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Everyday Democracy
When we think about the word "democracy," the first thing that usually comes to mind might be voting. And perhaps especially in an election year like this one, with headlines saturated by news about polls and swing states and undecided voters, it can be easy to overlook all the other ways we build democracy: not just by casting a ballot every four years, but in more ordinary gestures as simple as talking with one another and engaging locally in our communities. It's these kinds of activities that inspired PRF's 24-25 theme, "Everyday Democracy." The program is supporting six projects that use the tools of the humanities alongside a variety of disciplinary perspectives to create hopeful and productive forms of civic engagement. Check out the links below for more details on each of them.

Conversation Projects: Engaging Big Ideas on Campus and in the Community: *investigating best practices in community-building conversations around big ideas and polarizing issues to then create and pilot conversation toolkits that can be used by college students on and off campus*

Democracy and Diversity: *designing low-barrier games that can be implemented in classrooms to help students at various educational levels to respectfully engage across difference*

Deep Divisions: Can Polarized Beliefs Be Justified?: *conducting a small-scale study that enables understanding of political polarization and then developing a toolkit for individuals to determine whether their own polarized beliefs are ultimately justified*

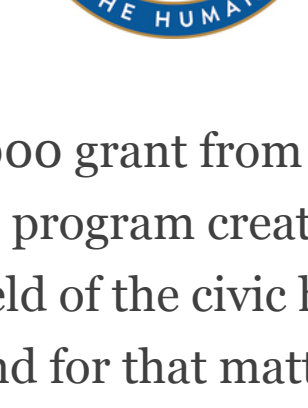
Portland and the Public Imagination: Building "Everyday Democracy" through Curriculum: *researching, designing, and piloting a new Core X-level course that aims to connect students to new ways of understanding the city of Portland and how engaged humanities practices can help us build healthier democratic cultures*

Communicating about Climate Change: *using tools from chemistry, biology, and the humanities to develop public-facing narratives that explain the intricate relationships between human carbon emissions, ocean acidification, marine ecosystems, and the local economy*

Columbia Park: Weaving Narrations of Everyday Democracy: *exploring how community members exercise and experience everyday democracy while using, defending, and protecting Columbia Park in North Portland and then designing and hosting an exhibition to showcase their stories*

Curious about what "everyday democracy" looks like nationwide? Read an article about the Trust for Civic Life and the amazing projects they're supporting across the U.S.>>

Introducing: The Civic Humanities Working Group



With the support of a 3-year, \$150,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the program created a working group to explore and help build the new field of the civic humanities. But what is a working group, exactly? And for that matter, what are the civic humanities? Read on for a few details on what the CHWG has been up to so far:

What is a working group?
A working group is a set of people who come together to explore a common interest by reading about it, discussing work in the field, and developing projects, events, and long-term goals.

Who is part of the CHWG?
Our core working group members are drawn from UP faculty, including: Andrew Guest (Psychology and Core Director); Molly Hiro (English); Jen McDanel (English); Sruthi Rothenfluch (Philosophy); Anne Santiago (Political Science and Global Affairs); and Shaz Vijlee (Engineering). Across the year we plan to involve students in working group discussions and events; we also will be inviting community partners to join our work.

What does the CHWG do?
Since June, the CHWG members have been meeting monthly to research and read about issues and methods in the nascent field of the civic humanities and come together to discuss them. As we've developed a background in the field, we've also begun working with students to co-create civic humanities projects that engage our communities. And last, the CHWG is including and hosting a series of events related to the civic humanities, including lunch discussions, roundtables that engage students and community partners, and a major speaker in the spring.

But wait, what are the civic humanities?
Good question! The working group quickly realized that because the field is just developing, there is no set definition of it yet. Across the summer we've developed a "working definition" that we intend to keep revising alongside student and community input; here it is: The civic humanities are a set of tools, practices, and ways of thinking that aim to create healthy democratic cultures through civil dialogue and productive engagement with local communities.

How can I get involved?
Be on the lookout for CHWG-hosted events next month and across the spring semester. And if you're interested in joining us for conversation, [send us an email](#)—we're happy to bring in more voices.



The PRF Student Cohort

What do majors from Biology, Computer Science, English, Environmental Studies, Nursing, Philosophy, Political Science and Psychology Spanish all have in common? Participation in this year's Public Research Fellows program! The 2024-25 PRF student cohort of 14 students is drawn from an astonishing 13 majors across campus, from the humanities to STEM to the professional schools and back again, proving that students from all disciplinary backgrounds are drawn to the creation of publicly-engaged scholarship. In addition to working with their faculty fellows across 6 different projects related to this year's theme of "Everyday Democracy," the student fellows are taking CAS 391 "Engaged Humanities Fundamentals," coming together each week to read key background in the field, examine project models from across the country, and develop practices and tools that they can bring to their own research projects.

