

BYU Humanities Center

2025–2026 Newsletter

BYU Humanities Center

BY THE NUMBERS

08 Faculty Fellows

09 Podcast Episodes

06 Eliza R. Snow Student Fellows

17 Research Groups

28 Essays Published

19 Colloquia

27 Symposium Presentations

31 Visiting Scholars

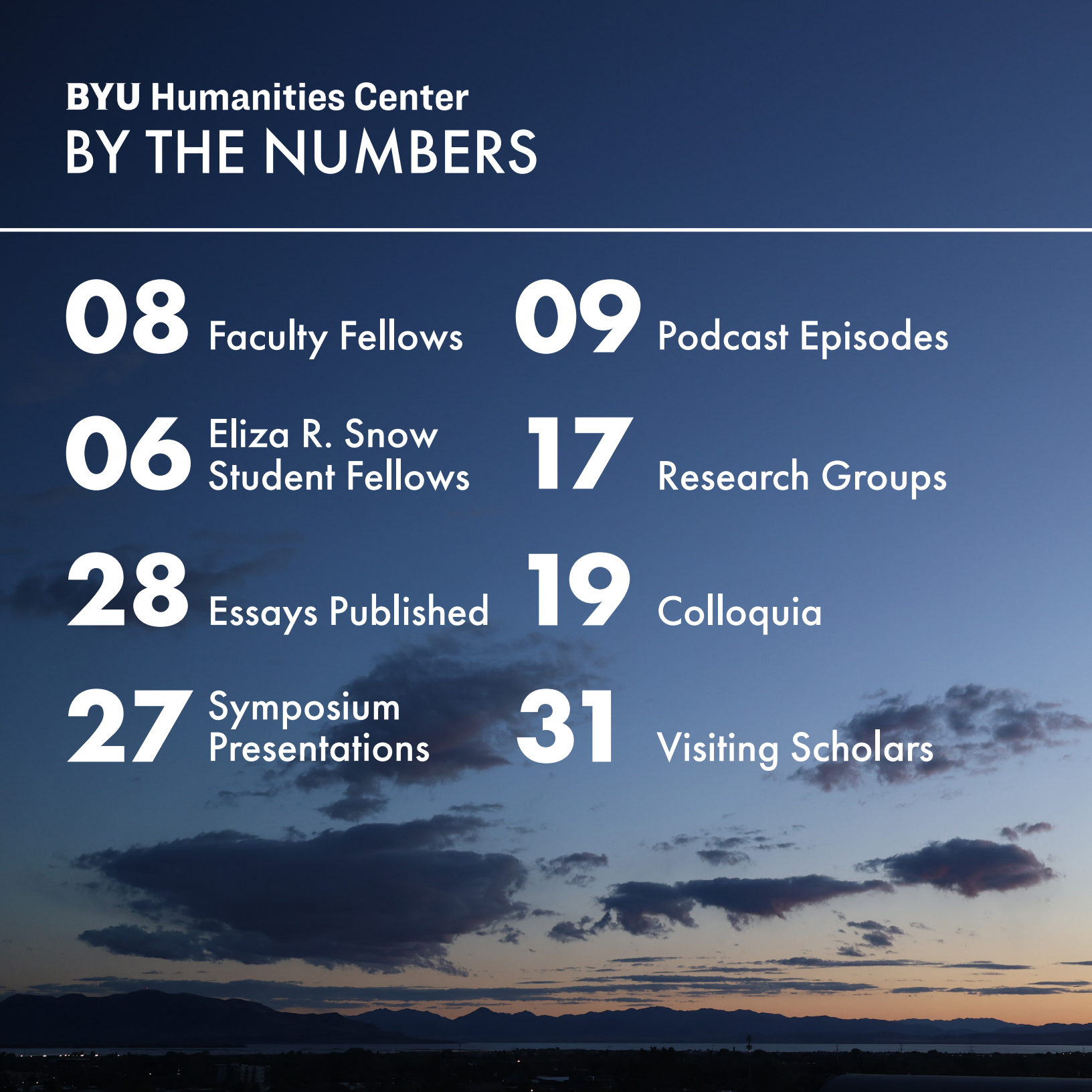


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Statement from the DIRECTOR



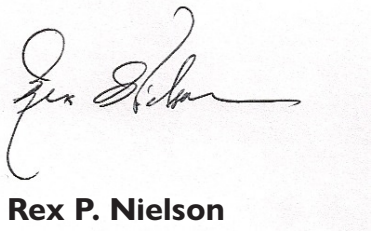
Stories, some argue, are as fundamental to human existence as the air we breathe. Whether we notice them or not, stories both surround and permeate our lives, giving shape to our identity and behavior, our memories of the past and ambitions for the future. They are what bind us to each other and underlie human relationships in families, communities, nations, and across the globe. They seem to be always in the air, and they even flow like the wind, at times imperceptibly expanding to fill space and condition our environment. And every so often they hit us with the force of a gale, knocking us down or pushing us forward, bringing into focus all our awareness and attention.

Understanding the power of stories lies at the heart of our work in the humanities. Long before 1969, when Tzvetan Todorov [1] first introduced the term narratology and proposed a science of storytelling, poets and prophets and philosophers of every kind understood that the stories we tell bear deep and wide-ranging influence on our presence in the world. As Peter Brooks has crisply observed, telling stories is "one of the principal ways we organize our experience." Paul Ricoeur famously argues in Time and Narrative (1983) that storytelling not only enables us to conceptualize time but is the very act that gives meaning to reality. The Mozambican novelist Mia Couto puts it this way:

> Essa necessidade absoluta, como se fosse uma necessidade de comer e de beber, de viver numa história, de se produzir a fantasia, é algo absolutamente essencial pra que nós nos constituamos como criatura. Eu acho que isso tá inscrito, é como se fosse uma coisa genética. Nós somos criaturas de histórias. Somos feitos de células, de átomos, sim, mas de histórias. [2]
>
> [This absolute need, like the need to eat and drink, to live in a story, to produce fantasy, is something absolutely essential for us to be able to constitute ourselves as creatures. I think it's inscribed in us, as if it were something genetic. We are creatures of stories. We are made of cells, of atoms, yes, but also of stories.]

