LIBERAL ARTS AND HUMAN SCIENCES
CENTER FOR HUMANITIES
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CENTER FOR HUMANITIES

College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences

A Message from the Director, Sylvester Johnson

Dear Friends,

Our world has shifted in drastic ways since our last newsletter communication. We are now grappling with a global pandemic, the social and economic fallout of which has generated tremendous suffering, hardship, and uncertainty internationally. Our own Virginia Tech is working to adapt to the jarring new realities of social distancing in an effort to guard public health.

In addition, we are seeing new efforts to advance racial justice and equity. The Center for Humanities affirms that Black lives matter and that the LGBTQ community must have full equity. This summer, as people across the globe are speaking out and demonstrating to support racial justice, the Center for Humanities is continuing efforts to support scholarship and academic programming that advances inclusion, diversity, and equity. At its best, humanistic scholarship is not disconnected from addressing problems of social structures and systemic oppression. Rather, it remains vital to include public good and positive impact as an essential part of what we mean by human-centered scholarship. This is especially fitting in light of Virginia Tech's *Ut Prosim* ("That I may serve") focus.

Amidst all of this, the Center for Humanities turns 2 years old this August. Given the unprecedented challenges we face, we are especially grateful for some positive developments that have emerged for the Center for Humanities. The center has received a total of $1.2 million in external funding, as detailed in this newsletter. Such vital support will enable the center to pursue the important work of advancing humanistic scholarship over the next few years by engaging the VT community as well as collaborators and partners beyond Virginia Tech.

The Center for Humanities, with generous support from the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, is also pleased to announce that Dominique Francesca has been hired as the new Business Manager. In this essential role, Francesca will be responsible for the center's financial operations as well as supporting communication, outreach, event management, and working closely with the director to ensure comprehensive execution of the center's mission.

The Center for Humanities also wishes to thank Shah Shajahan, who has worked as the graduate assistant with the center for the past year. As Shah moves on to advance his PhD studies, we extend gratitude for his invaluable support as a member of the Center for Humanities team!

As the summer winds down and we look toward a new academic year, we stand ready to face new challenges as well as explore the important opportunities that lie ahead for Virginia Tech. We invite you to join us for future programming as we work together to advance humanistic scholarship in the spirit of *Ut Prosim*.

CENTER FOR HUMANITIES ANNOUNCES FACULTY SUMMER STIPENDS

The Center for Humanities has awarded each of the following faculty a $4000 stipend in support of their ongoing research that identifies a humanistic, human-centered topic.

♦ Nneka Logan - Associate Professor, Communications—"Corporations, Race and Responsibility: Exploring How Business Organizations Engage Social Change"

♦ Paul Quigley - Associate Professor, History—"Preston Brooks, the Man Behind the Cane: Words, Violence, and the Coming of the American Civil War"

♦ Shalini Misra - Associate Professor, Public & International Affairs—"The Digital Mind: Thinking in an Age of Fleeting Attention"

♦ Joseph Bedford - Assistant Professor, Architecture & Design—"The Meaning of Architectural Education: Knowledge and Design in Postmodernity"

♦ Shaily Patel - Assistant Professor, Religion & Culture—"Inanimate Souls: Object Agency in the Early Christian Imagination"

♦ Chris Lindgren - Assistant Professor, English—"Proximities of white supremacy online: Towards measuring racist discourse to engage problems with content moderation"

Center for Humanities Creates New
"Tech for Humanity" Pathways Minor
Through Mellon Grant

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has awarded $665,000 to the Virginia Tech Center for Humanities to support the creation of a new "Tech for Humanity" Pathways minor. This new undergraduate minor will focus on the intersection of humanities and technology by emphasizing humanistic, human-centered approaches to technology. This curriculum development initiative will draw on a range of talent in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences. It will elevate the efforts of faculty in humanistic disciplines to help prepare a new generation of learners to understand technology through a comprehensive lens. The new undergraduate curriculum will include emphasis on technology policy, inclusion and diversity, AI ethics, historical and cultural knowledge, democratic outcomes, and the role of social justice in making technology accountable to public good and public interest.

