



2020 Working Group Key Recommendations
 Andrew W. Mellon-funded
**Humanities for the Public Good
 PhD Initiative**

Hosted by the Obermann Center for
 Advanced Studies at the University of Iowa
 In Collaboration with the Graduate College
 and the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

During the 2019-2020 academic year, members of the Humanities for the Public Good Advisory Board formed Working Groups to learn about changing graduate programs around the country and to lay the groundwork for an applied, experiential, cross-disciplinary humanities PhD. The Working Groups covered the following topics: Career Exploration, Community Engagement, Degree Structure, Dissertation, and Pedagogical Models. Their full reports offer a detailed account of their process and discoveries. Here, we zero in on their recommendations, which are not only invaluable for our work, but also offer insights we hope will be helpful to our colleagues in humanities departments here and elsewhere. On behalf of the Working Groups, we offer special thanks for the leadership of our HPG Postdoctoral Fellow, Ashley Cheyemi McNeil, who organized, facilitated, and guided the Working Groups with rare skill, intelligence, and collegiality. To learn more about the members of the Advisory Board and our work, please visit our [website](#) or contact us at Obermann-HPG@uiowa.edu.

The Values We Want to Guide the HPG PhD—

- The humanities serve as cross-disciplinary translation among campus and wider publics
- The degree should be a non-competitive asset and feeder to existing graduate programs
- The degree will be rooted in the ethics and practice of support and appreciation for students, faculty, staff, administrators, community partners, and all additional participants
- Every aspect of the degree from recruiting materials to classes to ongoing assessment will ask participants to reflect on the ways diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice contribute to knowledge, community, and creativity
- The degree will take a “whole person”/whole community approach to student learning goals, including a balance of personal interests and engagement that serves the goals of our community partners, students, and our university
- The degree will assume that the humanities offer a critical means of addressing long-standing problems and solutions
- The program will encourage scholarship that provides students with important expertise in a discipline and a distinctive professional identity

“[We are] framing HPG as convening multiple disciplines, projects, and programs: with the humanities serving as a translator among many different units on campus and between the university and wider publics” – Pedagogical Models

“Whole-person learning destabilizes the hubris of expertise; it breaks down the distinction between physical labor and knowledge acquisition, binaries of theory and praxis.” – Degree Structure

- In addition to content and skills, the degree will be a learning experience in hospitality, teaching/learning/living diversity, reciprocity, trust, commitment, knowledge production, innovation, creativity, listening, collaboration, risk-taking
- We will emphasize resilience, adaptability

“[There was an] intangible sense of humility and trust within our working group [that should be cultivated throughout the program]: all ideas were welcome, considered, taken in new directions, built upon, or archived as suited our scope and trajectory of exploration.” – Career Exploration

Curriculum—

- DEI will be embedded in every facet of the program including class time for reflection, case studies, subject matter, and approaches to teaching and learning
- We will use a systems-thinking framework to design applied studies (like internships)
- To accommodate all kinds of students, we will design flexible, varied learning experiences, opportunities, and timelines, and interweave courses, experiences, and forms of writing for multiple purposes, including grants and thesis project
- The degree should be capable of being tailored to varied groups—humanities scholars interested in engagement, engaged scholars interested in humanities, certificate students, returning students, distant students, part timers
- The degree structure will include student-designed course of study, regular self-reflection, support for risk-taking and generative failure, ability to revise goals and plans throughout the degree period
- The program will include cohort experiences, individual experiences, training in theory, and applied experiences through collaboration with university and community partners
- The program will offer in-depth research and broad understanding of given subjects and disciplines through course work and training informed by current theories and methodologies
- The degree will balance students’ work for methodological training and disciplinary perspectives with courses in common and opportunities for public engagement and career training

“... we should be aware of how working with diverse students impacts research topics, research methods, and the work of mentoring: underrepresented or unconventional students must not be viewed as attempting graduate work that is ‘easier’ than others. Care must be taken not to further disenfranchise them while undertaking a form of graduate education that will inevitably appear unusual to many academics.” – Dissertation