Scholars of the humanities and scientists of human behavior appear to agree on this point—perhaps no art or practice more completely sets us apart from the non-human world than our innate need and ability both to tell and to receive stories.

This 2025–2026 academic year, the BYU Humanities Center gave specific attention to the ways that stories educate, entertain, and inspire. Through the course of our programming, we pondered our need to tell stories and the complex ways that stories define our experience. We learned from colleagues whose work focuses on story form and reception. We examined story ownership (who gets to tell a particular story) and what moral and ethical consequences stem from both telling and hearing a story. We likewise contemplated a variety of adjacent notions relating to the work of story translation, how AI may already be impacting our practices of story creation and consumption, how stories impact our pedagogical methods, as well as the role of storytelling in building faith. In sum, we considered together how stories help give meaning to our lives. This publication invites you to join us in exploring the stories we tell.



Rex P. Nielson
Humanities Center Director
Department of Spanish and Portuguese



[1] Tzvetan Todorov first used the term in his Grammaire du Décameron to describe Bocaccio's narrative practice: "cet ouvrage reléve d'une science qui n'exist pas encore, disons la narratologie, la science du récit" [this work pertains to a science which does not yet exist—let us say narratology, the science of narrative] (10).

[2] Quote taken from an interview of Mia Couto by Kamille Viola, "As vozes femininas de Mia Couto," Revista vertigem, 2015, n.p.

Humanities Center Faculty Fellows



Brian Croxall
2024 – 2027
Associate Research Professor
Digital Humanities



Cherice Montgomery
2023 – 2026
Associate Professor
Spanish and Portuguese



Sara Phenix
2023 – 2026
Associate Professor
French and Italian



Chris Rogers
2023 – 2026
Associate Professor
Linguistics



James Swensen
2024 – 2027
Professor
Comparative Arts and Letters



Stephen Tuttle
2023 – 2026
Associate Professor
English

Humanities Center One-Year Faculty Fellows



Nieves Knapp
Teaching Professor
Spanish and Portuguese



Justin White
Associate Professor
Philosophy

Humanities Center Assistant Directors



Brooke Browne
Assistant Director



Courtney Bulsiewicz
Assistant Academic Director
English

Eliza R. Snow Undergraduate Fellows



George Dibble
English



Brooke Farnsworth
English Teaching
(Global Women's Studies)



Aiden Jones
American Studies
and English



Porter Kindall
Interdisciplinary Humanities
and Philosophy



Julia Morgan
Interdisciplinary Humanities
(Global Environmental
Studies)



Sawyer Wood
English and Portuguese
Studies
(Linguistics)

INTERNS



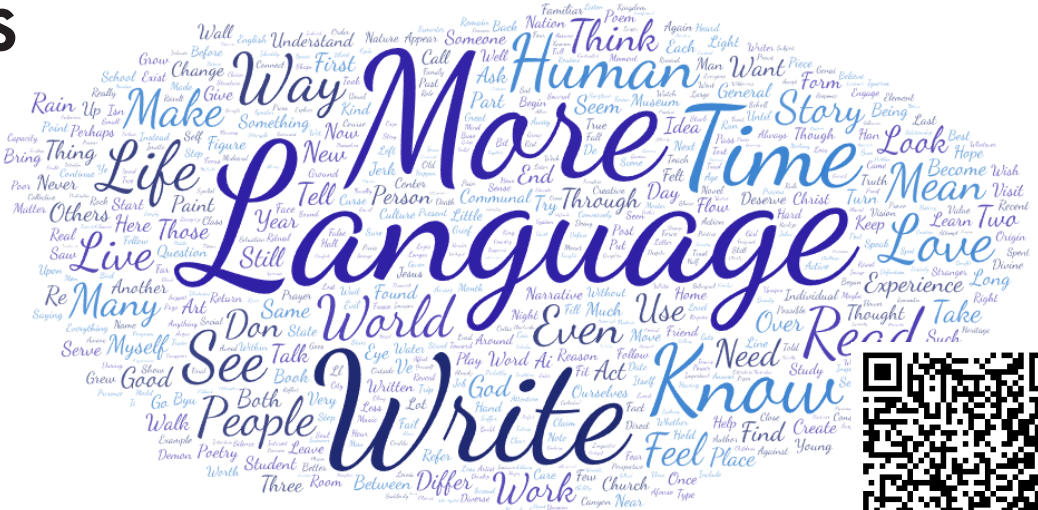
Jasmine Torres - Social Media Intern
Public Relations
(Asian Studies)

Sawyer Wood - Intern
(see above)

Public Humanities

Essay Series

Faculty and student fellows publish weekly creative nonfiction essays on the BYU Humanities Center website, focusing on artifacts of the Humanities and the writer's personal experiences. Though each essay is unique, the illustration (right) represents the words that most commonly appeared in this year's essays.



Read now

Faith & Imagination Podcast

BYU Humanities Center's Faith & Imagination podcast regularly hosts discussions centered on these questions: *How do we envision our highest ideals and deepest commitments? How do we name and express our most expansive sense of who we are?* The illustration (right) represents common themes from this year's podcast episodes.



Listen now

Faith and Imagination Fall Lecture

Stephen Knepper



Epiphanic Excess in Life and Literature

Epiphanies are integral to both fiction and the real world, often grounding us in timeless truths and reminding us how much we don't understand.

In October, the Humanities Center welcomed Stephen Knepper—a Professor of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies at Virginia Military Institute—to share scholarly and artistic insights in a colloquium presentation as part of the Faith and Imagination lecture series. Knepper began his presentation by emphasizing the immense richness of reality, then contrasting it with the tiny portion we as human beings most often appreciate. "We never perceive more than a fraction of the central excess that continually washes over us," he said, describing existence as "an inexhaustible excess or too-muchness."

Knepper argued that this "too-muchness" makes many in the modern world feel adrift or alienated from reality, causing some to turn to artistic expression as an attempt to make sense of the chaos around them. Many modern artists, by Knepper's observation, portray a "thinned-out reality" in which they try to explain life's complications away or dismiss them as entirely devoid of meaning.

