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Findings of the Imagination Conversations:

The Lessons of a Two-Year National Initiative

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Contents

1. The Call for Imagination, Creativity, and Innovation (ICI)	2
2. Lincoln Center Institute's Response: The Imagination Conversations	4
3. Findings of the Conversations	6
How ICI Functions across Professions and Sectors	6
How ICI is Nurtured and Sustained in Different Contexts	9
How to Cultivate ICI in Schools	12
4. Commitments to Further Action	15

1. The Call for Imagination, Creativity, and Innovation (ICI)

“The first step in winning the future is encouraging American innovation.”

President Obama’s words, from his 2011 State of the Union Address, reflect a national demand for innovation—one that has grown in urgency in recent years. The voices of government officials, businesspeople, researchers, and citizens have all contributed to this clarion call not only for innovation, but for creativity as well. Without these, it is felt, the United States simply cannot succeed in a 21st-century world marked by large emerging economies, rapid technological development, and increasing globalization. Related factors such as the widespread accessibility of information and the growing availability of overseas skilled labor, with its comparatively low wages, mean that America’s competitive edge depends now on bold, fresh *ideas*.

The business community in particular has emphasized this pressing issue. In May 2010, IBM released the results of its fourth biennial Global CEO Study, which interviewed over 1,500 CEOs, general managers, and public sector leaders. The jolting discovery: these executives believe that competing in today’s complex economy requires, more than any other single quality, creativity. This means, as the study indicates, being ready to overturn the *status quo*, coming up with original approaches, and making experimentation a habit.

Recent research by a number of other organizations draws similar conclusions about the path the U.S. must take in order to thrive. *Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*, released by the National Center on Education and the Economy in 2007, lists creativity and innovation among the qualities that “may spell the difference between success and failure” for the nation’s future workforce. Corporate employers agree, according to *Are They Really Ready to Work?*, a 2006 study conducted by The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management. Out of hundreds of managers across the country, 73.6% think the skill of creativity/innovation will increase in importance in coming years, but only 21.5% rate new job entrants with four-year college diplomas as “excellent” in this area. A wide gap exists between the level of need for creators and innovators and the current presence of these skills in our workers.

Voters are no less aware of the economic turning point America has reached. *Beyond the Three Rs: Voter Attitudes toward 21st Century Skills*, a 2007 national poll commissioned by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, makes this clear. Although nearly half of voters “rank [creativity and innovation] as a 9 or 10 in importance on a scale of 0 to 10,” just 5% “give schools a 9 or 10 in teaching this skill.” These percentages reveal an unambiguous perception among citizens that students are not receiving all the preparation they need to prosper in the global marketplace. Indeed, another poll, conducted by Lake Research Partners in December 2007, identifies a substantial “imagination constituency” representing 30% of U.S. voters—those very strongly in favor of making the cultivation of imaginative capacities part of core curricula in schools.

Emanating from the halls of government, corporate headquarters, the offices of think tanks, and American streets, the contemporary call for creativity and innovation is, as the evidence cited above shows, resounding.

2. Lincoln Center Institute's Response: The Imagination Conversations

Lincoln Center Institute's (LCI's) enthusiastic response to the countrywide demand for creativity and innovation stems from our 35 years of experience as the educational arm of New York City's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Over this time, our methodology of using guided encounters with artworks and other objects of study to develop students' critical and imaginative thinking skills has shown us the primacy of imagination. Our assertion, born of decades of work in schools, is that imagination, creativity, and innovation constitute a progression—the "ICI Continuum"—in which *imagination* is the foundation that prompts, and is continuously engaged in, creative and innovative activity.

Imagination, LCI believes, is the capacity to conceive of what is not, to perceive new possibilities. Creativity involves translating what has been imagined into action—introducing something original into the world. When such a creative act pushes past boundaries to truly new territory, innovation occurs.

Given our background and expertise, we felt we could best contribute to the effort to, in President Obama's words, "spark the creativity and imagination of [Americans]" by engaging with others. We reached out not only to our colleagues in the arts, but also to other major sectors—government, business, education, science—that aspire to "spark" these capacities. Our goal was to learn: (1) how the interrelated capacities of imagination, creativity, and innovation function within those domains; (2) how these capacities are nurtured and sustained in these different realms; and, based on the answers to the first two questions, (3) what must be done in schools to foster these capacities. This investigation took the form of the Imagination Conversations.

