



NEH awards Humanities Access Grant to SIUE, will support programming in partnership with the MJCHF and the Regional Office of Education

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EDWARDSVILLE - The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has awarded Southern Illinois University Edwardsville a two-year \$100,000 Humanities Access Grant for the creation of an interdisciplinary curriculum focused on digital storytelling. By building digital narratives about what it means to be a child, a teenager, and an adult, the project will create a conversation about how we can value difference and speak across generational divides.

“Conversation Toward a Brighter Future,” an expansion of an earlier program founded by Dr. Ed Hightower at the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities Foundation (MJCHF), will be led by the SIUE Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship ([IRIS](#)) Center, in partnership with the [MJCHF](#) and the Madison County Regional Office of Education ([ROE](#)) 41. Conversations Toward a Brighter Future began in 2016 following a summit that was held to engage 200 area students in discussions

focused on the MJCHF's four pillars - Respect, Dignity, Understanding and Forgiveness. Students were encouraged to think outside their comfort zones and consider how we must treat each other if we are to exist as a thriving society.

According to Dr. Ed Hightower, "MJCHF is excited to work with SIUE on this important initiative and we are thankful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for their support of our efforts and the ability to expand the program even further so that we can reach more students with these critical life skills."

The grant was announced Wednesday, Dec. 13 by the NEH in a [release](#) detailing the \$12.8 million it is providing in support of [253 humanities projects](#) across the nation. The challenge grant requires organizers to raise a matching \$100,000, over two years, to support the program's \$200,000 budget.

According to principal investigator 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, programming will be developed in collaboration with six Madison County school districts including Alton, East Alton/Wood River, Granite City, Venice and Madison.

"Conversation Toward a Brighter Future begins from the position that there should be more understanding between generations," said DeSpain. "With the complementary goal of increasing access to technology and engaging in the humanities, SIUE's IRIS Center is proud to partner with the MJCHF and ROE. Together, we can make meaningful connections with local schools and reach underserved students. The MJCHF's humanities mission is an ideal fit for the SIUE IRIS Center's digital community engagement mission."

The program will feature two main components: in-school curriculum and after-school digital storytelling studios. A teacher in each district will act as an on-site coordinator who will lead the project for approximately 25 students at each school. The IRIS Center will host training sessions, beginning summer 2018, for on-site coordinators and other interested educators at the MJCH's Alma Irene Aitch STEM Center in Edwardsville.

Digital storytelling brings together a variety of activities surrounding a central theme, including blogging, web design, podcasts, oral histories, video production and digital visualization. In the after-school studios, students will work with primary documents and archives, learn about digital ethics, and practice web development and other digitally embedded skills. They will also participate in field trips to interview people at universities, workplaces and retirement facilities.

“This project’s digital storytelling studios will provide students the opportunity to interrogate generational differences while mastering valuable digital skills, thus empowering them to lead the conversation and reach audiences far beyond those found within the confines of the traditional classroom,” DeSpain added.

Additional program contributors from the SIUE IRIS Center include co-director and associate professor Kristine Hildebrandt, PhD, as well as Jill Anderson, PhD, associate professor and director of the secondary English education program, Katie Knowles, project manager, and Ben Ostermeier, technician.

During the second year of the Conversation Toward a Brighter Future program, the students’ stories will be shared with the broader community at a MCJHF summit.

Created in 1965 as an independent federal agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities supports research and learning in history, literature, philosophy, and other areas of the humanities by funding selected, peer-reviewed proposals from around the nation. Additional information about the National Endowment for the Humanities and its grant programs is available at [NEH.gov](https://www.neh.gov). Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this article do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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](#) at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville 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.