And yet, Knepper stated, **"I suspect even the most alienated modernists have moments when they are jolted, perhaps by love or religious experience . . . perhaps by looking at an artwork or reading a poem, into realizing that there is much more to the world than they had realized before."**

These epiphanies, Knepper argued, represent less a change in exterior circumstances and more a change in a person's internal perspective. They signify "a sudden spiritual manifestation, a moment of peculiar perception in which something is seen in its luminous truth."

Knepper points out that the striking power of such moments is one reason they are frequently employed as the climax of modern narratives. Artists often recognize that epiphanies are fundamental to the human condition and use them to emphasize episodes of immense joy or pain in their stories.

Because epiphanies are moments in which human beings feel connected to something beyond themselves, Knepper affirms that they will always, to some degree, transcend us. This boundlessness allows us to see beyond our usual perceptions.

For Knepper, the process of epiphanies is a continual journey. He said, **"I study these things not because I have good answers, but because I struggle with them."** Despite their incomprehensibility, Knepper argued that epiphanies consistently bring meaning into the lives of those who experience them, and that working to make sense of them is worth doing. As he stated, "The deeper you go, you never exhaust the intelligibility of being."



Faith and Imagination Winter Lecture

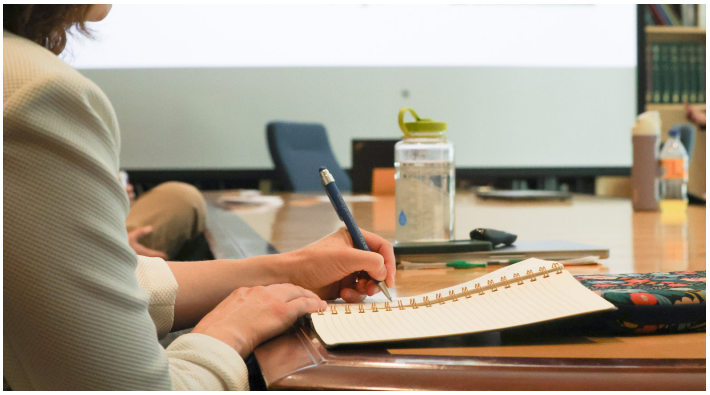
Katie Kresser

Speechless - Art, History and Primal Knowledge

Art is best approached from a perspective of wonder.

Katie Kresser, professor of Art at Seattle Pacific University, presented as part of the Faith and Imagination lecture series at the Humanities Center in March. Kresser's presentation focused on different models for artistic epistemology, as well as her recently-released book, titled *Church Beautiful: Sacred Art and Spiritual Healing*.

Kresser explained how art serves as a vessel to help human beings approach the divine, stating that **"art can capture truths that other types of communication cannot."** She described how many artists believe that art can "save the world," whether through facilitating cultural sophistication, instilling beneficial ideologies, or transforming the artist through the creative process itself. In contrast, Kresser suggested that art can "save the world" through an epistemological shift—embracing wonder.



She contrasted the model of wonder with two other epistemological models she has observed across the ages, which often serve as a base for how artists find their subject matter and describe the dignity of their craft. Kresser argued that these two models, *the divine textbook*—which implies that a select few individuals, geniuses, have perfect access to the mind of the divine—and *trial and error*—which declares that we make our own meaning and thus deprives life of any innate significance—are neither accurate nor productive understandings of art. She explained how her wonder-based model affirms the reality of timeless truths as well as the fact that these truths are gradually disclosed to individuals who seek them.

Kresser encouraged those present to consider seeking wonder when engaging with art, and she cautioned against placing perceptions too high (the divine textbook) or too low (trial and error) when considering how art is inspired and created. She gave the example of a child chasing a group of butterflies, not with the intention of catching them or pinning them up on a wall, but instead being "just overwhelmed with admiration and wonder toward the butterflies." This is the primal wonder she encouraged her audience to embrace, and what she described as "our first way of knowing." Kresser closed by emphasizing how essential this wonder-based perspective is when engaging with art, concluding that "we'd be remiss to ignore it."

The Stories We Tell

Annual Symposium

On September 18 and 19, the Humanities Center hosted its annual two-day symposium, bringing together faculty, students, and other guests to take part in conversations centered on storytelling. The event sought to find common threads between many different fields of study, with the 21 featured presentations spanning disciplines as diverse as music, business, and physics.

Scholars disucussed how narratives foster dialogue between the humanities and the sciences, evolve alongside advancing technology, and communicate across academic and public spheres. The event also facilitated robust question and answer sessions, where further connections were made across fields by both presenters and audience members. Such connections included how storytelling helps us develop empathy and how originality often stems from combining familiar ideas in new ways.

The symposium's two keynote speakers (see right) shared insights on how storytelling can follow and break conventions and how it contributes to the social glue that holds together individuals and communities.

As stated by Dean Christopher Oscarson at the event, the annual Symposium served to help scholars "find each other, and to seek commonalities in the work that we do."













Keynote Speaker - Jane Alison

In her presentation titled "Finding Natural Form in Narrative," Jane Alison from the University of Virginia focused on ways stories can deviate from the classic narrative structure, as explored in her book, *Meander, Spiral, Explode.*

Alison described the classic structure as "admittedly wonderful, but just one [option]," and outlined an analysis she'd done of several works that seemed to break the classic shape of a narrative. She noted that many non-standard structures followed patterns she'd also observed in nature, such as the meander, the spiral, and the explosion.

Alison suggested that writers be open to writing stories that didn't seem to fit the classic structure, but she cautioned against doing so simply to break the mold. "You would never say, 'I want to write a story in this shape,'" she clarified, "that just isn't the way it works." Instead of pre-planning a story's structure, she encouraged writers to explore their ideas organically until they had some indication of where they were going. **"I think the real thing is what is feeling true,"** Alison explained, urging writers to trust in their own impressions about their writing. She stated with a bit of humor, "The only way to write well, especially if you're trying something new, is to just be fearless and think, 'so what?' In the worst case, no one will like it."

Keynote Speaker - David Eagleman



In his presentation titled, "Story and the Brain," Stanford University's David Eagleman described how storytelling interacts with the brain in scientific terms. Eagleman proposed that the ability to tell and engage with stories, "to unhook from the here and now and put ourselves in the there and then," is what makes human beings capable of feeling empathy, forming communities, and engaging with literature.