Begun in 2009, the Imagination Conversations are an ongoing series of public panel discussions in which leaders with diverse professional backgrounds examine imagination's role in their work and life and address the three questions described above. As of this writing, thirty-five of these synergistic gatherings have taken place or are scheduled to happen around the U.S. In addition to dealing with the main questions at the heart of the initiative, many Conversations also focus on a specific issue relevant either to the event locale's community or to its host organization. Conversations have varied in theme as well as geography, exploring topics ranging from homeland security (California) to rural sustainability (Wisconsin) to education leadership (New York).

Still, Lincoln Center Institute and host sites never lose sight of the initiative's ultimate aim: to generate knowledge and build a critical mass of support for policies, programs, and research that will result in educational environments where imagination, creativity, and innovation flourish. Only if such environments exist in abundance will Americans—particularly our rising generation of young people—be able to answer the urgent demand for groundbreaking thought and action. At stake is nothing less than the country's civic, cultural, and economic future.

America's Imagination Summit is an opportunity to take stock of what we have learned so far from the Imagination Conversations and to plot the next steps. What have they taught us about how ICI works and is nourished across societal spheres and how it may be cultivated in schools? What are leaders connected with the Conversations doing or planning to make this happen? What should we do once the summit is behind us? The remaining sections of this document will investigate these questions in depth.

3. Findings of the Conversations

How ICI Functions across Professions and Sectors

By the time Lincoln Center Institute launched the Imagination Conversations, research by many noted agencies had already confirmed that our thinking was correct: Americans in all professions and sectors—business, education, science, and the arts, to name a few—see imagination, creativity, and innovation as crucial to their work. Through the Conversations, we sought to define a clear direction in which to take our advocacy, as well as to create a sense of strength and consensus among leaders across the nation. Especially illuminating were the several common threads that emerged from panelists' descriptions of how the ICI capacities play out in their different areas.

One such thread, borne out in various fields, is the notion that *challenges* stimulate imagination. Yoky Matsuoka, professor of computer science and engineering at the University of Washington, was a young tennis star until injuries dashed her hopes of turning pro. She went on to imagine a tennis-playing robot, which led her into robotics in college. Now a MacArthur Fellow and neurorobotics pioneer, she works on projects such as a lifelike robotic hand that the MacArthur Foundation calls “an important step toward...a dexterous prosthetic hand that can be controlled by the brain's neural signals.” Matsuoka's early desire to surmount her own physical obstacles underlies an innovative career devoted to helping the disabled.

Another scientist, Jeffrey Davis, director of the NASA Space Life Sciences Directorate at the Johnson Space Center, comments that astronauts are continuously challenged with practical problems and issues relative to space travel. “We deal with that by ‘opening up the solution space,’” he says, “and getting more people involved.” Faced with difficulties, Davis and his colleagues expand their thinking beyond NASA and engage experts from other disciplines in order to create more room for a solution to arise.

A similar point about the practical motivation for imagination, creativity, and innovation is made by Chris Coburn, executive director of Cleveland Clinic Innovations, which transforms medical research into commercial products: “People...in the medical community...are driven towards innovation typically because they're seeing an unmet need.” Across domains, it seems, real-world issues lead to the visualization of new possibilities. Michael Weiss, president and

CEO of specialty clothing retailer Express, encapsulates this with a pragmatic statement: purpose gives form to creativity.

Drawing fresh, surprising connections between things is another key aspect of imagination, creativity, and innovation that numerous Conversation participants highlight. As Tim M. Berra, professor emeritus of evolution, ecology, and organismal biology at Ohio State University, notes, “Knowledge”—our storehouse of experience and information—“is the raw material of imagination.” Thus Arthur Jones, clinical professor of culture and psychology at the University of Denver’s Women’s College, was able to combine his background as a high-school choir singer and his undergraduate study of Jungian psychology in founding The Spirituals Project, which investigates the cultural functions of African-American slave songs. In the case of entrepreneur Lara Merriken, the origins of energy bar Lärabar were her separate loves of health food and hiking: eating trail mix on a hike one day, she envisioned a new and easier-to-carry nutritional product.

