Project

Humanities

ASU’s Eight Design Aspirations:

- Leverage Our Place
- Transform Society
- Value Entrepreneurship
- Conduct Use-Inspired Research
- Enable Student Success
- Fuse Intellectual Disciplines
- Be Socially Embedded
- Engage Globally
Project Humanities

On the first floor of the Discovery Hall on the Tempe campus lies a suite that houses a passionate team led by an enthusiastic director, driven by innovative ideas. Through pictures on the wall, celebrations of past events, names of benefactors thanking them for their support and an array of dolls representing various cultures and lifestyles, the entire atmosphere communicates the essentiality of diversity.

“Humanities is so obvious, that it’s not obvious. It’s like air. We don’t realize it’s there, until we start losing it.”

- Dr. Neal A. Lester, Founding Director of Project Humanities, ASU

Abstract: In today’s world which maps with rapid uncertainty the meaning of progress and innovation, how much importance do we give to meditating and self-reflecting on what it means to be human and to be better humans? A unique initiative at Arizona State University is answering this very question and has made its place in the gamut of opportunities focused on enhancing the university holistically. Project Humanities is a multi-faceted initiative, engaging people throughout ASU communities and beyond to demonstrate the importance of humanities and its multiple implications for society as well as social and intellectual advancement.

This one-of-its-kind award-winning initiative demystifies a solely disciplinary perspective on humanities, choosing instead to understand and appreciate humanities by “doing” humanities through workshops, lectures, symposia, film screenings, performances, community and professional trainings, student and faculty contests, and festivals that bring individuals and communities together to “talk, listen and connect.” Through individual and shared experiences, Project Humanities demonstrates passion and knowledge of humanities study, research, and thought.

Background: Dr. Neal A. Lester founded the Project in 2010, while he was the Dean of Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at ASU. Due to the economic downturn at the time, there was a visible shift in students’ choices in major fields of study and students were fleeing from humanities subjects across the country. Universities were disestablishing language courses and the perennial question of, “What are you going to do with a humanities
major?” plagued the thinking of both parents and their students. This was veritably concerning for the university. A tenet of the ASU Charter and its Design Aspirations is that the University assume fundamental responsibility for its communities and transform society — something that could not be accomplished without a commitment to humanities. Humanities explores the past and present of human culture to understand oneself and to create a better future. Without a proficiency and understanding of humanities, society cannot expect to advance sustainably, responsibly, or ethically.

To address this issue, Dr. Lester was asked to “make humanities more robust.” Dr. Lester joined ASU’s English Department in 1997 where he promoted inclusivity by regularizing African American literature surveys into the curriculum. Leveraging his experiences as a public scholar and researcher and his time serving on the board of directors for Arizona Humanities, Dr. Lester created Project Humanities, promoting a culture at ASU that invites multiple ways to imagine and experience difference, inclusion, and equity.

**How Project Humanities Executes**

Humanity 101 is a hallmark of Project Humanities and creates a framework within which Dr. Lester’s work is executed. Created in 2012, Humanity 101 responds to the question with immediacy and urgency, “Are we losing our humanity?” Humanity 101 consists of programming, activities and events around these seven principles: compassion, empathy, forgiveness, integrity, kindness, respect, and self-reflection. Through these principles, Humanity 101 promotes and sustains robust dialogue and understanding around some of the most difficult issues that face our time — from sexism to cultural appropriation to homelessness to representation and everything in between. Activities and programs around these principles represent what Project Humanities sees as “humanity in action” and serve as reminders for how to be mindful of and to practice one’s humanity. Our world’s challenges require a multidisciplinary approach, benefitting from many diverse voices. In this complexity, communication can be difficult, especially when such diverse voices are speaking from different perspectives and with different motivations and understandings. The Humanity 101 principles create a common language through which we all can speak and relate regardless of our disciplines, backgrounds, and live experiences.