“*What is the humanities?* How do we define the humanities beyond specific disciplines? What questions, perspectives, epistemologies are most relevant to the Public Good?” – Degree Structure

“What if, we asked, we envisioned and pitched a Public Humanities PhD not as a competition/challenge to existing programs at UI, but rather as an asset to numerous departments and units on campus; a program that would act as a feeder to many of their courses, programs, and faculty and create exciting new interdisciplinary possibilities?” – Pedagogical Models

- Community engagement will be at the heart of the degree, including collaborations with public and private sectors in the mutually enriching, civic-minded creation of knowledge, learning, and the public good
- The sequence of courses will focus on public scholarship (We especially noted examples from the University of Wisconsin’s ways of engaging communities, understanding public cultures, translating humanities for new audiences)
- The degree will integrate public and digital humanities work
- We will offer courses in common with existing certificate programs and course work
- The program should offer a low residency option and online courses
- Internships will be offered locally and outside Iowa City (with dissertation connections when possible)
- We will encourage creative documentation of learning vs relying solely on exams, traditional courses, etc.
- The program will offer a balance of orientation (including career exploration and working with communities), theory, applied experience, individual courses, skills, ongoing self-design/reflection/documentation
- We should consider offering courses for a certificate as well as a PhD
- Dissertations can be creative projects, which will likely require unique skill sets, new stakeholders, more diverse mentors/thesis committee members, flexible timelines that include the integration of the thesis work throughout the program, new audiences, and plans for multiple forms/uses/afterlife
- “Dissertations” should be developed over time, integrated throughout the program, and designed for diverse readers and uses

“In terms of experience, there is no substitute for being in the field. Students learned things they never could have anticipated unless they were present on site. Each site has a different culture and different needs. Understanding the idiosyncratic nature of every organization is a key part of student learning and success. Another idiosyncratic aspect is helping each student access a menu of choices. In other words, students need to have some stake in decision making when it comes to creating the partnership match.” – Community Engagement

“Imagine the dissertation as a space — wherein a student is swimming in multiple power relations at all times — that moves from viewing the single student as its sole author to including the team of the committee and other players as more fully inhabiting that space. The ‘time’ of the dissertation also demands conceptual revision as an event occurring across the full span of the program, potentially allowing for greater negotiation with community partners, public and digital humanities, and other practices all along the route.” – Dissertation

Skills—

- Students will learn to engage with various kinds of mentors
- Students should learn to connect and share their work through networking
- Training in project management will be critical
- Courses will emphasize the collaborative skills needed for project-based learning—defining problems, creating teams, shared leadership and defining of roles, co-creating solutions and outcomes, project evaluation, taking the position of a novice, hearing new ideas, feeling discomfort, silencing our judgements, not jumping to conclusions without data

“The process-centered work we envision should ultimately prove more social and ethical insofar as it is conceived and designed to intentionally build a body of knowledge and networks for others to pick up, extend, and productively complicate.”
– Dissertation

Internships—

- The internships will focus on multiple ways of serving public good
- We will provide a clear rationale for the choice of sites
- Internships will be timed to serve student’s learning. Ideally, we would offer summer internships leading to yearlong internships
- The internships should be community-driven, long term collaborations with site partners
- The design of internships should include a focus on the process of working with others—deep listening, negotiating project goals, learning objectives, financial issues, workplan, reciprocal benefits and outcomes to MOU, and understanding that time is key

“Some students had experiences that created frustration and a feeling of failure. These were highly productive and valuable. Creating a program that embraces these ideas and helps students see failure as part of productive engaged scholarship is key. Removing the stigma and helping students understand the potential for these moments should be part of the pedagogy within the program.” – Community Engagement

Mentor Network—

- We need to build a team of faculty, adjunct faculty in areas like business, staff members, peers
- The program would benefit from mentors affiliated with groups like the Greater Des Moines Partnership and Corridor businesses
- We should enlist alumni mentors
- We will need to learn which mentors are more helpful at what stages of a student’s studies (including pre and post degree)