As he described it, **"literature is the inception of a dream-like state,"** one in which individuals are guided through points of view that expand the ways they think. Eagleman posited that human beings are neurologically engineered to care about shared adventure.

Eagleman connected these ideas to current questions about artificial intelligence, asserting that human beings "care about the perceived effort that went into something" and "pay more for flaws because we value things that are real." Eagleman concluded by stating that writing and storytelling will always be valuable skills, as they serve as parts of the "social glue" that holds our societies together.

Colloquia
2025–2026



Alejandro Madrid
Harvard University
"Silvio Rodriguez's *Dias y Flores:* A Microhistory of a Utopia at the End of History"



Alison Millar
Erica Starling Productions
"Storytelling in Filmmaking"



Michael Call & Brian Croxall
Brigham Young University
"Stories of Innocence and Experience: Student Mentoring and the Making of Cougar Tales"



Stephen Knepper
Virginia Military Institute
"Epiphanic Excess in Life and Literature"



Katie Kresser
Seattle Pacific University
"Speechless: Art, History and Primal Knowledge"



Victoria Livingstone

John Hopkins University Press

"Bringing a 140-Year-Old Journal into the New Millenium"



AI and Pedagogy

Roundtable Discussion

Brigham Young University

Jeremy Browne, Rachael Johnson, Tyler Gardner, and Brian Jackson



Shannon McHugh

The Huntington Library

"In the Archives: Tips from a Huntington Library Staffer"



Crafting Long-Form Critique

Roundtable Discussion

Brigham Young University

Nick Gentile, Mary Eyring, Matthew Mason, and Chris Hodson



Justin White

Brigham Young University

"Love, Grief, and the Structure of the World"



Nieves Knapp

Brigham Young University

"Bridging Proficiency in the Spanish Program at BYU"



Damien Pollard

Northumbria University

"Voices in Stories and Stories in Voices: What Film Sound Can Tell Us About Social Change"



Nathan Rockwood

Brigham Young University

"Premortality, Postmortality, and the Goodness of God"



Carlos Eire

Yale University

"On Hovering Nuns and Flying Friars: Wild Facts and the Writing of History"



Karen Tei Yamashita

University of California, Santa Cruz

"Listening for Story: Your Story in My Story"



Scott Muir

National Humanities Alliance

"Attracting Students to the Humanities: What Is Working?"



Chris Rogers

Brigham Young University

"Valuing Linguistic Diversity and Language Ecology: Perspectives from the Field"



AI and Pedagogy II

Roundtable Discussion

Brigham Young University

Jeremy Browne, Brian Croxall, Luke Drake, Rachael Johnson, Jordan Jones, Mark Olivier, Meredith Reed, and Kate Romney

Featured Colloquium: Language

Nieves Knapp



Bridging Proficiency in the Spanish Program at BYU

Nieves Knapp develops a new textbook to meet intermediate-level students where they are.

Nieves Knapp, Teaching Professor in BYU's Spanish and Portuguese Department, presented in February on the development of language curriculum in BYU's Spanish courses, recognizing the unique place BYU has as "the language university." While she acknowledged the decrease in language programs across the nation, Knapp noted that BYU faces unique challenges in that its program is heavily geared toward 300-level courses and above, due to the large number of students who enroll after having learned a language as missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Furthermore, Knapp described how foreign language textbooks are often designed for either the 100 (beginner) or 300 (advanced) levels, leaving a gap for those in between (intermediate).

To fill this gap, Knapp has written an entirely new textbook, which was developed for the Spanish 206 class at BYU. This class is often taken by students who have served as missionaries but didn't frequently use their foreign language, have been exposed to Spanish through friends or family, or have already completed all 100-level Spanish classes. These students usually have some experience with the language, but lack the fluency to articulate complex ideas. They also struggle to maintain a consistent train of thought to form paragraphs, communicating instead in sentences that are mostly clear, but largely disconnected from one another.

When designing her textbook, Knapp included exercises that combine grammar with culture so that students will understand not just the language, but also how to use it in context. Concepts such as regional phrases, idioms, and other cultural expressions are meant to help students see the language as a way of life. Knapp also emphasized exercises with false cognates, which often trip up the average language-learner.

The main objective of Knapp's textbook is to help those students progress into the advanced level in Spanish. Knapp is optimistic that students come because they want to learn. She hopes that they would get as much out of the experience as she got out of developing the textbook. Her final advice for language learners was, **"Have a lot of patience and put in a lot of time. But enjoy it."**





Featured Colloquium: Language

Chris Rogers

Valuing Linguistic Diversity and Language Ecology

Chris Rogers advocates for language diversity and explains how it connects to identity and community.

Backed by decades studying dozens of languages as a field linguist, Associate Professor of Linguistics Chris Rogers offered insights into how language represents a lived and communal experience. During his presentation in November, Rogers stated that "field linguists don't necessarily see language as an organ, something that serves a single function. It's spread through a lot of cognitive, social, and cultural experiences, and so it creates this network that individuals can rely on to talk about their lives."

Rogers claimed that languages are always interconnected through what's known as language ecology and that this cross-cultural exchange is integral to the living nature of any given language. Cross-language contact allows for linguistic adaptation that's important to the way a language transforms over time. Rogers stated, **"If you try to make a language community monolingual, you kill the ecology, and therefore kill the language."**

Rogers shared personal experiences from one endangered language he has studied, Guazacapán Xinkan, which was spoken in specific regions of Guatemala. Rogers observed that when he interviewed a man named Carlos, the last native speaker of this Xinkan dialect (who has since passed away), "his [Carlos'] ecology had changed so much that he had a hard time remembering how to use native Xinkan structures." This loss, Rogers argued, was due to an imbalance in the language's ecology.



Rogers stated that when there's an imbalance in a language's ecology, it leads to greater emotional and mental challenges for speakers of the language. The complete loss of a language is correlated to higher rates of depression and suicide.

Rogers asserted that looking at languages in terms of their ecologies is important because it helps us develop multicultural competence, increase awareness of our individuality, and strengthen our communities. He said that the most meaningful part of his field work is the opportunity to create materials which will help others value their own identities. In his words, "I champion, explore, and understand language diversity in all of its glory."

