

Nomination Statement
Illinois Humanities - Sojourner Scholars

Illinois Humanities is excited to nominate our program Sojourner Scholars for the 2019 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize for Public Humanities Programs.



First cohort of Sojourner Scholars in 2016

Founded in 2016 and rooted in a commitment to engaged pedagogy and equity, [Sojourner Scholars](#) is an intensive arts and humanities summer institute for high school students living on Chicago's South Side. This free program provides sixty young people the opportunity to enroll in college-level arts and humanities courses taught by local college and university faculty and to ultimately earn college credits over the course of three summer sessions.

The program also offers year-round arts and humanities programming for Scholars, their families, and community members. This combination of college-level coursework in the arts and humanities and participation in creative practices prepares Scholars to more fully engage with the world around them in critical and innovative ways.

Over the course of three summers and beginning the summer following their first year in high school, Scholars take seminars in critical writing, U.S. history, literature, philosophy, and media studies, and complete a research-intensive capstone course their final summer in the program. To lower barriers to participation, every Scholar

receives a stipend, lunch, snacks, and transportation to and from the program. Each summer, Scholars are in class five days a week from 10:00 AM - 3:00 PM over the course of three weeks.

From summer to summer, Scholars explore complex questions about the human experience, bringing their own insights and expertise directly to bear on these explorations. Together the Scholars produce new knowledge, cultivate problem-solving strategies, and generate cultural works and scholarship. Invariably and quite purposefully: Chicago, and more specifically Chicago's South Side, is a major subject of inquiry for Sojourner Scholars. By working with local art centers and community-based archives, including local library holdings and South Side residents' personal collections, our young people become accomplished researchers and cultural interpreters. Without a doubt, the Scholars' growth and flourishing is enhanced through discourse and fellowship with local artists, scholars, community workers, and organizers who join us in seminar and in year-round programming. Honored collaborators of Sojourner Scholars during 2018 included: Patric McCoy, founder of [Diasporal Rhythms](#); writer and educator [Dr. Tara Betts](#); poet and activist [Mario Smith](#); cultural historian Veronica Casado Hernandez of [The Protest Banner Lending Library](#); Coya Paz and Melissa DuPrey from [Free Street Theater](#); educator Orlando Mayorga of [Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation](#); and journalists Carlos Matallana and Erisa Apantaku of [Blok by Blok podcasts](#) and South Side Weekly.

The goals for Sojourner Scholars are:

- 1) To provide South Side students in public high schools with college-level arts and humanities-based courses and exposure to and engagement with local cultural resources early on in their high school education.
- 2) To teach students both critical and cultural literacy through arts and humanities courses and creative, arts-based learning opportunities.
- 3) To use arts and humanities-based courses and creative, arts-based learning as opportunities to bring students together across communities through learning and working alongside scholars from different neighborhoods and schools.
- 4) To increase students' knowledge and investment in the local cultural resources of their own communities through applied arts and humanities-based learning in the form of a capstone project and through year-round programming.

This past year, 2018, was a particularly eventful year for our Scholars as they further developed their interpretive skills and insights by working with artists, scholars, and community members in creating new content and experiences for exhibitions and an academic conference in Chicago.

During the spring and summer of 2018, the most recent graduates of Sojourner Scholars (graduating high school seniors) worked on [The Time is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago's South Side, 1960-1980](#), an exhibition that was a joint effort by the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art and the DuSable Museum of African American History. Working with one of the exhibition's curators, [Dr. Rebecca Zorach](#), and staff

from the Smart Museum, Sojourner Scholars interviewed Chicago-based artists and musicians from the 1960s and produced a collection of oral histories that were both captured on vinyl and digitized as [The Alley LP: Perspectives and Recollections](#). *The Alley LP* was incorporated into the exhibition through listening stations in the gallery. Transcripts of the [interviews](#) Sojourner Scholars conducted were also featured in *The Chicago Reader*. Additionally, Sojourner Scholars were trained as docents for the Smart Museum of Art, paying jobs that students who remain in Chicago after graduation are able to work throughout the year and that students who are attending college out-of-state are able to work when they return over the summer.



The Alley LP: Perspectives and Recollections produced with Sojourner Scholars for the *The Time is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago's South Side, 1960-1980* at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art.

During our 2018 summer session, Sojourner Scholars delved into the subjects of citizenship, freedom, and justice. With artists-educators Damon Locks and Sarah Ross from the [Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project](#) as co-facilitators of their three-week seminar, our capstone Scholars (rising seniors) focused specifically on the disciplines of

Art and Art History and examined the relationships between art practices and responses to, conversations about, and organizing around the criminal legal system and mass incarceration. Work produced in this culminating course included visual art and manifestos dedicated to imagining and advancing more just and peaceful futures. With the help of Free Street Theatre and [Scrappers Film Group](#) and the editing and artistic expertise of Damon Locks and Sarah Ross, the Scholars and the work they produced are currently featured in a video that is included in a city-wide exhibition called [Envisioning Justice](#).



Sojourner Scholar creative response to the prompt: What kind world should we demand for happy and thriving lives? Capstone Course 2018.