“How can the degree be structured and mentorship relationships be cultivated such that graduate students are supported during what seem like particularly significant periods that bookend the degree structure: the summer or early fall before the program begins, every summer during the program of study, and the months after graduation as the students attempt to navigate what will likely be an entirely new set of unprecedented job markets and prospects — the likes of which have never been faced in the living memory of any of their mentors?” – Degree Structure

Structures—

- We need staff support for cohort and individual learning opportunities
- We need staff oversight for the internship program and community-based learning
- We would benefit from an external advisory board of business and nonprofit partners

“Consider what more comprehensive post-dissertation completion support would look like: what if the program doesn’t just conclude when the dissertation is deposited? What if there was time built into the structure of the program that made space for implementing the work of the dissertation in concrete and useful ways? What if, in thinking about restructuring the timeline of the dissertation and developing a fully student- and community-oriented program, space and time were built into the later stage of the program to bridge the gap between the academy and the student’s future career partners?” – Dissertation

Challenges—

- We need to build consensus around core definitions of terms such “public good” and “humanities” and around shared values
- We need to identify leadership for the program
- We need to secure long-term funding
- We now need to address COVID and physical distancing safety issues
- We need to find creative ways to negotiate with the bias towards quantitative metrics for success
- We need to wrestle with the possibility that the uniqueness of the program and dissertation might not fit traditional grants and fellowships
- We need to expand definitions of “research” and its audiences

“We identified three key ‘pillars’ that need to be addressed to achieve the objectives of our working group . . . These include:

Policy: Changes to the current PhD must be supported by concrete, specific policy changes at all levels – departmental, collegiate, university-wide, and disciplinary.

Infrastructure: Changes to the current PhD must be facilitated by changes in the interlocking institutional and organizational (as well as financial support) systems that now structure most colleges and universities.

Culture: In addition to concrete revisions of policy and infrastructure, a culture of support and appreciation must be fostered to encourage innovative PhD work, as well as the desire of graduate students to pursue a PhD without seeking a traditional academic position as its result.” – Dissertation

Next Steps—

- We need a strong frame that makes clear the type of program and the mission of that program to guide our construction of the degree—for students, possible collaborating departments, and potential employers
- We need to clarify what concrete, specific policy changes, infrastructure, and culture change will be necessary at all levels– departmental, collegiate, university-wide, and disciplinary
- We need to provide DEI training for the advisory board, emphasizing how DEI can be meaningfully built into all aspects of a degree program
- We need admissions criteria that help us understand applicants’ goals, interests in program, and commitment to the public good
- We need a strong affiliation with existing departments, certificate programs, etc. that are already focused on public work

“Continue talking with people who crucially — but often behind the scenes — have enabled non-traditional PhD research through internal policy changes, innovative curricular changes, and vital forms of support and encouragement beyond conventional mentorship.” – Dissertation

- We need to identify stakeholders—publicly engaged faculty across the UI, funders, employers
- We need an external advisory committee
- We would like to plan a faculty and Advisory Board retreat in Des Moines to gather data, conduct small scale needs assessments, network, map, and convene stakeholders
- We should seek corporate support for year-long internships
- We will hold meetings with people on campus who are already working creatively with grad students, but we also need to engage faculty and administrators who are skeptical about our plans (for ex., of alternative dissertations)
- We will launch a public relations campaign to engage departments, promote the value of developing public humanities components within existing programs, and recruit faculty to experiment with core practices of HPG
- We could offer certificate courses as a first step

“We feel that one of the most important things that students and faculty can learn is ways to listen to our communities. This means being committed to taking the position of a novice, hearing new ideas, feeling discomfort, silencing our judgements, not jumping to conclusions without data, and understanding that time is key. In order to model this in our pedagogy, we need to practice student centered learning, where students are equal partners in our classrooms; they help us develop guiding questions and direct our journeys through concepts, ideas, texts, and experiences. This means de-centering authority and power and listening to their ideas in order to determine needs, direction, inquiry, and pedagogy.” – Community Engagement