Featured Colloquium: Film and Sound

Alison Millar



Storytelling in Filmmaking

Alison Millar believes making films is a collaborative and relationship-based process.

As one of the UK and Ireland's most respected documentary filmmakers (having produced films including *Lyra*, *The Father, the Son and the Housekeeper*, and *The Disappeared*), Alison Millar visited the Humanities Center in September to share insights about how, for her, filmmaking has been both profession and passion.

Millar described the impetus for many of her films, as well as several individuals she's worked with in making them, ranging from Christopher Duntsch ("Dr. Death") to Michael Cleary (an Irish Roman Catholic Priest and a popular radio personality) to an investigative journalist and Millar's close friend, Lyra. She also showed clips from multiple films as a base for her presentation.



For Millar, these films were more than work; they were always based on relationships. She commented, **"I don't make the film. We make the film. That experience is collaborative, it's special, and it's an ongoing relationship."** Filmmaking has served as a way for Millar to better understand people, including herself. She explained how making films has become a hopeful and healing process for her, as well as for many individuals her films focus on. In her words, filmmaking goes beyond sharing stories; it's about being able to make a difference. She said, "You can see a purpose in this. You can have some impact. We might be able to get healing."

Further, Millar noted that several of her films have had tangible impacts on their communities, including reconciliation between opposed groups and a greater understanding of diverse perspectives. Her film *The Disappeared* focuses on victims who were secretly murdered and buried in the bogs of Northern Ireland. Due to the film's success, individuals have begun searching for the disappeared bodies, and have returned at least one to the missing person's family.

Millar believes that this kind of social impact is what makes her films worth sharing. She stated, "I've spent a career making films about communities that are driven apart by trauma or stories of people who have never had a voice . . . I felt that they needed a voice."



Featured Colloquium: Film and Sound

Damien Pollard

Voices in Stories and Stories in Voices

Damien Pollard puts the voice center stage in everything from Italian horror to independent Ugandan film.

Visiting in January from Northumbria University, Assistant Professor of Film Damien Pollard described how the voice is central to storytelling in films of various genres. From contexts as diverse as government censorship to low-budget independent filmmaking, Pollard describes the voice's "bridge-like nature" as "nowhere so clear as it is in cinema."

One context in which Pollard has analyzed voice is in Italian horror cinema; he used *La corta notte delle bambole di vetro (Short Night of Glass Dolls*) as a concrete example. In this film (and other post-war films like it), the voices were dubbed post-production because the actors didn't speak a common language (this is known as a "polyglot film"). The dubbing also served as a way for the government to censor specific themes or ideologies they didn't want transmitted to the public. This dubbing and censorship represents, as Pollard put it, **"this moment in European history made audible, as the ideology behind it is translated in a tangible part of the film."**

Pollard found similar themes in another area of study: the distribution of foreign films in Uganda. In Ugandan public showings of foreign films, because much of the audience doesn't understand the languages the films are played in, dubbing is done in real time by what's known as a "video joker" or "VJ." Though these VJs often don't speak the language of the film themselves, they provide live commentary to help those watching make sense of the narratives' plots and characters.



This practice was expanded by "Wakaliwood," an independent Ugandan film studio, where VJs dub humorous commentary in English over their films to help them appeal to a larger online audience (what Pollard referred to as a "global village"). He claimed that much of Wakaliwood's online success is due to their VJ dubbing, which often allows the film studio to curate "an advantageous identity: Ugandan, but not too Ugandan. Foreign, but still funny."

Pollard argued that these seemingly disparate contexts show the versatility of uses that voice can have in cinema and storytelling more generally. He stated, "The voice is always bridging categories which seem separate or even opposed and tying them together." Whether in horror or humor, Pollard framed the voice as "something that is always telling a story."

2025–2026 Research Groups

BYU Religious Studies in Europe
Cognition and Literature
Disability Studies
Editing and Publishing
Game Studies
Greek and Latin Translation
Health Humanities
Humani-techies
Humanities and the Learning Sciences
Humor
Medieval and Renaissance Studies (MARS)
Metaethics in the Mountains
Provo Walks Lab
Short Story
Theology & Humanities
Translation Studies
Women's Studies Teaching and Research (WSTAR)

Featured Research Group Events



Translation Studies Symposium
Sergio Waisman, Victoria Livingstone, and Daniel Balderston

Translation Studies Symposium

The Translation Studies research group concluded over a decade of work in October of 2025 by hosting a two-day symposium with three invited scholars: Sergio Waisman (translator, literary critic, and Professor of Spanish and International Affairs), Daniel Balderston (scholar, translator, and director of the Borges Center), and Victoria Livingstone (translator, writer, and the managing editor of *MLN*). These scholars shared fascinating insights on transcription as translation, the urgency of translation in a world of conflict, and the challenges presented by running a translation journal. Faculty and students also participated in a roundtable discussion with these guests, focusing on translator Jorge Luis Borges.

Health Humanities Guest Lectures



James Tabery
University of Utah
Guest Lecture on Health Humanities

The Health Humanities research group hosted several lectures this academic year, including James Tabery from the University of Utah and Dustin Matsumori from BYU's new School of Medicine. Tabery's comments focused on the recently successful medical humanities major at the University of Utah and factors that have led to its success. He emphasized the importance of a humanities-based education for those in STEM fields, as their professions are often "fundamentally focused on humans." Matsumori's visit focused on informing the group about the new school's plans for infrastructure and accreditation, also answering questions from faculty about the process. Both lectures gave the research group insights into how to connect the humanities and health sciences. Many members of this research group look forward to participating in the Health Humanities curriculum workshop this spring.

Art in the Humanities Center
Heirs of Eden

The Humanities Center is pleased to display an artistic exhibit featuring the work of local artists Susannah T. Mecham, Elise Ostraff, Kathleen Peterson, Arianne Reed, Sarah Winegar, and Clinton Whiting. The exhibit was curated by Allie Sena and Natalie Rasmussen, two graduate students in the Art History & Curatorial Studies program at BYU and centers on themes of unity amid struggles and "the microcosm of perfection before the Fall."



