

AFS Long-Range Plan: Toward the Future of Folklore Scholarship and Practice

[Original version, January 2007; last revised April 2010]

Folklore is one of the most venerable disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. With origins in the early 19th century, the discipline of folklore pioneered an inclusive view of culture and creativity in communities by examining expressive life across boundaries of time and distance. Folklore laid the groundwork for cultural relativism and American-style cultural anthropology, and promoted the idea that music, stories, handmade objects, beliefs, ritual, and worldview are sources of cohesion and continuity that serve as windows into the defining identities and values of people and communities. Further, folklorists were among the very first scholars to recognize the unique expressive traditions of former slaves, immigrants, and Native Americans. By collecting and disseminating the traditional culture of groups outside the mainstream, folklorists enhanced the commons essential to America's democracy.

Through the 20th century, folklorists occupied research positions with libraries and archives, documenting and writing about music, tales, language, customs, traditions, and legends from hundreds of ethnic, racial, and immigrant communities. Universities expanded folklore offerings, and by the mid-1970s doctoral programs were in place at the University of Pennsylvania, Indiana University, the University of Texas, and UCLA. Furthermore, the field developed a remarkable popular front, with scholars like Benjamin Botkin, Kenneth Goldstein, and Alan Lomax producing books, recordings, and radio programs that were embraced throughout the country and that brought the materials and methods of folklore to millions of Americans.

Late in the last century, however, our field fell into more difficult times. Newly established ethnic and gender-studies programs, which borrowed many of their core concepts from the field of folklore and in many cases owed their existence to the focused interests of adventuresome folklorists, siphoned resources that a few decades earlier would have supported folklore teaching and research. Simultaneously, the patient approach to qualitative research that is a hallmark of folklore scholarship was nudged aside by quantitative work. "Listening disciplines" like folklore were overtaken by "counting disciplines" like sociology that documented trends and attitudes with surveys and statistical analysis. Although a growing demand for folklorists in government created employment opportunities and a considerable expansion of the field at the MA level, several of our major doctoral programs that had been at the forefront of research and theory—and of the professional preparation of all folklorists, academic and public—lost their momentum.

Fortunately, folklore's leaders have recognized this problem and in more recent years have begun a number of efforts to reinvigorate the field. Although some of our flagship doctoral programs did fall on straitened times, several are reinventing themselves to continue to serve our field and nurture our successors, and other programs of long standing—at Indiana University, the University of North Carolina, the Memorial University of Newfoundland, and the Université Laval, for example—have remained strong. Younger centers, programs and departments—at George Mason, Louisiana, Missouri, Ohio State, Oregon, Utah State, Western

Kentucky, and Wisconsin—have energized the field by creating their own unique approaches to scholarship, public service, and professional preparation. In the last 20 years, folklorists have also created new professional niches for themselves, both in independent non-profit organizations devoted to public humanities and arts education about folklore, and in private consulting practice. All these are positive developments, but there is more to be done.

Founded in 1888 by a coalition of university scholars, museum professionals, and private citizens, the American Folklore Society (AFS) is the oldest scholarly society in the US dedicated to the study of the intersections of individual creativity and social order. As such, it is ideally positioned to implement initiatives that can restore folklore to its appropriate position as a core humanities and social science discipline. Over the last decade, the Society has laid the groundwork for this process by building the capacity to support a full-time professional staff, which in turn has developed and managed special projects and initiatives to benefit the field as a whole, including a permanent planned giving campaign that to date has received pledges and gifts totaling over \$1 million to strengthen the Society's capital structure. Now, committed to restoring folklore to its standing as a unique and valuable actor in the humanities and social sciences, we are turning our attention to projects that specifically address the strength of folklore within the American academy.

Today, our field and its core concepts—including art, context, folk, genre, group, identity, performance, text, and tradition—continue to make unique and meaningful contributions to scholarship and understanding in the humanities and social sciences. A listening discipline that uses locally based qualitative research to understand culture and community through expressive life, folklore is more relevant to the academy and to public education today than at any time in its history. Folklorists work to understand and communicate knowledge about community-based creativity in a global economy, about cultural communication within and across religious and ethnic divides, and about the advancement of understanding and respect within the world's diverse cultural commons. Moreover, folklore contributes unique intellectual insights to the creation, analysis, and evaluation not just of knowledge, but also of public policy, and not just of cultural policy, but also of the cultural dimensions of all policy.

Throughout 2006, the Executive Board that governs the Society worked with the Society staff and with many individual members to carry out a process of long-range planning toward these ends. The Board carried out this work through four "gatherings":

- A Board planning retreat in April 2006
- A three-day May 2006 meeting (generously supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and led by AFS) of representatives from folklore, oral history, and ethnomusicology to discuss the changing place of these three fields in the academy, and strategies for improving that place
- A one-day symposium preceding the AFS annual meeting in October 2006 (co-sponsored with the Fund for Folk Culture and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts) on the futures of scholarship and public practice in the field of folklore
- A second Board planning discussion in October 2006

This process articulated five goals and developed a set of highest-priority actions associated with each theme. Overarching these goals is the idea that the Society needs to focus on **centering** the field. The materials of folklore tend to be characterized by their diversity; and the study of folklore is similarly characterized by the centrifugal pull of this variety of materials, by the many approaches and methods of the field, and by the wide range of institutions, academic and public, in which folklorists do their work. The Society should provide a complementary, centripetal pull.

Inside the field, we should focus our attention on the ways AFS, as folklore's leadership organization, can from its unique position most effectively assist individual folklorists, and the many institutions of our field, to reach their goals and to work together for the advancement of the field as a whole. In the larger world, the Society should actively position the field as a core humanities and social science discipline, and folklorists as capable of providing unique insight into significant issues of art, culture, education, policy, and society.

