This campus is looking at how the arts can transform the lives of the students and our communities. It understands and values what the work of the arts community, and the Center for Arts Leadership is part of the plan to help us work smarter. It’s thrilling and an honor to be part of it.

Creative placemaking – the NEA definition “In creative placemaking, public, private, not-for-profit, and community sectors partner to strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, tribe, city, or region around arts and cultural activities.” This is what we’re doing at UH, and what we can do for Houston.

We- who is this we, this us? Is it The University, the administrators, the artists, the funders, patrons or audience? Yes. Yes, Yes, Yes. And Yes. All the above. An ecosystem.

I and many of the other arts leaders in this community have stated, and what many of us champion across the nation and internationally, is that the arts in this city collaborates. We partner. With raise the barn, circle the wagons, we join forces. It’s one of the reasons that I came back to Houston and one of the reasons I stayed.

But is it enough?

Did we have enough time, information, resources to capitalize on those endeavors? Are we so focused on the multitude of partnerships and projects that we are neglecting to build the program? Are we evaluating ideas and moving on before the audience and our publics - can acknowledge its value and articulate the impact?

Nationwide, we’ve seen risk taking organizations fail, solid “safe” organizations fold; cities leveraging their art to get out of bankruptcy; but some communities are now thriving because of the art projects and cross-sector activities. How can we be one of the thriving communities? How are the artists and the arts organizations benefitting? Did the arts lead, or were they led into partnerships that only had a short term benefit?
I’ve been interested in how these systems, these interlocking mechanisms, of artist, organizations, public/private philanthropy, and cultural policy are working together. I hope it’s part of why y’all are here today.

We are at a one of those critical points in this city where it seems like so many possibilities are coalescing. Something big is going to happen this time, can’t you feel it? We know that we have a diverse population. We know we have some really great, big institutions. We’ve had a number of national conventions in recent years and on the horizon; We see a number of accolades for our “mid-sized organizations” who are celebrating big anniversaries, there seem to be so many events visual arts, performing arts, mutlti-disciplinary social-practice installation durational sculpture post-hashtag art that there is no day of the week you can count on as a day of “rest.” We have some of the most generous foundations in the nation, and and some of the most active philanthropists.

What we figure out here and now, we can influence how other cities do it.

Can we partner in ways that are of long-term benefit? Can we lead to metrics that are not just about economic exchanges? Are we knowledgeable enough about our own value to appropriately leverage our resources? I can keep going because I’ve been thinking about these systems for a while. We’ve been thinking about these things for a while. We’ve had small conversations here and there; a brief (or maybe not so brief) conversation over a cocktail or three. But there is something in the air that’s encouraging us to come together. The artist town hall, the Project Row Houses seminar, the other symposia that I didn’t get to attend – we’re expressing a desire to talk, to ask questions. And soon, we’ll be wanting to act.

In the panels and the discussions this weekend, we’ll hear how some of our local arts leaders have been addressing ideas about audience and community, about research and metrics, about change and action. We’ll be exploring these ideas, looking at local best practice, and innovation process. Seeing how that does or does not mesh with national trends.
The Summit is not just a presentation of ideas, but a forum for participation from the different sectors of stakeholders. In the two scheduled response sessions, we are encouraging for different types of like-minds to come together. The first session will be by sector affiliation, the second by years of experience with the local arts community.

It’s an experiment to see if there are attitudes that cross multiple sectors. Are there actionable items that bring nuance and perspective? What are the assumptions that we need to break down? What are the cycles we can break out of together?

When I committed to starting the Center for Arts Leadership, and people asked me what exactly is “arts leadership” and what are you going to do? I continually said that the first years are as much about data gathering as putting out programs. Asking questions and initiating pilot projects.

But it all came back to this idea that Leadership is about not about an individual, but how artists, organizations, universities and communities taking on leadership roles, making it about something bigger.

This is the first of what we hope to be many Leadership in the Arts Summits. It’s a forum to ask big questions, to get ideas flowing,

What does it take to be a 21st Century Arts Community? What does it take to build a diverse, robust, validated arts ecosystem?

It might take a while to figure that at out.

What is clear, to me, is that I’m grateful to this arts community that continues to nurture, surprise, and challenge itself. Thank you again for being here and being part of this Inaugural Leadership in the Arts Summit, for sharing your time, your ideas your questions and your hopes. Your participation and feedback will help to define the priorities and programs for the Center, and hopefully inform the future of this city.