"This is immensely important and transformational for Virginia Tech," expressed Sylvester Johnson, who directs the Center for Humanities and is Principal Investigator for the project. Johnson also serves as Executive Director of Virginia Tech's university-wide "Tech for Humanity" initiative. He added, "At a time when Virginia Tech is participating in human-centered leadership of technology through our Tech for Humanity initiative, such significant support from Mellon could not be more timely and necessary."

The funding from Mellon will enable faculty to create courses for a new Pathways minor. It will also fund the creation of close to 100 case studies that will be made freely and publicly available for anyone to use for teaching about technology from a humanities approach. As a Pathways minor, this "Tech for Humanity" curriculum will be available to undergraduates from any major. Because Pathways minor credits count toward general education requirements, students can pursue the Pathways minor without increasing the cost or time-to-completion for their undergraduate education.

As reflected in its stated mission, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, under the leadership of President Elizabeth Alexander, "seeks to strengthen, promote, and defend the centrality of the humanities and the arts to human flourishing and to the well-being of diverse, fair, and democratic societies."

Government leaders, industry experts, human rights organizations, and private citizens are becoming increasingly attuned to the human impact of technology, especially for highly vulnerable populations. Through support from Mellon, the Center for Humanities will be well positioned to help prepare for an increasingly technological world by enhancing humanities curricula.

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Award for
Ensuring Scholarly Access to Digital Records

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has awarded $44,000 to support a collaboration between the Center for Humanities and the Virginia Tech University Libraries to host a workshop on ensuring access to digital records. The workshop will be conducted in partnership with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). This effort aims to ensure future access to the massive and ever-growing collection of government records in NARA's digital catalog.

The project team consists of Bill Ingram of VT University Libraries (Principal Investigator), Sylvester Johnson, Director of Virginia Tech's Center for Humanities; and Pamela Wright, Chief Innovation Officer at NARA.
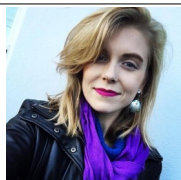
This planning grant from The Mellon Foundation will enable Virginia Tech and NARA to convene a group of archivists, librarians, humanists, technologists, information scientists, and computer scientists for a two-day workshop at the Virginia Tech campus in Arlington, Virginia. During this workshop, VT and NARA will identify requirements, develop conceptual models, and devise and articulate a work plan for a subsequent pilot project that will test state-of-the-art tools and technologies to increase the effectiveness of archival programs and broaden public access to the important content in the NARA collections.

ASPECT Dissertation Research Fellowship Award

ASPECT PhD student Linea Cutter is the winner of this year's $5000 ASPECT dissertation research fellowship award sponsored by the Center for Humanities.

Linea's dissertation project engages in a multi-scalar analysis, as it examines how global food and eating regimes shape and are reproduced by individuals at the level of subjectivity. More precisely, she analyzes how these regimes delimit the specific, often mundane ways of life, corresponding eating patterns, and embodied relationships to food that are possible in certain historical and spatial contexts.

In her project, she theorizes foodstuffs as biomedical tools of self-management, self-enhancement, and self-medication that, when ingested, dissolve neoliberal forms of discipline and compulsion into the body. Through the grid of neoliberal governmentality, the project examines how power is inscribed on, read through, and co-produced by the bodies of eating, tasting neoliberal achievement subjects.

Henry Luce Foundation Supports
"Future Humans, Human Futures" Project

The Henry Luce Foundation's Theology Program has awarded $500,000 to the Virginia Tech Center for Humanities to support "Future Humans, Human Futures," a project on religion, ethics, and technology that tackles fundamental questions of what it means to be human in a technological age. The grant includes $20,000 to support immigrant farm laborers through English-as-second language (ESL) conversations, as an effort to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on essential workers. This generous grant from the Luce foundation will make possible a three-year project that will include summer research institutes enabling researchers in religion and theology to engage with experts in technology and innovation domains such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), synthetic biology, and cybernetics (combining humans with machines). Participants in the summer institutes, who will be funded by Luce, will learn how technology is impacting a complex world and will advance their scholarship in light of the growing need for human-centered guidance. The project seeks to deepen the diversity and inclusion of underrepresented populations whose insights and participation are essential to shaping the role of technology for public good and public interest.