The imaginative practice of *mixing disparate elements to produce something novel* is operative in other realms as well. Lee Boot, associate director of the Imaging Research Center at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, searches for ways to utilize the arts to convey the kinds of information usually found in sources like textbooks; he strives to make gap-bridging art that “weave[s] knowledge into culture.” When designer and *Project Runway* finalist Althea Harper gets stuck, she turns to her hobby of drawing animé, and sometimes uses this recreational artwork to help her create a fashion collection. Summing up this approach nicely, Chris Coburn of Cleveland Clinic Innovations points to his organization’s CEO, Delos Cosgrove, who holds thirty-one patents and encourages inventions that come from finding associations between unrelated things.

Some Conversationalists—to coin a phrase—stress that imagination is *the* central feature, and not just a vital ingredient, of what they do. Award-winning novelist David Milofsky claims that for him, talking about imagination “is like talking about breathing”; to separate his work from the capacity that enables it is impossible. And Dave Troy, co-founder and CEO of 410 Labs, says that his primary tasks as a software entrepreneur are to imagine a product, realize what currently nonexistent component is required to create that product, and then invent that component and make the product. “It’s a constant push to question the status quo,” Troy remarks, “as well as to conceive of things that have not yet been identified.” Whether one writes fiction or code, imagination, creativity, and innovation are integral to the process.

This sketch of some of the contributions of Imagination Conversation panelists is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather to provide a glimpse of a few dominant behavioral patterns we have discovered. The initiative has gathered the stories and insights of countless leaders whose wide professional range this section merely suggests. Their testimony points to the conclusion that the ICI Continuum does indeed reach every corner of working life in the United States, always taking a slightly different shape, depending on its given environment. No sector functions without it, and all sectors need more of it.

A fitting final image is that of the recently opened Children's Garden at the Denver Botanic Gardens. According to CEO Brian Vogt, one reason for building the unique three-acre space was so that "we might provoke a little bit more creativity and imagination" in young people's highly structured lives. Such gardens exist, figuratively, in all spheres of American society—but how do we keep them growing?

How ICI is Nurtured and Sustained in Different Contexts

From the start of the Imagination Conversations, Lincoln Center Institute assumed that certain kinds of environments and processes—more than others—nurture and sustain imagination, creativity, and innovation in individuals and organizations. But in hearing two years' worth of panelists discuss this issue as it relates to their own professional contexts, we have been surprised, again, by how much these contexts have in common.

Across the board, environments that encourage *risk-taking* even if it may lead to failure are seen as crucial to the exercise of imagination, creativity, and innovation. “We reward results, but also...the courage of actually executing on ideas,” says Doug Kramp, senior vice president of Fossil, Inc., a designer and manufacturer of clothing and accessories. “If [employees] don't execute some of them, they will stop having them.” Kramp and his fellow managers realize imagination and creativity are muscles that can atrophy if not used, so they support their workers' trying something new and risky. Lara Merriken attests that just such an environment—not at work, but in ordinary life—enabled her to invent her energy bar: “I found it energizing to be around people who weren't afraid to go out and try something new... I needed that in my life, and I finally found that.” Being part of a community of bold thinkers and doers gave Merriken the confidence to turn her own vision into a reality. The rest is health-food history.

Leaders in education and science also recognize the value of creating *an atmosphere in which imagination, creativity, and innovation are not hindered by fear of failure*. Freeman Hrabowski, president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, strives to build a culture that “allows people to make mistakes.” “Often,” says the educator, “we can learn more from failure than success.” He understands that failure, handled constructively, can drive imagination by spurring us to find solutions to our errors. As NASA's Jeffrey Davis puts it, “Actually going through the process [of failure] is, in itself, valuable.” But one can only have this imaginative and instructive experience in a setting that allows it.

Collaboration is another key nurturing strategy that many Conversation participants emphasize. Davis notes that NASA promotes group problem solving, which gives “access to multiple disciplines”; when scientists with different areas of expertise come together to address a challenge, the field of possibilities expands.