Project Humanities contends that it is through observance of these Humanity 101 principles that we begin to understand one another, resolve contentious issues, and heal rifts that divide us so that we can grow as a society and be better people. The Humanity 101 principles are integrated into everything Project Humanities does and are visible in events such as the ongoing Service Saturdays homeless outreach, the annual Hacks for Humanity hackathon for the social good, and community dialogue series like Vital Voices and Aridity and the Desert.

“I appreciate most how Humanity 101 encapsulates basic principles for thoughtful interaction with others. Without Project Humanities, ASU and Arizona would be so much less... well, human.”

- Kenja Hassan, Director, Cultural Relations, Office of Government & Community Engagement, ASU
Their Work

Project Humanities’ work encompasses a broad scope. They host events like film screenings and keynotes around intersectional and intergenerational content, develop programing and courses like those on “the N-word” (engaging students as young at ten in conversations about culturally offensive and insensitive language and its implications), and even create internships for high school students so that they can develop a deeper understanding of campus culture through the lens of diversity and inclusion.

While each of their outreach methods is important and meaningful in their own right, three specific programs most clearly and meaningfully illustrate the Humanity 101 principles and the mission of the Project Humanities: Service Saturdays, Hacks for Humanity and their Community Dialogue Series.

Service Saturdays

One of the arms of Project Humanities that most exemplifies ASU’s commitment to and its responsibility to broader communities outside the boundaries of the University is the Service Saturdays homeless outreach effort. Embodying the Humanity 101 principles of integrity, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, kindness, respect, and self-reflection, Service Saturdays is a community outreach that provides clothing, shoes and toiletries to 150-200 adults experiencing homelessness or instability in downtown Phoenix. This Valley-wide effort attracts anywhere between 30 to 50 intergenerational volunteers every other Saturday morning from 6:30 am to 8:30 am, to distribute donated items. The effort also gives groups, organizations, companies, and individuals the opportunity to volunteer their time off-site where they can organize, sort and transport items for distribution.

Service Saturdays gives students and community members an opportunity to realize the importance of seeing the world through different eyes and the humility of knowing that we cannot know everyone’s lived experience. It is also an opportunity to give back in an impactful way. This bimonthly outreach exposes volunteers to different ways of being human in our complex and unpredictable world and helps to dispel myths about this population.
While homeless outreach is common among many service and faith groups, Project Humanities’ approach through the Humanity 101 principles makes it particularly special. For Project Humanities, the goal is not just to serve a community of individuals in need, but to foster communication and understanding among individuals and groups to effect long-term and sustainable impact. Volunteers are not simply trying to “do good” for this community, but also trying to develop their own understanding of and empathy for the issues impacting vulnerable populations so that they are better positioned to create lasting change.

“For many students, this was the first time they were exposed to such a large number of homeless people at once and the most extensive interaction they had had with homeless people in their entire lives. This was also my own experience. We met people who were just like us; we learned their names, heard their stories, and sent them off Saturday morning with a few more basic necessities taken care of than they had fulfilled the day prior. Service Saturdays allowed students to directly help a disenfranchised demographic while dispelling the myths surrounding homelessness for young, impressionable students.”

- Andrew Basha, 2016-2017 President, Rho Kappa Honor Society, Desert Vista High School

**Hacks for Humanity**

When you first think of a hackathon, you might picture a bunch of coders in a room, wired in to their systems, typing their fingers away. But just like everything else at ASU, Project Humanities too does things differently - innovatively. “Hacks for Humanity” is an annual hackathon hosted by Project Humanities that takes a unique spin on the traditional hackathon. The goal is to create any technology for the social good but grounded in at least three of the seven Humanity 101 principles. Unlike many hackathons that too often target only engineers and computer geeks, this hackathon targets and attracts people from various disciplines; not just coders. Committed to the notion that the resolution of social challenges can only be achieved through a diverse approach, “Hacks for Humanity” is inclusive of everyone – regardless of discipline, age, background or institution. From high school students to working professionals with a background in chemistry, the hackathon is a place where anyone and everyone can get their creative juices flowing and make a difference. The first “Hacks for Humanity” event took place in 2014 and has been evolving since its inception, becoming more fun and diverse each year.

