



National Humanities Alliance Foundation

Humanities Working Groups for Community Impact Initiative

Community Profile: University of Georgia Willson Center for Humanities and Arts¹

“The Willson Center is a partnership among a large community of people who believe that excellence in research in the arts and humanities builds a better community and a better university.”

- Center Director Nicholas Allen, 2013-2014 Annual Report

Founded originally in 1987 on the University of Georgia’s flagship Athens campus, the [Willson Center for Humanities and Arts](#) has, in recent years, pursued aggressive growth strategies around a core commitment to public engagement and community collaboration. Director Nicholas Allen’s above-cited statement in the Center’s 2013-2014 annual report captures this commitment well, and Professor Allen’s suggestion that humanities scholarship can hold benefits for both the university and its surrounding communities is, in itself, both powerful and salutary. Where the Willson Center’s recent work is most noteworthy, however, is in its capacity to weave these two strands of university and community benefit together, rather than pursuing them in isolation from one another. The result is a promising model for partnership in research and outreach between university-based humanities scholars and a range of community stakeholders.

Exemplary Programs

In many senses, it is the deep integration of public engagement and community collaboration into the Willson Center’s overall strategic vision that makes it of such interest as a model. This vision posits that the University of Georgia can continue to develop its profile as a global research university in the humanities by considering as part of its human capital the local communities in which it is embedded. To cultivate this capital, the Willson Center seeks to engage publics throughout what it understands as a humanities lifecycle extending from children in the public schools to the increasing numbers of retirees settling in Athens.

Within the Center’s pursuit of this mission, certain initiatives merit particular mention for their effectiveness in engaging scholars and community members simultaneously. For one, the Center’s Digital Humanities Lab has strengthened UGA’s standing as an international leader in the exploration of **new modes of digital scholarship**. Scholarship does not become publically engaged, of course, solely by

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virtue of its conduct and/or presentation in digital domains. Many of the Lab's core faculty affiliates, however, are deeply committed to creating and using digital tools that make humanities research and insights available in powerful new ways to the general public. The UGA [ehistory](#) project is exemplary in this vein, having launched multiple online platforms in recent years that allow users to visualize and access primary source material and analysis on such issues as U.S. expansion into Native American lands. Projects of this sort have achieved high levels of [media attention](#), translating in at least one case to over 110,000 unique users (and counting). As the UGA faculty's capacity in this promising field continues to develop, students also benefit, most recently through the launch of a new undergraduate certificate program in [Digital Humanities Research and Innovation](#).

Through its support for projects like *ehistory*, the Willson Center is also fostering **new models for engaging publics outside the university as active collaborators in the production of humanities scholarship**. Of particular note in this vein is the [Georgia Virtual History Project \(GVHP\)](#), which documents and presents local Georgia histories by drawing UGA faculty and students into direct relationships with community members – in particular advanced students in high schools where the Project focuses its work. As this collaborative research progresses, the GVHP website will fill with mini-documentaries, historical source material, and tourism-relation information that will be accessible in place-specific ways through GPS compatibility. In these ways, the Project exemplifies the concept of [“citizen history”](#) that underlies the *ehistory* project more broadly. In the UGA Department of English, meanwhile, a comparable commitment to collaborative research animates the [Roswell Voices Living Lab](#), which partners with local residents on the documentation of language and life stories, and then works to incorporate this material into broader efforts of community development.

Through the emphasis that it places on projects like these, the Willson Center is fostering an academic and research culture with public engagement at its foundation. This is not to say that all Center affiliates engage to the same extent in public and/or digital scholarship, and herein lies a remarkable point: in building its base of support among campus and community constituencies, the Center is cultivating among its partners an awareness of the mutual interdependence of more publically engaged and more traditional modes of humanities scholarship. Just as the Center's faculty affiliates embrace the importance of projects like *ehistory* and the Georgia Virtual History project, so too do community constituencies recognize the importance of supporting the ongoing conduct of “basic research.” Particularly noteworthy in this vein is the formation and activity of the Center's Board of Friends, a group of community members who advise, support, and advocate for the entirety of the Center's programming agenda, from the most high-profile public concerts to the most library-based faculty fellowships. If the Willson Center continues to succeed in building this broad base of support for the full range of its work, its successes will contain an important lesson: namely, that embracing public engagement does not mean the wholesale replacement of one mode of scholarship by another. Rather, a turn toward greater public engagement through key projects and initiatives can yield new returns on existing and traditional research strengths, thereby expanding campus and community understandings of what the academic humanities can be and do.

Success Factors

In formulating and implementing a strategic vision focused on public and community engagement, the Willson Center's leadership has identified and continued cultivating several institutional assets. These include:

Faculty expertise and commitment

Indispensable to the Center's success has been a cadre of distinguished and emerging faculty members and graduate students with the skills and motivation to undertake publically engaged work. The Willson Center has created an energized interdisciplinary space and an infrastructure of support for faculty members and graduate students with this profile to continue pursuing their work.

Digital capacity and infrastructure

While publically engaged scholarship need not be digital in all cases, the Willson Center has recognized and cultivated the tremendous potential of digital technologies for engaging new publics. Ongoing faculty projects in the departments of History and English have given critical impetus to the Lab for Digital Humanities; but equally critical, in areas ranging from knowledge to computing infrastructure to material support, has been the Center's close partnership with the University of Georgia Libraries and the University of Georgia Press. The most recent expression of these partnerships is the recently opened DigiLab's physical location on the third floor of the Athens campus's main library.

Administrative support

The University of Georgia administration has rightly recognized the Willson Center's emergence as a hub of excellence that will bring growing levels of international visibility to the UGA-Athens campus. In a highly significant expression of this support, the Center relocated in the Spring of 2015 to a newly renovated historic house on the Athens campus. Support for the renovation and relocation came from a combination of community and university sources, the latter made available with direct assistance from UGA President Jere W. Morehead and Vice President for Research Dr. David Lee, who both attended the new facility's dedication. This combined investment in the Center's work constitutes strong evidence of how a publicly-facing strategic vision can translate to increased levels of institutional and community support.

Community partnerships

The Willson Center's recent efforts to form a local Board of Friends merit close attention as a model for increasing public engagement and support. It is not sufficient, of course, simply to form such a body, and where the Center's leadership has succeeded most roundly is in energizing the Board of Friends around its strategic vision. Partnerships with organizations outside of the University of Georgia, meanwhile, have been critical for advancing the Center's publically oriented scholarship; and in this vein the Willson Center's relationship with the [Georgia Humanities Council](#) merits particular mention. State humanities councils are uniquely well positioned to facilitate connections between institutions of higher education and the non-academic publics that constitute one of the councils' core constituencies. Levels of collaboration between councils and university humanities centers vary widely nationwide, and the relationship between the Willson Center and the Georgia Humanities Council confirms the mutual value and interest of cultivating such ties where they do not currently exist.

The foregoing list of success factors is not exhaustive, of course, nor will organizations elsewhere necessarily encounter the same array of assets and opportunities. We recommend assessment in each of these areas, however, to institutions considering emulation of the promising model under development at the UGA Willson Center for Humanities and Arts.