Looking at the business world, Buck Jabaily, executive director of the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance, observes a similar team approach: “The corporate world is increasingly embracing the idea that you put people together with a topic and...let them go, as opposed to people in their cubicles each having their task.” Indeed, common sense would seem to say that a community of imaginers is much more likely to weave disparate elements into a truly fresh concept than a lone individual; yet we are only starting to see the widespread rise of this model. Publishing consultant Nina Hoffman recalls an experiment that took place at National Geographic: each department was asked to produce a team of two or three people to address their concerns and changes they wanted to see in their workplace. This event “galvanized the entire staff.”

Collaboration and the freedom to take risks and fail may be the most significant environmental factors where imagination, creativity, and innovation are concerned, but others receive attention from Conversationalists as well. Delores Etter, director of the Caruth Institute for Engineering Education at Southern Methodist University, is one of several panelists who stress the importance of *diversity*: “Diversity is a big driver of innovation—diversity of education, discipline, gender, etc.” The more diverse a context is, the more its inhabitants are informed and inspired by the differences that their colleagues bring to the table; this, in turn, leads to richer outcomes. But diversity must be accompanied by a sense of safety. “Educationally or even professionally, we have to create an environment where it’s okay to be different, where it’s okay to be unique,” urges Marcia Temple, executive director of Augustana Arts. Without this kind of security, the expression of heterogeneous perspectives may be stifled.

The very way in which workspace is physically laid out, panelists say, has a critical impact on the thinking and acting that occur there. Legg Mason Chairman and CEO Mark Fetting claims, “You know a good company within the first five minutes of walking around [it].” One such company is Northrop Grumman Corporation, an engineering, computer science, and defense business. “We removed cubicles and have lots of conference space, windows,” explains Michael LaRoi, director of its Advanced Concepts and Technologies Division. “When you can sit and look out a window and imagine, it helps.” How an office looks and feels is far more than a cosmetic matter; rather, spatial layout can help open one’s mind or, like the claustrophobic cubicle, close it down. Even a factor as seemingly trivial as music can make a difference. Catherine Leggett, senior vice president of human resources at ICMA Retirement Corporation, says of her workplace, “To allow music is a big deal in financial services... So first earphones were allowed,

now soft music plays.” She adds, “Music is inspiring.” Organizational settings are becoming more conducive to imagination.

All the externals discussed in this section should not obscure the fact that imagination, creativity, and innovation are also fueled by conditions existing *within* individuals. CEO Fetting likes his managers to hire people who have overcome challenges and failures, who seem to possess a “[d]rive for excellence,” which he knows “is an internal process.” If you look closely, you will find such a drive in prominent innovators across the professional spectrum. A particular brand of intrinsic motivation is often present in artists, as the remarks of visual artist and teaching artist Maria Barbosa suggest. Some of the things that nurture her imagination are “observation, reading, curiosity, determination, empathy, ideals,...and the respect for human rights... I work all the time, and my art is an integral part of my life.” Note how many items on Barbosa’s list relate essentially to her inner experience. A constant “hunger” (her word) to make art compels her to never stop working. In the case of Barbosa or of Fetting’s ideal employee, supportive external environments augment and reward their inherent drive.

Lincoln Center Institute’s Imagination Conversations have borne out the notion that certain kinds of situations and processes do nurture and sustain imagination, creativity, and innovation, no matter the context. Speaking on this issue, Conversation participants in cities around the country have unknowingly echoed each other time and again. Their vivid descriptions, examined above, will be useful as we approach the question of how to cultivate these capacities in places where they are not currently in abundance.

How to Cultivate ICI in Schools

Imagination Conversation participants have affirmed the value of establishing within schools and other educational settings the conditions and learning experiences that foster imagination, creativity, and innovation in students. Aware of the difficulties attendant on such reform, they seek feasible, realistic strategies for surmounting them.

Many panelists identify “*real-world challenges*” as a fundamental stimulus to students’ imaginative activity and an effective means of enlivening education. “Students really want to make a difference in the world,” says Delores Etter. So when they encounter a high-stakes situation demanding a resolution, this desire to have an impact sets their imaginations in motion.

William “Brit” Kirwan, chancellor of the University System of Maryland, explains how this thinking has affected universities: “For example, [undergraduate] engineering programs around the country have changed their degree requirements, and in their senior year in an accredited engineering program, students have to solve some major problem... Students work in teams, and they can’t get a degree unless they come up with a credible solution to this challenge. So it brings out their innovation and creativity.”