Beyond its commitment to diversity and inclusion, this 36-hour long hackathon with 150-200 people—participants, sponsors, volunteers and mentors, focuses on thematic categories to further guide
participants; such as Education, Earth, or Healthcare. The products produced at the end of these 36 hours are impressive and far-reaching; all created around challenges that emerged organically rather than predetermined.

Indeed, the hackathon experience goes far beyond coding. For instance, through a series of ice-breakers and giving participants an opportunity to mingle and get to know each other, teams self-organize. In 2016, a high school student, a college student majoring in chemistry, and a recent graduate in graphic design created “Drive as Local,” an app to help people understand basic driving rules in other countries and states they visit. This helps people understand the regulations of the country or state they are driving in and hence keeps our lives and roads, here and abroad, much safer. This team won first place that year. “Drive as Local” team member, Qi Wang, also won 2nd place in 2017 with her team that conceptualized a small bot that would stay with elderly people who live alone, check in on them, and contact close family or services in case of emergencies.

“The ‘Hacks for Humanity’ is so unique because people focus on local and global issues instead of technology challenges. [There are] no major limitations, so everyone can participate. It was a wonderful experience for me working with people from diverse backgrounds at the Hacks for Humanity.”

- Qi Wang, Undergraduate Student, ASU

During the hackathon itself, diverse mentors across the experience spectrum, answer questions and facilitate workshops on development and pitch preparation. Participants create business plans, conduct market research, and compete through live pitching at the end of the event. The hackathon creates a great atmosphere to learn by doing, but also to learn from professionals and gain valuable insights.

For many, these team products don’t just wrap up at the end of the 36 hours. Qi’s teams are working on further developing their creations to share them with the world and to make a real impact. After the 2017 hackathon, two “serial entrepreneurs” who are also Project Humanities Humanity 101 Founders, Michelle Mace and Jim Tuton, hosted the top 7 teams for a post-event breakfast to understand the next steps in advancing their products from the hackathon. A product of the first “Hacks for Humanity,” ARKHumanity, is already thriving as a for-profit committed to suicide prevention.

“The momentum from Hacks for Humanity does not stop once the winning team claims their prize. Hacks for Humanity has generated significant change within the lives of several of our participants. Perhaps the best example of this event’s sheer transformative power has been demonstrated through the continuing success of our 2014 winning team, ARKHumanity, who created a system designed to identify specific tweets containing key phrases that are frequently used by people in crisis who risk self-

![Image 5. Hacks for Humanity 2017. Photo courtesy of Project Humanities.](image)
harming. Since their group's formation and victory at the Hacks for Humanity hackathon, they have gone on to win various social enterprise competitions, have participated in major conferences, and have launched their own business called HumanityX. This team continues to lead the way in improving humanity through creative new technologies.”

- Dr. Neal A. Lester, Founding Director of Project Humanities, ASU

Community Conversations Series

“Project Humanities is unique in that each event approaches a social problem and requires audience participation that often results in much needed cross cultural dialogue. People walking away feeling empowered.”

- Ayanna Shambe, Undergraduate Student, Vice President of Black Student Union, ASU

“Aridity and the Desert” is an event that engages diverse populations in critical dialogue around tough subjects that might otherwise remain unapproached because people have been taught to avoid such contentious topics in public conversation. The “Aridity and the Desert” Dinner and Dialogue series facilitates conversations in everything from morality, politics and politicians, and LGBTQ issues to the future of technology and humanity. While individuals may not agree on perspectives, being aware of other perspectives and respecting civilly and respectfully is a skill on which all can improve.

