

THE ART OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

It's fine for a museum to declare a civically principled vision and modify its mission accordingly—as we demonstrated in the past two issues of this newsletter. It is another matter to move from articulation to implementation. It's equally fine to engage in outreach efforts to effect cultural and social service. It is another matter to reflect transformation internally—to change the agent of change. To do anything less is to risk harboring paternalist arrogance, not uncommon in the social service, non-profit sector.

How we do business meets half the objectives of public service. *How* we *compose* ourselves—literally, how we *constitute* ourselves—indicates how integral or expendable the ideal of public service is to the institution. For a museum whose mission includes pursuing multidisciplinary programming and transnationalism in collecting and exhibiting art—as does ours, uniquely among national museums—Sheldon needs to apply these principles at home, organizationally, to prove its integrity of purpose.

This is our current task. We are in the process of re-crafting the Museum's organizational structure to become more democratic as an institution and less hierarchical, as in the traditional, exhibitions-driven museum. We are cutting a line across the standard division of museum departments: curatorial, education, collections, development, public programming, membership, operations and administration.

This new line of intersection reorients each division toward public service. Designed to increase dramatically Sheldon's role in the civic life of the Lincoln community, this effort requires a multi-tiered staff

reorganization to generate new *collaborative* outreach programs.

We call this new line of exchange across internal borders—leading necessarily outside the museum—*The Sheldon Museum Civic Engagement Initiative*. It is the exercise of transnationalist principles within the museum itself and with the community at large: acting on existing connections across old divisions.

Staff reorganization includes revised roles at Sheldon: Associate to the Director, Monica Babcock (special outreach programs); Curator of Cultural and Civic Engagement, Sharon Kennedy (exhibitions responsive to communities); Director of Education, Karen Janovy (new collaborative outreach education programming); and Public Programs Coordinator, Laurie Sipple (adding new programs). Rather than ask how museum programs can serve exhibitions (the traditional approach), we will ask how each museum department can engage the public and the academy.

The Initiative's objectives are to serve Lincoln's diverse audiences with multidisciplinary arts programming; to focus more of the Museum's resources on civic engagement; to teach and model Institutional Ethical Leadership—i.e., practicing civic responsibility by addressing community needs, such as developing cultural inclusiveness for new and underserved, native and immigrant populations; to develop civic mindedness and critical thinking through arts education; and to teach about the diversity that continues to add to the fabric of American life. This is what a museum in a democratic society can look like.

— Jorge Daniel Veneciano,
Ph.D., Director