Allie Sena and Natalie Rasmussen, Curators of *Heirs of Eden*

Sena and Rasmussen agreed that they've learned a lot through the process of curating the *Heirs of Eden* exhibit. "At first, we were planning to make an exhibition that focused on three different types of unity," Sena explained, "unity between people, unity between people and God, and unity with people to the earth . . . but we had to cut that down." Their exhibit now has a smaller scope, but this change gave the curators room to explore their artistic themes more deeply.

Rasmussen stated, "Every time we would make a mock up, we would think 'this is the best exhibit that's ever existed' . . . but every time we made the next version, we thought 'we're so glad that happened because this is the best one now.'" This continual adaptation required creativity on the part of the curators, and the unique challenges gave the students a chance to see what art curation looked like in the real world.

Sena stated, "since we're really new to leading a curation project, we didn't have personal relationships with a lot of artists around here . . . we had to search online and sometimes I went to some of the local galleries around here to try and see what might be available." However, these students didn't have to work entirely alone; they curated this exhibit as a part of a course they were taking with BYU Professor James Swensen, who oversaw the project. They also cited getting help from other professors with connections to the local community. Rasmussen noted, "some of [the artists] were recommended to us by faculty members. Some of these people have worked before with BYU so they have a good relationship lending."

One of the central pieces in the exhibit's process was *Cleave* by Sarah Winegar, an intricately-carved wood block that depicts two nude figures (Adam and Eve) in an embrace. Sena stated:

> Cleave *makes the connection to Eden very clear . . . we wanted to keep [the piece] even as the theme changed or the artists we could work with changed, since this one does show two figures that are nude and are hugging each other and that evokes Adam and Eve. That was really important to us. And if someone didn't come from that background of knowing a lot about [the classic story], we also liked that, just in general, it was two people holding onto each other with nothing else around them.*



Cleave by Sarah Winegar

Cleave captures the exhibit's central theme of unity, evoking both the harsh reality of isolation and to the choice to hold to one another. Rasmussen observed:

> *I love that it's just them. I feel like sometimes it's very hard for me to picture being the only two humans and what that would mean for survival. You would have no option but to be unified and make it work. Sometimes I feel like we forget what that must have been like, and that that's the first example for us of how human relationships should be, whether marital relationships or family relationships, friendships; it's just relying on each other whenever things don't work out. We know for them it didn't sometimes.*



First Choice by Susanna T. Mecham

Both curators felt confident that the final version of the exhibit is the best it could have been. "It was really difficult," said Rasmussen, "but that's what made it really special to us." They also added that curating the exhibit felt like a spiritual experience. Sena explained, "We would feel led in one direction, and it always worked out."

The curators wanted to be sure the art came from local artists, and still managed to get a wide range of mediums. The exhibit includes acrylic, oil on canvas, wood block, and 3D sculpture, all united under the same theme. The pieces displayed in *Heirs of Eden* capture the complexity of choices that unify amid uncertainty, inspiring new ways of looking at the classic Garden of Eden story. The Humanities Center will continue to display the exhibit through the summer and into the 2026 Fall semester.



Faculty Writing Retreat

Repeating the tradition established in 2024, the BYU Humanities Center sponsored a week-long Faculty Writing Retreat in June 2025 at the Zermatt Resort in Midway, UT. As the location is close enough for easy access and yet distant enough to give the feeling of "getting away" into the Wasatch Mountains, the retreat proved ideal to provide faculty with time and space to work on research projects of their choice.

Following the National Humanities Center model that inspired this retreat, the BYU Humanities Center required faculty to participate in a group meal once a day to encourage the exchange of ideas that could be potentially fruitful for the faculty's projects. The Humanities Center looks forward to continuing this tradition in spring 2026.



From left to right: Stephen Tuttle, Mac Wilson, Cherice Montgomery, Anna-Lisa Halling, Kathie Gossett, Brian Price, Lauren Truman, Jarron Slater, Sharon Harris, and Ann Dee Ellis made up our 2025 cohort.

Undergraduate Research S



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On November 7, the Humanities Center held its annual Undergraduate Research Symposium, highlighting six students who received Humanities Undergraduate Mentoring Grants (HUM Grants) and completed faculty-mentored research in the last year. These six students, who were selected for their excellent-quality work, shared their research with their peers and BYU faculty and were applauded for making significant scholarly contributions in their respective fields.

From left to right:

Emma Shobe - Russian, English
"From Pasternak to the Present: Feminist Critical Theory and the Western Reframing of *Doctor Zhivago*"

Hazel Mattson - Linguistics
"Stop Speaking Like You're from the Mountains: Attitudes Towards Albanian Dialects"

Faith Murri - English
"'Sensation Rubbish' Redeemed: Etta W. Pierce's Gothic Critique of Patriarchal Constraint in the Gilded Age"

Regan Presley - Art History & Curatorial Studies
"The Divine Union: Understanding the Syncretism of Isis and Hathor in Ancient Egyptian Art"

Mathilde Oscarson - Art History & Curatorial Studies, French Studies
"Centering and De-Centering Paris: A Cultural History of the Pont Neuf"

Brendan Murphy - English, Philosophy
"Poetic Self-Formation and the Victorian Preface"

Student "Tell Your Story" Contest Winner
Creative Nonfiction Category

Angle of Incidence

Written by Paige Winegar Fetzer

Most of what I know about God has arrived sideways—caught like dust motes illuminated in a warm slant of light. The summer before I started graduate school, the sun slipped through the window of our basement apartment that way.

Angled, tangled in the shadows of lawn grass, it tracked across the tile floor, speckling boxes and our mismatched furniture as we moved into the tiny set of rooms. While my husband made a grocery run, I settled tiredly against a mountain of sharpie-labeled cardboard. I couldn't bring myself to unpack anything.

I'd been accepted to a master's program in creative writing at BYU, and though I'd worked hard for the opportunity, I was struggling to feel excited about anything. This was the most recent in a long string of moves—the latest deviation from my original plan of homes and babies and career paths.

I was grateful for the strange gift of divine subversion, but longed for the solidity of knowing. I hadn't written anything in months.

Everything was so quiet.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, wrinkling my nose at the musty smell. Dusk darkened the apartment, but I didn't stand to turn on the lights. I was waiting for the flare—what Spencer W. Kimball might have called "the spectacular" spiritual message.

I plead, for what felt like the millionth time, just tell me I'm moving in the right direction. I fell asleep waiting for the heavens to part.