Through structured, civil, facilitated discussions, the “Aridity and the Desert” series doesn’t necessarily intend to resolve tension between people with opposing views, but rather to create a space in which individuals with different life experiences and perspectives can talk freely, openly, and respectfully. These events take place at the dinner table, following the belief that “breaking bread” serves as a cultural ritual through which we can see others as real human beings. The hospitable environment helps people with opposing views communicate more openly with one another without feeling like they are under attack. Even if they are unable to reach consensus or resolve their differences, they will have at least had the opportunity to engage in respectful dialogue and better understand the perspectives of others.

Another such community dialogue series called “Vital Voices” brings together individuals and communities through literature, language, and performance in important cultural spaces. The purpose of the series is to communicate that every identity, culture, and voice is vital. A couple of times a semester, a “Vital Voices” event explores an idea, an artist, author or genre. What’s unique about this effort is that there is a facilitator who leads the conversation but the vitality comes in that participants
bring a favorite quote, passage, essay or poem to share as related to a subject. An example of a past event is, “What a Children’s Story Taught Me about Humanity” in which participants were invited to bring a passage, picture, quotation or artifact that communicates what a childhood book taught them about one of the seven Humanity 101 principles. Each participant shares what they have brought with them, while other participants are given the opportunity to learn from their lived experience and perspective. In a world in which we all come from such diverse backgrounds, events like these challenge our perceptions and help us look beyond what divides us.

Impact

“We are doing stuff that no one has done outside the University or within in new and provocative ways.”

- Dr. Neal Lester, Director of Project Humanities, ASU

Project Humanities began as a week-long series of events. Impressed by the impact and the need for such a humanities initiative, the University stepped in to fund Project Humanities annually, and that annual funding has now become multi-year to ensure that the impactful programming continues.

It is not just the University who sees the importance of Project Humanities’ work. The broader communities also believe in this initiative that looks at making us more human. Today, Project Humanities operates with a strong backbone of five student workers, three staff members, two Humanity 101 Advisory Boards, a Project Humanities Steering Committee, and 51 separate Founders - consisting of people or organizations that have invested $1k or more in this programming.

ASU has created an atmosphere of innovation that enables all of its members to dream, think big, and innovate without bounds. When people talk about creativity and innovation, they usually refer to it as “thinking outside of the box.” Project Humanities embodies this mindset by being interdisciplinary in its approach and continuing to integrate multiple communities and the broader world. Through their unique programming, Project Humanities encourages entities to prioritize humanities—languages, literature, film, writing, history—along with the experiences that keep us in touch with how it means to be human in an increasingly mechanized, anonymous world. Project Humanities is ever-evolving and responds to the needs of society, bringing a much-needed human touch everywhere it goes. This program aligns with Arizona State University as a “New American University” moving across boundaries and creating innovatively. Like ASU, Project Humanities is creating local and broad impact and demonstrating the value of “taking, listening, and connecting.”

“Project Humanities was one of the reasons I decided to attend Arizona State University. I was intrigued by the programs that I attended and inspired by Dr. Lester’s eagerness to challenge students with leadership opportunities. From day one at ASU, I started engaging in the Project, believing that if I invested in them, they would invest back into me. I could have never predicted just how right I was.”

- Rachel Sondgeroth, Undergraduate Student, President of Sun Devils are Better Together, ASU

Project Humanities has made an impact quickly as a force that organizations, students, individuals and the University support and value. Whether corporate or community groups that partner with Project Humanities, high-school students that intern with Project Humanities, or 900 people who showed up to
experience the straight-talking anti-racism educator Jane Elliott, Project Humanities is touching lives and redefining the way we look at culture, diversity, and humanity at ASU.

“Through the discussions that Project Humanities creates, cultural diversity becomes more than a statistic, and is explored in such a way that allows us to be better connected with one another. The organization asks us to both acknowledge and preserve our differences, but also to come to an understanding that we all have differences, which makes inclusion necessary.”

- Dava Newell, Undergraduate Student, ASU