Last summer, the first and second year cohorts of Sojourners Scholars (rising sophomores and juniors, respectively) focused on ideas of citizenship and freedom through the study of literature, U.S. History, philosophy, and media studies. Scholars in the first-year cohort read Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, which lead one student to reflect, "During my summer in the program, my understanding of citizenship didn't change, but it expanded greatly. *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine opened my eyes to citizenship because its point of view allowed me to actually put myself in each person's position. Although I already knew about citizenship, this book enlarged my thinking ... Over time, American ideas of citizenship change. African Americans were accepted as citizens, but still treated differently. Even though they were citizens, they were still excluded from rights like voting. This shows that being an American citizen doesn't mean being treated equally. Citizenship is here, but equality isn't." Sojourner Scholars further demonstrates how young people are engaging, both in their thinking and lived realities, with complex socio-political issues and when space is created to help foster the expression of their deep thinking around these issues, we all learn a great deal.

In addition to having space in the classroom to express their ideas, through a partnership with Blok by Blok podcasts, Scholars created a series of podcasts that critically engaged with the concept of the "American Dream". Scholars learned how to conduct interviews and record and edit sound, and produced seven podcasts that capture the Scholars engaging with their instructors, friends, and families in discussing and deconstructing the "American Dream" as well as podcasts that feature remixes and reinterpretations of Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought to America from Africa" and Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I A Woman".

In October 2018, Sojourner Scholars, through a continued collaboration with Blok by Blok podcasts, were invited to record their experiences and reflections on attending the [18th Annual Imagining America Conference](#) that was held in Chicago and organized in partnership with Illinois Humanities. The theme of the conference was "Transformative Imaginations: Decarceration and Liberatory Futures" and the students decided to tell four stories from the conference, including one focusing on the relationship between a woman who is currently incarcerated in Decatur Women's Prison in Illinois and who presented at the conference via phone and her friend, a formerly incarcerated woman whose phone the first woman called into in order to present her conference paper. Another story the Scholars produced focused on the work of the local chapter of [Black and Pink](#) who presented on the work they do with incarcerated LGBTQ folks through their pen pal and letter writing program. These podcasts provided important insights into the conference and allowed the Scholars to not only experience the conference, but to retell their unique experiences of the conference for a larger listening public.

Finally, we wrapped up 2018 with the Sojourner Scholars participating in the "Teen Day of Resistance" at artist Theaster Gates' [Stony Island Arts Bank](#). Scholars facilitated breakout sessions with local youth to examine and respond to [ICONIC Black Panthers](#), an exhibition celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Black Panther Party in Chicago. The students previewed the exhibition and learned about the Black Panthers and then following a community lunch paired with a discussion with three Chicago Black

Panthers, Scholars facilitated breakout groups where participants talked about specific pieces in the exhibit and then spent time creatively responding to the pieces through writing and/or art making.



Sojourner Scholar leading breakout session for ICONIC Black Panthers at Stony Island Arts Bank with local youth from the community.

Illinois Humanities is immensely proud that the Sojourner Scholars are taking ownership of Chicago's cultural offerings and providing a youth perspective that is informed by their course work in the humanities. Furthermore, these young people are being sought out as vital interpreters and contributors to the work that is being produced and showcased in Chicago. Through the immense support of local artists, scholars, and community members from Chicago's South Side who so generously collaborate with, teach, and support the Scholars, we feel confident that Sojourner Scholars know that their community shows up for them and is deeply invested in their futures as knowledge producers and cultural workers.

Financial support for Sojourner Scholars in 2018 came in the form of an NEH Access Challenge Grant for \$50,000, which was matched by \$25,000 from a Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events' Year of Creative Youth project grant and an additional \$25,000 in funding from a private family foundation. Sojourner Scholars also received a grant from the Field Foundation in the amount of \$20,000. This funding went to covering the direct program costs of Sojourner Scholars.

Referenced Works Produced by Sojourner Scholars:

This Time is Now! Arts Worlds of Chicago's South Side, 1960-1980:

<https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-alley-exhibit-the-time-is-now-smart-museum-of-art/Content?oid=62597526>

<https://smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/blog/the-alley-lp-perspectives-and-recollections/>

<https://d3qi0qp55mx5f5.cloudfront.net/smartmuseum/i/files/Smart-TheAlleyLP-Transcript.pdf>

Podcast Series with Blok by Blok:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/sojourner-scholar-promo/id1328931717?i=1000418133836>

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/american-dream-by-cassandra-hickmon/id1328931717?i=1000421800902>

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/celestial-progression-by-danita/id1328931717?i=1000421980793>

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/american-dream-by-tia-aneesha/id1328931717?i=1000422511875>

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/armani-nakiya-talk-to-relatives-about-american-dream/id1328931717?i=1000422933734>

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/american-dream-by-josiah-and-jasmyn/id1328931717?i=1000423137699>

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/aint-i-a-women-remix-explicit/id1328931717?i=1000423697087>

Capstone Course with Prison + Neighborhood Arts Project on display at *Envisioning Justice* Exhibition:

<https://we.tl/t-VFqxxWuTgc>