—

I began my college career as a psychology major at Utah State University. This was, as everything had been, according to the long-established plan I'd made for myself.

Stretched ahead of me were the four predictable years of a Bachelor's degree in psychology with a minor in studio art. Beyond them loomed graduate school, and a stable career as a pediatric art therapist. I could also see the husband and children interspersed, though, at the time, they still seemed peripheral. A part of the long game.

It was a good plan, and I'd repeated it to myself and anyone else who asked for long enough that deviation seemed inconceivable.

But after a semester of statistics labs and lectures about behavioral studies, I found myself strangely hollowed out. One day, as I braced against the Northern Utah windchill of my morning walk to campus, I felt a strange panic build in my chest.

I didn't know what I wanted to do anymore.

When a plan collapses, the future suddenly grows quiet. Without the familiar script to follow, even small decisions take on an unfamiliar weight. I didn't yet know what direction my life would take, but I knew I needed to move toward something that felt alive. So I began choosing classes not for where they would lead, but simply because they stirred a faint spark of curiosity.

In a quiet act of surrender, I signed up the next semester for a handful of classes that simply sounded interesting. One of them was poetry.

On the first day, my professor asked us to spend ten minutes describing something ordinary. "Look until it becomes unfamiliar," he said. I chose the cracked sidewalk outside the building. At first there was nothing to write—just gray cement, a few pebbles caught in the seams. But as I sat there longer, details began to emerge. The concrete was not gray but a scatter of colors: chalk-white grains, flecks of rust, tiny glints of quartz catching the light. A line of ants threaded carefully along the fracture in the pavement, disappearing and reappearing like a stitched seam.



I realized I had walked over that same sidewalk dozens of times without ever seeing it.

Poetry required that kind of looking. Each week we practiced it: describing a kitchen sink, a bus stop, the particular shade of evening light in a hallway. The work felt almost physical, like adjusting a lens. The familiar world shifted slightly out of alignment until its textures surfaced—the way a leaf curls along its veins, the way light pools on a windowsill, the way a voice falters just before someone says something honest.

Slowly, I began to understand that attention changes what we perceive. When we linger with something long enough, it begins to disclose itself. The ordinary world grows intricate, even radiant, under sustained looking.

Poetry didn't alter the world around me so much as it altered the way I moved through it. Looking differently, I discovered, was the first step toward really seeing.

This relies on attention to revelation—on the hands of a second, less visible Artist, animating our work with light. In this divine collaboration, inspiration is everywhere—the world gone luminous because we see it with new eyes. As Mary Oliver writes in "Sometimes,"

> *"Instructions for living a life:*
> *Pay attention.*
> *Be astonished.*
> *Tell about it."*

A few weeks into that class, a visiting poet from Brigham Young University came to speak to us about their Master of Fine Arts program. She described the students there—writers who had chosen to spend their days reading carefully, writing deliberately, and paying close attention to the world around them. They believed poetry mattered, she said, because attention matters; that by noticing the overlooked details of ordinary life, a poem could change the way someone saw the world. I remember sitting in that classroom with the strange certainty that I needed to be there. I wanted to study with people who believed that kind of attention could make the world better—that learning to see clearly was its own form of service.

I wanted to give my life over to the surprise of poetry—to the need to share the world, renewed, with itself.

Writing taught me to slow down and to notice its small, flickering details—the worn corner of a book, the pattern of sunlight on a wall, the fleeting hesitation in a student's voice—and to celebrate them, not merely record them. Writing became a way of attending. But when the certainty of guidance and clear answers had slipped away, my attention wavered. The light I had once traced through words and observation felt hidden behind shadows of doubt and expectation.

Attentiveness is not just an aesthetic or intellectual exercise—it is a discipline of faith, a way of keeping God's light in view even when the world seems opaque. By extension, it becomes an act of creation—a partnership with the unseen Artist.

We clumsily dance our fingers through practice, looking for beauty in the mess we make, and Heavenly Father teaches us how to see it.

The ordinary, once truly seen, is no longer ordinary.

—

I woke the next morning to a strip of light like white linen over my eyes. I blinked, bringing the room into focus. My husband was already gone, his side of the bed empty of everything but the wrinkled sheet we'd haphazardly thrown over ourselves the night before. I heard a noise outside and looked up just in time to see his tennis shoes disappear beyond the window.

As I looked closer, I realized that the overgrowth of garden plants had been cut away, making more room for the morning sun to stream in. I felt my heart in my throat. He'd gotten up early to make sure that when I did, I would wake up to light.

Revelation, art, human care—they converge. They shape perception. We take what little light we are given and, as artists and as disciples, we amplify it.

I didn't have all, or even many, of the answers to my questions, and my life was still grounded in a place as unfamiliar as my future, but the basement, the boxes—although ordinary, were transformed.

The way forward is not often found in a sudden unveiling of the whole road, but in the practice of attending to what is directly before us. It is trusting that each small beam of light—each gesture of care, each word written, each note played—will be enough to take the next step.

I rose slowly, the gentle heat drawing a flush from my skin—the moment lit from a new angle. Light, in all its uncommon guises, is the Lord's way of teaching us to look again, and look differently.

Much like learning an instrument, this kind of faith requires practice.

So, I moved toward the brightest point. The tile cooled my feet as I walked toward the window, weightless particles weaving around me, gone golden in the light—the regular made radiant—the way forward made clear.



Paige Winegar Fetzer recently completed her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Brigham Young University, where she studied poetry and worked as Editor in Chief of *Inscape Journal.* She collects words, rocks, books, and people, and can usually be found in the mountains. Her work has most recently been published in *Long River Review, Red Rock Review, The Emerson Review, Poetry South, Exponent II, Thimble Lit, Vellichor Lit,* and *Wayfare Journal.*

Student "Tell Your Story" Contest Winner
Artistic Narrative Category

Wǎnān

Written by Marie Hua

Tonight, my *Năinai* makes wontons:
ground pork
bok choy
xiāmǐ
thumbs up!

chop to mix,
hǎo hǎo hǎo...
We wrap them
like small talk;

like how on the way to buy *pí*
Gūgu says
Yéye did
"secret things" and
I nod

And "secret things," Ian says,
means fixing
pipes for
the people
making bombs

And *Năinai* was a nurse on base,
giving out
cough drops
in cold season
I imagine.