The five goals and associated actions, some of which will require a funding partner and some of which we are carrying out with our own resources, are:

1. Engage in an active campaign to improve the standing of folklore in the academy.

Activities for which we seek a funding partner:

A. Identify and support several outstanding university-based folklore programs, poised to move to the next level of development, as they plan and undertake that transition. These might include a lone folklorist who wants to bring a partner onto the faculty, a pair of folklorists working toward developing a center or program, a program wishing to incorporate public humanities preparation directly into its curriculum or to test new structures for an undergraduate folklore curriculum, a center with plans to create alliances with new partners in the humanities or social sciences, or a program ready to move from the MA level to departmental status and to offer the PhD. In partnership with those programs, AFS will design and carry out appropriate activities to help them take that next step. These creative institutional interventions will also serve as models for other programs in the field.

B. Create and carry out an undergraduate recruitment campaign to increase cross-disciplinary awareness of folklore as a graduate field and as a scholarly and public profession. To increase the diversity of the field, another goal of this effort, target Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, colleges on the US borders, and large urban institutions (e.g., the City University of New York, Temple, or the California State University system).

Activities we are carrying out with our own resources:

C. Carry out a "benchmarking" project to design and communicate objective criteria for the review and evaluation of university-based folklore programs.

D. *[Underway]* Develop a more active, engaged presence for AFS at university folklore departments and programs, offering professional development opportunities (see 3A below), a program of regular campus visits by AFS leaders, effective advocacy when necessary, and the like.

2. Promote the purposes, work, value, and contributions of the field more actively and effectively.

Activities for which we seek a funding partner:

A. Create and fund an AFS staff position responsible for creating and carrying out a marketing plan to promote the purposes, work, value, and contributions of the field more actively and effectively in the academy, in the public policy community, and among the general public.

Activities we are carrying out with our own resources:

B. *[Underway in 2010]* Convene an AFS committee to advise the staff and Board on the most effective marketing and public information activities the Society can undertake with its limited resources to benefit the field.

C. *[Completed]* Working with JSTOR and the publishers of JSTOR's other folklore journals, take the leading role in creating and managing a system of shared access to all these journals for the members of any of our societies.

D. *[Completed]* Create, in collaboration with our sister societies worldwide, an H-Folk listserv to support more and better international communication among folklore scholars and public humanists.

3. Take better care of our own.

Activities for which we seek a funding partner:

A. Develop a program of AFS-produced year-round professional development activities for folklorists—at all career levels and in all sectors of professional employment—working in collaboration with university-based folklore programs and public folklore centers.

B. *[Proposal pending at NEH]* Take a leading role in activities to create and/or implement national systems and standards to improve the preservation, cataloging, and description of the folklore archival collections of universities, state folk arts programs, and private folk arts non-profit organizations, and—through digitization and other means—to improve access to those collections.

Activities we are carrying out with our own resources:

C. Create, in partnership with academic folklore centers, departments, and programs, a database they and we can use to track the career trajectories of their students.

D. Continue to add value to membership in the AFS by creating new professional and personal benefits of membership, based on the expressed needs of members and opportunities for collaboration with outside organizations. *[Continuous]*

E. *[Completed]* Convene a working group of folklore graduate students to help us design ways to meet the most important unmet professional needs of students, working in concert with academic programs and other institutions in the field.

F. *[Now underway]* Convene a working group of senior folklorists to help us design ways to retain the participation of retired folklorists as guides, advisors, counselors, and mentors to younger folklorists.

G. *[Now underway with SIEF, H-Folk, the China Folklore Society, and folklore organizations in Mexico]* Continue to build partnerships with relevant outside organizations, including other international folklore societies, that will provide our members with greater opportunities for communication and professional exchange and will engage our field more deeply in the larger world.

4. Engage more fully in relevant public policy worlds.

Activities we are carrying out with our own resources:

A. *[Completed]* Convene a working group of folklorists with a variety of public policy involvements (including past AFS delegates to WIPO) to study and propose, by spring 2007, models for our more effective long-term engagement in relevant public policy and public service arenas.

B. *[Completed]* To provide good baseline data, carry out and analyze results from a survey of our members' involvements in public policy arenas of all kinds, and of the possible impact of their work on policy-making.

C. *[Now underway]* As a test case for similar efforts in other public policy areas, convene a working group of folklorists to prepare a series of products that will articulate the contributions that folklorists have made to the development, implementation, and evaluation of public policy in the health care fields; and will highlight possible future applications of folklorists' perspectives to health care public policy issues.

D. *[Proposal now in front of the Board]* Building upon that test case, convene similar working groups in other areas of public policy, such as immigration, nutrition, and the environment.

5. Improve and increase meetings and communications in the field.

Activities we are carrying out with our own resources:

A. *[Underway in 2009]* Convene a working group, with representation from throughout the field, to examine the content, structure, and process of the present annual meeting and to make recommendations for change to the membership and the Executive Board by early 2010.

B. *[Now underway]* Convene the AFS Publications Committee to discuss strategies for redesigning the Society 's web site into a Web 2.0 resource for the field.

C. *[Now underway]* Convene a working group to examine, and recommend strategies for increasing and strengthening, communications in the field

The Executive Board regularly monitors our progress toward these goals and meets with representatives from our field to discuss the Society's work. On the basis of this monitoring and that discussion, the Board, from time to time, may add other activities to the above list. This planning work, and the document that describes it, are both organic processes and will change and develop according to changing circumstances and our own understanding and opportunities.

