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## Rethinking Community Engagement: The Wharton Studio Museum's Digital Initiatives

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Known for its location in the Finger Lakes region, its stunning gorges, and for being home to Cornell University, Ithaca's important role in the history of silent film is often overlooked today. Preservation efforts have increased in recent years, as members of the community have worked to document the Wharton brothers' filmmaking that took place in the town in the 1910s. Yet, challenges of access have arisen at every step. The old film studio cannot be accessed (and transformed into a museum) because it is now owned by the city and holds public works supplies. Many of the archival documents are held in Cornell's library and while members of the public are allowed to apply for entrance, town-gown barriers (accentuated by the institution's location on a hill) deter most. Finally, notions of silent film as an antiquated genre, irrelevant to today's youth, have made it difficult for many K-12 and college students to engage with this aspect of their town's history.

These barriers form a stark contrast with how the films were produced and received in the 1910s. Members of the community (young and old) served as extras in the films, the local paper reported on every small piece of news related to them, and the star actors and actresses were treated as town celebrities. In an effort to negotiate some of these borders—both between the institution and community, and intergenerational ones—I am working with the Wharton Studio Museum organization on a series of digital initiatives. These include digitizing materials from Cornell, the local archives, and also town members' personal archives and featuring them in a curated, open access, web resource.

Some of the materials will be digitized in public demonstrations at the local library—a practice that has proven successful for other digital projects. Community members will be invited to help digitize and

bring their own materials related to this period of Ithaca's history, from family archives. By involving community members early on, we seek to be transparent about our process and acknowledge that they play a vital role in this act of preservation. The second initiative will build on an assignment that my undergraduate students completed with great success. In Spring 2017, I will run workshops in which middle and high school students will learn to use film editing software to re-score the Ithaca silent films using pre-written music. The combination of music and visuals brought many people to the cinema in the early years of the twentieth-century. I found that my own students responded extremely well to accessing the seemingly antiquated films by repeating the creative process, adding their own touch to these cinematic reinterpretations.

Through these activities, we hope to engage the community in Ithaca's history in a more interactive way than past efforts (which have primarily focused on film screenings and physical exhibits—most recently, on Cornell's campus). My presentation will detail our challenges in breaking down barriers to access, including issues such as restrictions that come with institutional support and broader town-gown tensions. Furthermore, I will explore the possibilities that flourish through pooling resources on- and off-campus and my experience negotiating long-held power structures in this context.