Now, it is she and I alone;
only small words
to share
between us

Still we
wrap, boil,
scoop, share
one plate of wontons together

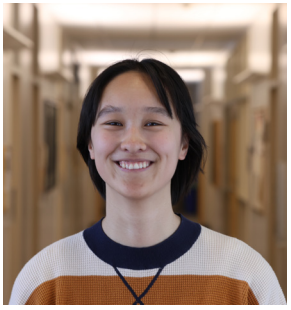
She hands me another plate
and when it's gone:
One more?
"xièxiè--
hǎochī"

She gives me a thumbs up to say,
Anytime
then washes
her hands
and I,

I am about to say, "Wait—" but,
"Goodnight—"
slips out
instead

She looks at me mildly.
"Oh... um—"
I wave.

She laughs,
walks away,
and
disappears—
down
the
hall



Marie Hua grew up in a small town in Western Massachusetts where she learned to love writing and literature. At BYU, she is studying Mechanical Engineering while working as a writing consultant at the Research and Writing Center.

Looking Ahead

2026 Symposium



Touch

Sensation, Embodiment, Relation

September 24–25

Health Humanities Curriculum Workshop
May 4–8, 2026

Research in Editing and Publishing (REAP) Inaugural Conference
August 6–7, 2026

Education Week Classes
32 Presentations
August 17–21, 2026

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Donations to the BYU Humanities Center are exclusively used to benefit students.

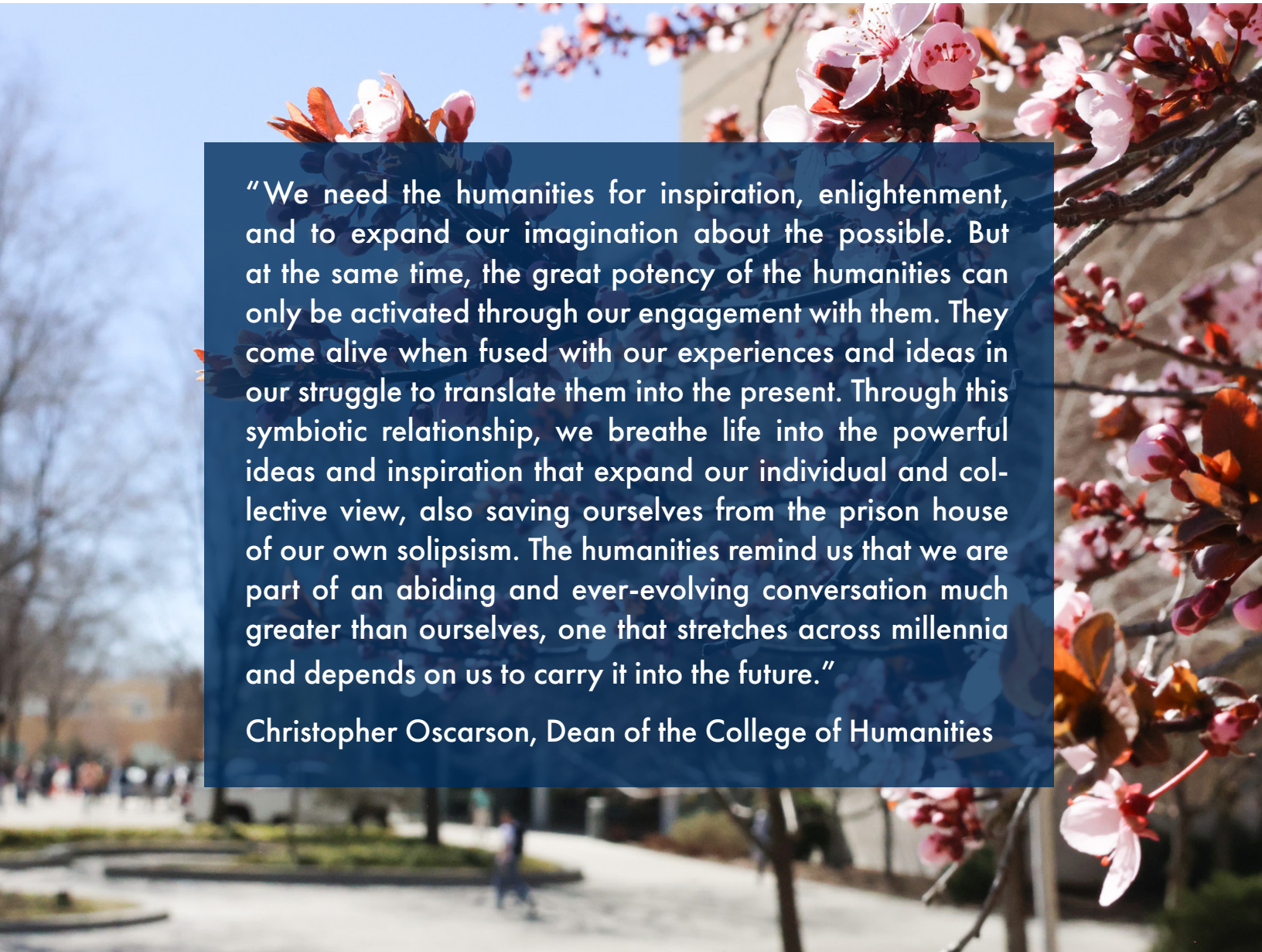
Students are a vital part of our center. They attend our events, belong to our research groups, serve as research assistants, and present their own independent research. We mentor students and their work blesses us and others. So, thank you for supporting our Humanities Center. It helps us enhance the education of our wonderful students.

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"We need the humanities for inspiration, enlightenment, and to expand our imagination about the possible. But at the same time, the great potency of the humanities can only be activated through our engagement with them. They come alive when fused with our experiences and ideas in our struggle to translate them into the present. Through this symbiotic relationship, we breathe life into the powerful ideas and inspiration that expand our individual and collective view, also saving ourselves from the prison house of our own solipsism. The humanities remind us that we are part of an abiding and ever-evolving conversation much greater than ourselves, one that stretches across millennia and depends on us to carry it into the future."

Christopher Oscarson, Dean of the College of Humanities