This approach is beneficial not only in higher education, but for younger learners as well. Seeing “no reason why students can’t work on real-world problems and help solve them,” Jeffrey Davis proposes an ongoing K-12 space-flight challenge in which awards would be given for the best solutions. Victoria Brown, founder and director of the arts-based Lucy School and an expert in early childhood education, notes that different challenges may be posed according to children’s ages and levels of development. She also thinks they are “an excellent model for cooperative learning.”

Brown’s scenario, in which students cooperatively respond to real-world challenges, recalls another factor that Conversationists frequently cite as contributing to a culture of imagination, creativity, and innovation: *collaboration among diverse individuals*. Indeed, collaborative work encourages learners to gather knowledge and imaginative insights on their own, which they can then bring back to the group; it deepens their intrinsic motivation to master the problem at hand and the skills required to solve it. And intrinsic motivation is at

the heart of sustained learning. Mark Fetting believes “at the end of the day creation is largely a ‘from-within’ kind of thing. But it’s nurtured; it’s a combination of an inquiring mind that’s intrinsically driven...with some teacher who has...supported that.”

As the example of successful corporations demonstrates—not to mention other hierarchical organizations—school leaders must adopt similar practices if imaginative, creative, and innovative learning is to thrive in their institutions: Linda G. Popp, visual arts coordinator for Baltimore County Public Schools, says that teachers need time to collaborate, and need to “be imaginative before they can teach their students to be.” A number of Conversation participants similarly assert that developing imaginative capacities in students is impossible unless they first exist in the administration and faculty. Producing, and maintaining, such a situation is a “real-world challenge” that adults in education face.

Panelists point out that *collaboration* creates a context in which *risk-taking* becomes a shared responsibility and *failures are seen as learning experiences* on the road to creative and innovative results. Like employees of the best companies, students and teachers must be empowered to take risks and possibly fail. Maryland State Superintendent of Schools Nancy Grasmick speaks of the pressing need for settings that provide such empowerment. She observes, “Teachers are fearful.” Educators who are worried about losing their jobs if they unsuccessfully attempt something ambitious will not take a chance on alternative methods that may set young imaginations free. Which is why Michael Chalupa, principal of City Neighbors Charter School, advises, “Don’t have educators in the building who are afraid of failing. This has to be modeled by the principal and made okay, has to be a norm in the organization.” Administrators can help institute a culture that does not merely tolerate the constructive making of mistakes, but embraces it. The attitude will filter down to students. As Victoria Brown articulates, “failure, and the act of trying something new over and over again, is exactly what leads to creativity and innovation”—imagination, too. Insisting on constant short-term success is shortsighted.

Business leaders, we remember from the previous subsection, often stress *the architecture and arrangement of workspace* as a factor that impacts innovation within their organizations. Education leaders feel the same way. Bobbi Macdonald, founder and executive director of The City Neighbors Foundation, a network of charter schools, asserts, “Physical environment really matters. When you walk in the door [of a school]...every wall is talking to you of what your capacity is or what it’s going to be like.” The look and feel of the building send a

message to students and teachers, one that may either inspire or oppress them. Too often, the message is of the type that Brenda Jews, a trustee of the Arts Education in Maryland Schools Alliance, describes: “you are in this classroom in this building, you do this work in isolation, you’re in your nice straight rows...” But some schools today are paying heed to how innovative organizations arrange workspace to facilitate collaboration and stimulate imagination. Macdonald mentions one school where “incoming ninth-graders designed the cafeteria,” and Baltimore City Public Schools CEO Andrés Alonso tells of another that is remaking its environment “with no sharp angles; they have worked on the colors; instead of lockers they have pods...where [students] can leave their things and work together with each other.” The edifices of education must be planned with great care: do they promote imagination or hinder it?

It is clear that the cultivation of imagination, creativity, and innovation in schools and other educational settings is a complex problem. Nonetheless, Imagination Conversation participants have addressed the challenge over the past two years by identifying critical conditions and practices that support these capacities, and by describing exemplary organizations. The establishment of such conditions and practices in schools bound by traditional assumptions will require energetic, persistent, and imaginative commitment. Leaders and institutions within the education field, and, perhaps more crucially, forces from other sectors of society, must join together in the effort. To marshal these forces is the aspiration of Lincoln Center Institute, whose work has been advanced immeasurably by all those who have actively participated in Conversations around the U.S.

