# Middle school students explore local history and culture through Digital Humanities Club

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EDWARDSVILLE - Middle school students in Madison and Venice are learning new technologies as they engage in content that matters to them by participating in Digital Humanities Club.

The afterschool program is coordinated by the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship (IRIS) Center and Center for STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) Research, Education and Outreach, in partnership with the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities Foundation (MJCHF) through its STEM Meets Humanities initiative.

"Research indicates STEM education focused on human problems is more effective at engaging underrepresented and minority students," said Jessica DeSpain, PhD, associate professor in the College of Arts and Sciences' Department of English Language and Literature, and co-director of SIUE's IRIS Center. "The Digital Humanities Club is providing underserved students with unique opportunities to interact with a broader community, learn how to have meaningful conversations with adults and frame their own narratives about their lives and communities."

According to Candi Johnson, with the SIUE STEM Center and coordinator of the MJCHF STEM Meets Humanities program, 12 students from each school district are participating in the Digital Humanities Clubs.

"We are proud that the number of students we are reaching has exceeded our original expectations," Johnson said. "The students are currently working on producing podcasts. Future projects may include building a website, producing a documentary and generating digital maps."

To create their podcasts, students are conducting interviews with principals, police officers and SIUE basketball players on topics including the health of school lunches, area crime rates, and the challenges of being a college basketball player.

"I've never made a podcast before, so I'm glad to be in the club and learn more," said A' Zaiah Robinson, a 6$^{th}$ grade student in Madison.

"I like math and language arts," added classmate Monique Wright. "The teachers in this club are nice. I was excited to meet people from SIUE, because I want to go there some day."

Four SIUE undergraduate students are leading the Digital Humanities Clubs, including English major Gabrielle Borders, psychology major Shervonti Norman, and Brooke Bradley and Veronica Cribbs, both English majors with a secondary education endorsement.

"I like this project, because it offers a meaningful and fun way to expand my skillset and positively influence young learners," Borders explained. "The students enjoy talking and learning about what's going on in their community. Seeing them gain interest in local issues has been wonderful."

The Digital Humanities Club is fulfilling its goals of developing young leaders who will go on to positively impact a changing world.

"By integrating the humanities and STEM, students learn about the world's problems and how to solve them from social, cultural and scientific perspectives," DeSpain said. "Skills central to the humanities, like writing, speaking, interpersonal communication and critical thinking are increasingly identified as necessary assets for employers."

"We plan to expand this programming to additional school districts and give more students the opportunity to learn technology skills that will allow them to share their voice with their community," Johnson concluded.

The [Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities](#) conducts activities that promote mutual understanding and respect among people of different cultures, races, ethnicities, religions, and other distinctions; influence positive social change by transforming attitudes and perceptions towards greater acceptance, tolerance, and interaction among these groups; and ultimately remove barriers that hinder individuals and groups from realizing their aspirations and full potential.

Founded in 2010, with a mission to support faculty and student research in the digital humanities, the [Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship (IRIS) Center](#) is invested in connecting to, working with, and helping to document, the people, places, practices and histories of the region as well as a broader international community. Since the Center's founding, students and faculty have: travelled to Nepal to aid in the recording of endangered languages in order to build a digital atlas alongside native speakers; worked with the colorfully designed physical copies of nineteenth-century books as they built a comparative edition of one of the century's most popular novels; recorded the language practices and attitudes of lifelong residents of St. Louis's Metro East to better understand regional dialect variation; built an encyclopedia of Madison County history in partnership with local cultural institutions; and designed an educational outreach program for middle school students in East St. Louis to build a website about the history and culture of their city. The Center generally serves 50 students and faculty a semester through research opportunities, internships and the Digital Humanities and Social Sciences minor.

The Southern Illinois University Edwardsville [Center for STEM Research, Education and Outreach](#) comprises an independent group of researchers and educators, innovating

ways to engage students and the public in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). Within the SIUE Graduate School, the Center brings together research faculty, graduate students and practitioners to conduct education research. The Center contributes educational expertise to SIUE undergraduate classes and provides professional development for K-12 teachers. The Center boasts a significant library of equipment and resources, which are available for loan at no cost to campus and regional instructors. For more information, visit https://www.siue.edu/stem/about.shtml or contact STEM Center Director Sharon Locke at (618) 650-3065 or stemcenter@siue.edu.