University of Portland | PUBLIC RESEARCH FELLOWS | Mellon Foundation

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The Engaged Humanities: Our Year by the Numbers

With the generous support of the Mellon Foundation and a private donation from Don and Nina Robertson, the program has seeded a wide variety of projects, events, and community relationships that have already had an impact on UP's students, faculty, and local neighborhood and will continue to yield benefits as we grow the program. This past year, the funds have supported:

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- 7 faculty working with 11 students on 5 engaged humanities projects that connect UP with local communities and timely issues
- 5 community guest speakers in courses across UP
- 12 events attended by more than 140 students, 85 faculty/staff, and 40 community members

Check out the stories below to read about what this year's work looked like on the ground!



Humanities Futures: Dispatch from our 3rd Annual Alumni Panel

On April 7th, six UP humanities alumni returned to campus to talk about their experiences after graduation to a room full of UP undergraduates and faculty. Now in its third year, this annual event showcased a range of alumni from majors including history, English, and philosophy, who graduated as recently as 2023 and as long ago as 2008, and who work in a variety of career fields today—offering insight into the diverse possible futures for UP students. Their heartfelt discussion provided clarity, perspective, and hope for those currently studying in fields that are less directly "vocational" and who can sometimes struggle to see what the next step might be. As these alumni made clear, their career paths were all unique, nonlinear, and winding—and rather than experiencing this as a problem, each of them affirmed that it actually contributed to their personal and professional development.

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have to get it right on the first try. Panelists emphasized the normalcy and importance of making mistakes; they looked at these as opportunities to learn, grow, and change direction, stressing the value of “failing up." And the group highlighted the significance of leaning on one’s friends and networks for advice and support in these times of upheaval and change. In isolation it can be tempting to assume that everyone else has it figured out, but when you connect with others you realize that there's no such thing as the perfect path. History alum John Herrmann (2019) noted that “sometimes, the best friends are made in the trenches,” a sentiment all college students can relate to.

Panelists also underscored an often unspoken value of a humanities education—simply the development of people skills for career advancement. The group reminisced about the ways their humanities classes provided spaces for learning how to pay attention and how to work alongside others in genuine ways, qualities that employers ultimately value for improving collaboration, creativity, and retention. In a world where nearly all applicants to any given job posting may be qualified, what often gets you ahead is being a thoughtful and engaged person. Alum and filmmaker Walter Thompson-Hernandez (2008), someone who routinely hires people to work on his projects, emphasized the importance of this, asking: “Are you someone I want to go to lunch with, someone I can have a genuine conversation with?”

After the panel, current students were able to mingle with alumni over drinks and snacks to continue the conversation and practice a bit of networking in an informal environment—another way that the Engaged Humanities is working to help students put their liberal arts education into practice beyond the classroom.

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UP's First Digital Detox Retreat: Takeaways from "Touching Grass"



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“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” You might not have thought much about Henry David Thoreau’s famous 19th century quote since your high school English class, but what might it mean in the Tik Tok era of 2026?

One of our research teams this year set out to explore how technology affects the experience of today’s students in both the classroom and their communities. The project culminated in the design and implementation of UP’s first “digital detox” retreat to Cougar Creek Campground, a modern version of the “camp cure” for 19th century malaise that Thoreau made famous.

Twelve students (4 of whom had never camped before) left their phones behind and joined the research team for 36 hours in the Willamette National Forest along the McKenzie River, led by student guides for Outdoor Pursuits. The group hiked, slept in tents, and most importantly, spent time away from screens to reconnect with nature, their peers, and themselves. Here are a few of the team’s takeaways from the experience:

- Many students use phones as mirrors and watches, enabling them to always see how they look to others and keep track of time; it was unusual and perhaps even liberating to go 36 hours without thinking about how one looks or worrying about a precise schedule
- 36 hours without technology highlighted how much of our social interaction is about the things that happen on our screens; conversation and interaction aren't just facilitated through

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- Students reported that they ultimately didn’t feel like it was all that difficult to go without their phones; while it's common to simply assume that all young people are addicted to screens, it was surprising to discover that the compulsion to constantly be on their phones was actually a quite easy one to break

There seems to be a growing wellspring of interest in more opportunities like this that offer ways to detach from the technologies in our lives; the team hopes that the pilot of this retreat can provide a model for future iterations for the UP community and beyond.



Incubator Partners: Seeding the Civic Humanities, One Small Project at a Time

The Civic Humanities Incubator Mellon Grant, directed by English faculty Jen McDaneld and Molly Hiro, has big, long-term goals in mind: launching a new intergenerational curriculum, developing internships and a minor, and creating a broader network of community-campus relationships

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At the same time, we realize that big projects start with small steps. So, last fall, we invited UP faculty to submit proposals for civic-humanities inspired activities and projects geared toward sparking something new in their teaching or research.

We ended up offering funding for five Incubator Partners, to faculty from a wonderfully diverse set of disciplines to work on these projects:



Beth DuFault (Marketing): to build a partnership with Make-A-Wish Oregon that enables students to explore ethical marketing: how successful nonprofits share powerful stories and communicate hope, while honoring privacy and dignity. The marketing director from Make-a-Wish joined DuFault's class in April (left).