4. Commitments to Further Action

The Imagination Conversations have already begun to yield concrete actions, which go beyond the initiative itself while continuing its effort to foster imagination, creativity, and innovation in American schools. Lincoln Center Institute believes the national demand for these capacities will not be met unless multiple forces align to shape policies, programs, and research that support their growth. Representatives of these forces—government, business, education, science, and the arts, among others—are starting to commit to such actions.

At America's Imagination Summit on July 21 and 22, 2011, LCI will learn what steps Imagination Conversation participants across the country are currently taking. Their actions and pledges to action will be recognized at the conclusion of the summit. In advance of the summit, we are inviting participants to post the findings and outcomes of their Conversations on the Google Docs website.

What was perhaps the first tangible result of the Imagination Conversations occurred before the official initiative began in the fall of 2009. In the spring of that year, LCI Executive Director Scott Noppe-Brandon visited Ohio, where he made a presentation on imagination to state educators and arts organizations. The Ohio Department of Education (ODE), inspired by this meeting, put together an intra-organizational Imagination Conversation. It took the form of a series of brown bag lunches in which ODE curriculum, communications, and policy directors discussed imagination's role in their own work and in teaching, with their staffs serving as an audience. The department thereby made a commitment to stimulating imagination, creativity, and innovation within both its own offices and Ohio classrooms.

In Massachusetts, advocates have brought about legislative change. Dan Hunter, a participant in one of the state's Imagination Conversations, is the innovator behind the Creative Challenge Index (CCI), which became law there on August 5, 2010. As Hunter writes, it established "a public measurement to assess the number and quality of opportunities for creative work being offered in schools." Similar legislation was filed in California on February 22, 2011, and eight other states are now considering the adoption of such an index. The CCI is a strong example of action that can affect the learning environment in schools, challenging them to make imagination, creativity, and innovation part of their culture and curriculum. "It will...raise the priority of teaching valuable 21st-century creative skills to our children," says Hunter, "and will provide a measurement to hold our schools accountable."

The Indiana-based Meridian Institute gathered state forces in 2010 to produce, as president and CEO Scott T. Massey writes, “recommendations for actions to increase the innovation and imagination capacity of Indiana culture, education, and economic strategy.” The Imagine Indiana project was allied with LCI’s Imagination Conversations. It comprised three elements: a survey of state leaders conducted by the Meridian Institute and Walker Information, a year of research on innovation performed by the Imagine Indiana Steering Committee, and an opinion poll taken at its culminating Leadership Summit on October 12. The resulting report, *The Indiana Innovation Agenda*, contains 13 recommendations for action; the state arts commission and education department are now considering them. They include introducing “creative knowledge skills” and “a creative...culture” to Indiana schools, and building “strategies to attract creative industries” to the state. A council charged with promoting the implementation of this agenda is being formed. Imagine Indiana promises to make the whole state a more imaginative, creative, and innovative place.

Maryland has linked the issue of imagination, creativity, and innovation to brain science research conducted in the state. This process began on May 6, 2009, when Johns Hopkins University (JHU) hosted “Learning, Arts and the Brain—An Educational Summit.” Then, on October 20 and 21, 2010, the Johns Hopkins Medicine Brain Science Institute hosted a speaker series called “The Science of the Arts: Perceptual Neuroscience and Aesthetics.” Mary Ann Mears, founder and trustee of the Arts Education in Maryland Schools Alliance (AEMS), writes in the report *Imagination Conversations in Maryland*: “much of the discussion [at these events] focused on imagination, creativity, and innovation, and the capacities of ICI are one of the areas...attracting interest for research.” AEMS has since used online platforms to continue the discussions begun at the two Johns Hopkins gatherings. Maryland’s focus on the connections between the brain, the arts, education, and imagination is pushing advocacy there in an exciting new direction. As Mears notes, “partnerships” between “the field of arts education” and “research institutions” such as JHU and the University System of Maryland “hold great promise in this arena.”

Lincoln Center Institute is eager to announce new initiatives of our own at America’s Imagination Summit, and to receive further reports from Imagination Conversation participants—at the summit and online (see p. 15)—about the decisive actions they have taken or are planning.