The support from the Luce foundation will also make possible a timely partnership between the Virginia Tech Center for Humanities and DoGoodX, an accelerator designed for early-stage social entrepreneurs who are passionate about developing businesses that do good in the world. DoGoodX will help lead summer institute workshops and will collaborate with Virginia Tech to produce public summits that engage a broad audience in fostering the ethical guidance of technology.

"We are pleased to support this important new project at Virginia Tech's Center for Humanities," said Luce Foundation Program Director Jonathan VanAntwerpen. "Emphasizing the inclusion of scholars from underrepresented groups, and seeking to move beyond traditional academic boundaries, the project will establish new directions in humanistic engagement with emerging technology by examining what it means to be human in a technological age. Research encouraged and amplified through the project's work will focus in particular on the role of technology in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, including attention to data, security and surveillance, and to the impact of technology on religious communities during the pandemic."

Sylvester Johnson, who directs Virginia Tech's Center for Humanities, is Principal Investigator for the project. He also serves as Executive Director of VT's "Tech for Humanity" initiative, a university-wide effort focusing on human-centered approaches to technology and innovation. Johnson will coordinate this three-year, Luce-funded project to promote new directions in research by national and global humanities scholars with expertise in theology and religion. "We are very excited for this unique opportunity to partner with The Henry Luce Foundation to advance research in religion, theology, and technology ethics," he emphasized. "The human-centered challenges that technology is raising require new directions and greater inclusivity in the scholarship addressing difficult questions about technology's public impact. Luce's bold and game-changing generosity to support this effort is something we should all celebrate."

The Henry Luce Foundation seeks to enrich public discourse by promoting innovative scholarship, cultivating new leaders, and fostering international understanding. Established in 1936 by Henry R. Luce, the co-founder and editor-in-chief of Time, Inc., the Luce Foundation advances its mission through grantmaking and leadership programs in the fields of Asia, higher education, religion and theology, art, and public policy.

ESL Classes for Migrant Farm Laborers Supported by Luce Foundation

The Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC), in collaboration with Virginia Tech and Margaret Breslau of the Coalition for Justice, is launching virtual ESL classes for migrant farmworkers. LAJC's Virginia Justice Project for Farm and Immigrant Workers advocates for better labor and living conditions for agricultural workers across the Commonwealth. This harvest season, 20 Virginia Tech students and community members will provide virtual English language instruction as part of a larger project on religion, ethics and technology at the Center for Humanities, supported by a grant from the Luce Foundation's Theology Program.

For the past five summers, LAJC organizers have moved to the Eastern Shore, where they develop relationships with H-2A visa holders from Mexico who come to Virginia to pick tomatoes. These workers live in isolated labor camps, and, as such, one of their primary requests is the opportunity to learn English so they can interact with the local community. Sustainable ESL also builds in cultural and linguistic exchange; the student-teachers will also learn Spanish and the migrant worker experience.

Using a mutually-accessible Facebook platform, the groups will navigate a curriculum that enables them to learn practical English-language skills, such as common terms for shopping and going to the doctor. In the time of COVID, migrant workers are even more secluded and health care information is paramount so teachers are incorporating vocabulary such as "social distancing" and "masks" into lessons. Learning English not only puts farmworkers in a position to have meaningful interactions in the community, but also to have fruitful relationships with their employers and supervisors, with whom they rarely have a common language.

This collaboration harnesses the power of technology in an innovative and empowering manner. Quite literally, students from one geographic corner of the Commonwealth are able to have a mutually beneficial exchange with migrant farmworkers on the opposite side of the Commonwealth. In that spirit, Virginia Tech, LAJC, and the Coalition for Justice are excited about the prospect that this endeavor will be an interactive, forward-thinking model that can be replicated across student bodies and worker communities across the Commonwealth and beyond.

Center for Humanities Podcast

The Center for Humanities is creating a podcast series that focuses on human-centered topics of relevance to a broad audience. This series of podcasts will feature humanists who can share expert insights into a range of complex issues to produce intelligent media that aligns with the center's mission of advancing humanistic scholarship and human-centered knowledge.

The podcast will cover multiple categories of themes and topics with particular attention to areas related to current and future initiatives. Please check our webpage at https://liberalarts.vt.edu/research-centers/center-for-humanities.html for updates.

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