Kyle Flann (Biology): to develop a connection between UP exercise science students and SportsLab, a physical therapy lab, supporting hands-on experience and reflection on the social, cultural, and ethical dimensions of health and wellness.



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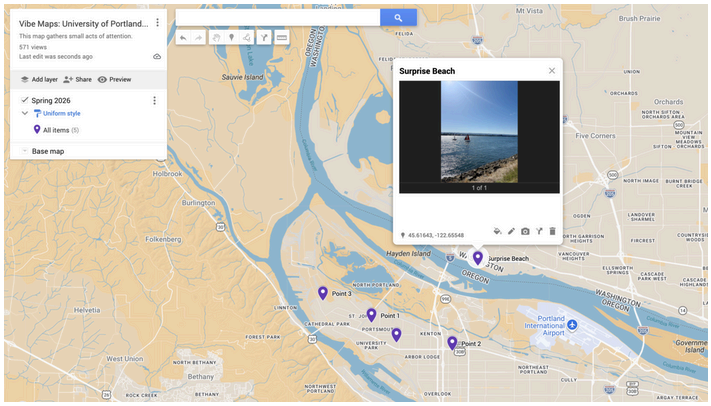


Christi Hancock (History): to pilot a "Scholar-in-Residence" program by supporting writer and award-winning filmmaker Walter Thompson-Hernández in teaching a multimedia storytelling course and offering public-facing events to share his films and writing with the UP community and beyond.



Rebekah Hanson (Music): to design and stage an Earth Day Concert & Sustainability Fair, bringing campus and community together through music, storytelling, and local CSA-grown food, to help us consider our relationship with the environment in ways that feel meaningful and accessible.

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Corey Pressman (Public Health and Wellness): to launch “Vibe Maps,” a project that invites University of Portland students to explore nearby neighborhoods through the senses, translating atmosphere and presence into poetry, photographs, and sound recordings that get shared on a collaborative digital map.

In all, these projects, “small steps” though they were, had wide-ranging impact, from offering students new humanities perspectives in places you wouldn’t expect it (Marketing, Biology), to opening up our campus to community members who got to see all that our students and faculty are up to, to getting students out of the bubble of UP and into our neighborhoods, using all their senses to pay attention to their civic surroundings. Stay tuned for more Incubator Partner/Civic Humanities creativity in future years!



Wild Humanities Showcase Dinner

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Since the very beginning of the Public Research Fellows program, we've always capped off the year with a public-facing showcase—from a red-carpet entry to our "College After Covid" documentary film in 2022, to outdoor tents with interactive exhibits in the "Engaging Portland" year, to the year we moved everything to Zoom during the pandemic. Sharing the fruits of our research with a broader audience has been a rewarding way to wrap up projects, but this year we opted to try something new.

After so much success this year with vibrant conversations over a shared meal, we decided to make the showcase into a dinner. The nine students and seven faculty who've been part of PRF 25-26—all exploring environmental issues through humanities lenses—gathered the evening of Scholarship Day to hear about each other's projects, ask questions, and share our reflections and takeaways from the year. We learned about organizing clothing swaps as a way to call attention to the problems of fast fashion; how the digital detox retreat helped students connect in surprising ways; and how the humanities can offer fresh insights into datasets related to climate change for a larger audience.

Reframing the showcase from a tent in the quad to a dinner around a big table, with a delicious Middle Eastern buffet and wine for toasting our achievements, changed the overall vibe in interesting ways. Rather than just sharing outcomes and seeing that as the endpoint, gathering in a humanities-minded way, over conversation and questions, enabled us to really look ahead and reflect on the longer-term impact of our "Wild Humanities" work this year.

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Neighborhood Humanities: Building a New Kind of UP Course

What is it?: A Neighborhood Humanities course is a new type of educational experience that brings together UP undergraduates with local neighbors to create a learning community from which all can benefit. Courses will be based in humanities disciplines but will also draw on expertise from across campus to create interdisciplinary conversations about timely topics.

Why try this?: Research shows that intergenerational learning—opportunities for college-aged students to study and discuss alongside their older neighbors—provides benefits for all involved: it corrects for cross-generational stereotyping and ageist attitudes; younger students benefit from hearing about the experiences of older participants; older participants are shown to gain numerous health benefits by engaging in academic pursuits; and communities and institutions of higher education benefit by creating the infrastructure for local civic connections.

Want to get involved? The program directors are looking for collaborators as they build the pilot curriculum. If you're a faculty member who might be interested in eventually teaching one of these

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have a hand in the research and design of this innovative new curriculum, you should apply to be a student fellow on the project in the PRF program for next year (**more info here**.)



And lastly, the program's Reading Hour series was a smashing success this year, with more than 60 students, faculty, and staff attending to engage in the radical act of reading side by side. And we got word that the idea for this event has spread to another campus (University of Montana, whose Instagram post, above, we spied during the spring semester)—might this be the start of a reading revolution? Either way, the program plans to continue to grow this event in the future, possibly expanding to nearby community sites as well. Follow us on Instagram to stay in the know!

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