Purpose of Series

In alignment with our Project Humanities mission, *Aridity and the Desert* brings together individuals and communities who wouldn’t normally come together to talk, listen, and connect over a shared meal. We create bridges between our university and the surrounding communities to advance meaningful interactions and dialogue about our individual and shared humanity. In order to meet this goal, we purposefully seek out individuals from differing communities and with different life experiences to attend these evening events.

In a world of increasing use of electronic means to connect with others, we run the risk of solely connecting with those that agree with us, look like us, live like us. Our *Aridity* series is a platform to witness and participate in the transformative power of civic and community engagement. Our shared humanity makes itself known when we come together to break bread.

Description of Events

As planned, Project Humanities conceived of, coordinated, and executed four events focused on constructing space for people to engage in conversation about the topics that affect us all.

Event #1, “Community, Place, and Progress,” centered on the notion of place and place-making as it relates to personal and communal identities. Particularly as a relatively new state, Arizona has many transplants for whom identity and Arizona is a contested reality socially, politically, and historically. As part of the event’s focus on Place and Identity, we looked at Arizona via the five senses—What does Arizona taste like? Smell like? Feel like? Look like? Sound like? Participants initially spoke of their experiences in Arizona as being marked by a lack of community, ruled by car culture, and the inhospitable desert environment. However, by the end of the evening, participant feedback listed takeaways such as a desire to seek out diverse social connections, a recognition of personal bias, and a refreshed sense of hope.

Event #2, “Politics and Politicians,” featured the Institute for Civil Dialogue, an organization that facilitates structured community and organizational conversations on what they call “hot topics.” For this particular event, participants were asked to assess the controversial statement, “I feel my values are protected by my elected representatives.” At the conclusion of the evening, participants reported feeling uplifted, stimulated, grateful, and valued. They also realized the tension for many who see politics as a great divider than a unifier for those who think, believe, and live differently.

Event #3, “Pride and Prejudice: Intersectionalities within LGBTQIA+ Communities,” featured two facilitators from Disability Resources and the Transgender Education Program, both at Arizona State University. This event brought to light the oft-ignored reality of intersectionality within LGBTQIA+ communities. To dispel the myth that an individual is only one thing, the facilitators engaged
participants in peeling back the complex commonalities through a “stand up/raise your hand if” activity. This simple activity allowed attendees to not only recognize intersectionality in others, but also within themselves, and to recognize that having multiple identities does not mean that everyone is equally oppressed or without privilege.

Event #4, “The Future of Innovation, Technology, and Humanity,” tapped into the complicated relationship humans have with technology. As was discovered at the event, the race to create and profit from the next new big thing can lead to a general sense of distrust of technology for some participants. Attendees examined the risks and rewards of our growing dependence on technologies and the possibility that humanity’s future lies in the balance.

**Attendee Information**

As part of creating a diverse group of participants, Project Humanities requested personal registration information from each applicant. This included asking how participants identify racially, religiously, politically and even revealing likes and dislikes. We asked interested participants to attend just one event in the series to ensure new and diverse participation. Marketing techniques to attract attendees included social media posts, direct networking, and reaching out to Project Humanities’ large database of connections.

**Successes**

Anytime diverse groups of people come together to talk, listen, and connect, a learning opportunity presents itself. By creating these opportunities intentionally, the learning is nearly always a positive experience. Attendees overwhelmingly praised each of the four events. Feedback included praise for the talented and knowledgeable facilitators, enjoyment of delicious meals and venues, but most importantly, a gratefulness for bringing together people to simply talk about being human in an increasingly divided time. The most requested addition to the events was a furthering of them.

**Challenges**

As is true for many people, our invited attendees have busy lives with many responsibilities. Due to this, we did face the challenge of ensuring all 40 participants were in attendance. Having said that, we excelled in reaching a level of diversity on multiple levels.

While these events undoubtedly resulted in meaningful conversation and connection, some participants felt there wasn’t enough time to truly dive deep. Others want an opportunity for continuation or follow-up.
Documentation

Project Humanities captured these events through video, photographs, and news articles found on our website.

[https://projecthumanities.asu.edu/content/aridity-and-desert](https://projecthumanities.asu.edu/content/aridity-and-desert)

Funding

Funding from Campus Compact was used for these purposes: event venue rental, honoraria for facilitators, food, supplies for event activities, and event photography and videography.

Moving Forward

*Aridity and the Desert* Dinner and Dialogue Series was a success, made possible by the generous funding from Campus Compact. We intend to continue bringing people together in this Dinner and Dialogue format to further these important conversations in our communities.