

Elizabeth D. Rockwell Conference Funding Program  
Application

Innovations in Arts and Health:  
Collaborating for Medical Humanities, Professional Development,  
and Community Health,  
Houston Arts and Health Summit, January 20–23, 2022

A collaboration between the McGovern College of the Arts  
and the College of Medicine at the University of Houston,  
The Arts and Health Division of the World Health Organization,  
and Culturunners, a London-based artists collective

Organizers:

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## Description of the Conference Theme

The proposed conference will highlight Houston's role as a leader in collaborations at the intersection of arts and health. Presentations and other events will underscore the importance of arts and health for the ethical formation of healthcare professionals and the improvement of community health.

Alongside the unprecedented physical impact of COVID-19, a "mirror pandemic" is emerging, with 93% of the world's countries reporting an escalation of mental health cases resulting from isolation, income reduction, fear of infection, or bereavement. In 2020, it is estimated that over 1 million people will have died from suicide and over 3 million from alcohol-related deaths, while hundreds of millions will have suffered from increased depression and other mental health disorders in the wake of the pandemic. This is on top of an ongoing global mental health crisis already acknowledged as a public health emergency of the first order: nearly 1 billion people worldwide are known to have a mental health disorder, and one-third of the world's population is known to have had a diagnosable mental illness at some point in their lives; 75% of these will go untreated due to stigma or to lack of access to quality, affordable care; depression is expected to be the leading disease burden by 2030, with suicide already the second-leading cause of death for those aged 15–29; and mental health now accounts for 9.7% of all disabilities worldwide—up nearly 15% from the previous decade.

In this context, it is imperative that we seek innovative, creative, and ethical leadership approaches to addressing mental health specifically and community health more broadly. Consider the wider healthcare context against which these crises are unfolding: the first two decades of 21st-century medicine have witnessed significant transformation in healthcare delivery, marked health disparities, civil unrest, unprecedented rates of physician burnout and suicide, and further public health crises (including, for example, COVID-19 and the opioid epidemic). Now more than ever, physicians must learn to interweave their developing scientific knowledge with emotional intelligence, critical thinking skills, and an understanding of social context. Furthermore, physicians must be adaptive, lifelong learners who can effectively respond to these and future challenges.

In a recent report, the Association of American Medical Colleges recognizes the arts and humanities as essential to educating a physician workforce that can effectively contribute to optimal health outcomes for patients and communities.<sup>1</sup> That view is rooted in the belief that the arts and humanities can play a unique and largely-unrealized role in equipping physicians for 21st-century challenges. The AAMC's recommendations include, among others, enhancing the research and evaluation of courses and programs that integrate the arts and humanities into medical education and continuing professional development; and increasing collaboration among scholars of

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<sup>1</sup> AAMC, *The Fundamental Role of the Arts and Humanities in Medical Education* (December 2020).

higher education, medical professionals, arts organizations, creative arts therapists, artists, humanities scholars, learners, and patients.

The city of Houston is a global center for just such innovative approaches to healthcare and medical education. Home to the largest medical center in the world, thriving arts organizations, and a major research university, work in Houston on integrating the arts and health to address critical issues such as mental health and health disparities is ongoing. Contributors to that work include institution-based arts and health programs seeking to improve healthcare outcomes and lower costs in major hospitals; practicing artists; professional visual and performing arts organizations with a focus on how their work impacts societal health; and academic programs designed to integrate the arts, humanities, and medicine in both medical education and arts training curricula.

It is against this rich backdrop of a global health crisis paired with Houston's leading position in arts and health integration that the McGovern College of the Arts and the College of Medicine at the University of Houston propose to partner with the arts and health division of the World Health Organization and London-based Culturunners' *The Future is Unwritten: Healing Arts Initiative 2021* to hold an arts and health summit in Houston, from January 20–23, 2022, on the theme Innovations in Arts and Health. The summit will take the form of a public-facing professional conference aimed at a wide audience that includes organizations or community members working

at the forefront of arts and health integration, academic and institutional medical education communities (from undergraduate to professional to continuing medical education), and an expansive network of professional arts and community organizations of all sizes (museums, performing arts companies, literary organizations, and the like) from across Houston. The conference will be the culminating event in a series of similar proceedings initiated by the W.H.O. and Culturunners, occurring in London, Aspen, New York, Palm Beach, and Houston between March 2021 and January 2022.

The conference will provide an opportunity to further position Houston and Houston's university—the University of Houston—as a global force in ethics and leadership, in this case specifically in the area of innovative education and practice in medicine and the arts. The summit will include presentations by scholars and practitioners, expert panels, practicing physicians, and artists working at the forefront of arts and health, and one or more celebrity keynotes. Publicity and media coverage will be supported by the global media infrastructure provided by the W.H.O. and Culturunners. A collection of essays drawn from the scholarly presentations and expert panels will follow, ensuring that the conference's content meets the rigorous scholarship standards of a major research university and has long-term impacts.