Across the semester, students have been engaging in a number of conversations around "Everyday Democracy," the civic humanities, and how scholarly work can create healthier democratic cultures. And as it happens, much of the conversation has revolved around the practices of conversation and dialogue itself and the ways that small acts of community-building might help us build stronger civic connections. Recently, the cohort read a *New York Times* article "[Is the Partisan Divide Too Big to be Bridged?](#)" in which the author emphasized the importance of conversation over other types of discourse such as debate or persuasion: "When you look for common ground, you find it, but conversation can't be about conversion." In taking on this issue, the cohort hopes not just to learn more about how to hold productive conversations, but to embody the skills needed to listen and be heard—and put these practices into action at UP.

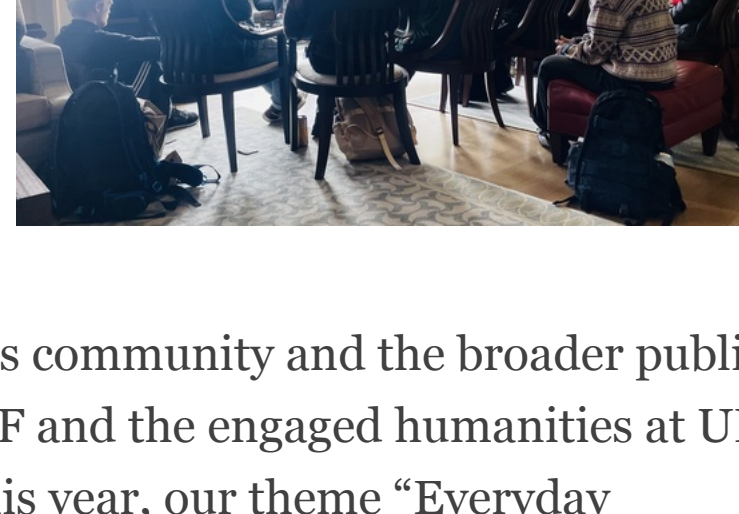
[Interested in learning more about the Engaged Humanities Fundamentals course? Check out this year's syllabus here>>](#)

Project Spotlight: Models for Conversation at UP and Beyond

The civic humanities shine through in Dr. Andrew Guest and Dr. Shaz Vijlee's research this year, "Conversation Projects: Engaging Big Ideas on Campus and in the Community." Their goal is to create a space on campus for civil conversations around issues relevant to higher education. Their first step in this process has been to investigate different practices that already exist on campus and in the greater Portland community regarding community-building conversations. As part of this research, the group is reading *I Never Thought of it That Way* by Monica Guzman, as well as engaging with conversations being held in the CORE101: Anchor Seminar classes, where students learn about the university's Core Habits through dialogue. By looking at similar projects, like the [Oregon Humanities Conversation Project](#), as well as doing more broad, national research, PRF student fellows Joaquin Valencia and Tommy McCaffrey have been building a conversation toolkit, which they are planning to put into practice for an event in the spring.

During a discussion about the project, Valencia emphasized the personal growth he has felt during the process of working on this project. He noted that he has gained a greater awareness of how he approaches difficult conversations, and how he hopes to conduct these interactions in the future: "One of the main takeaways I have gained so far is how important perspectives are and how we need to take the other side's perspective to truly have a successful conversation." On the topic of the future, Valencia noted that learning more about polarization has given him a sense of renewed hope: "In a time where we have so many different views and opinions, it's important to understand that at the end of the day, we are all humans experiencing life together. I think if more people paused and changed the way we talked to others about deep and important issues, society would be better off."

Dialogue on Campus: New Opportunities



Generating conversation—about public-facing research, among disparate members of our campus community and the broader public—has been one of the goals of PRF and the engaged humanities at UP from the program's inception. This year, our theme "Everyday Democracy," has inspired us to think even bigger about the power of conversation. In this thinking, we're not just harnessing the humanities' superpower for open-ended dialogue; we're also channeling American education philosopher John Dewey, who contended in 1939 that "the heart...of democracy is in free gatherings of neighbors on the street corner to discuss...news of the day, and in gatherings of friends in the living rooms of houses and apartments to converse freely with one another" ("Creative Democracy").

As such, we've been sparking opportunities for intentional conversations this fall. The Civic Humanities Working Group hosted a lunch discussion in early October, offering twenty faculty the space to talk through the very topic of conversation in the classroom—is genuine conversation happening in our classes? How can we get students more comfortable talking about tough topics? And are there any topics that are too tough? On the student front, CHWG member and Political Science professor Anne Santiago has a dual role this year as Dundon Berchtold Faculty Fellow for Constructive Dialogues, which has inspired her and other colleagues to launch twice-weekly "[Lunchtime Insights](#)," open discussion groups as well as occasional forums where the goal is to help students feel safe and supported in asking or listening about local, national and global politics (see above photo). And in November, we'll convene a panel to allow us to hear directly from student leaders of diverse types of groups on campus, hoping to learn more about where and how on campus conversation flourishes, and where it gets stifled. All will be welcome at this panel, so stay tuned for more information and plan to attend!