HUMANITIES INSTITUTE ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM | DAY 1

The Resilient Humanities PhD: Scholarly Formation for the 21st Century

Wednesday, November 4, 2026 | 11:30 AM to 6:00 PM
The University of Texas at Austin

The University of Texas at Austin Humanities Institute

The University of Texas at Austin Graduate Office of Career and Life Design
Career Success

Five Provocations to Build Resilient Scholars in the Humanities

Towards a Mycelial University: Thriving in a Landscape of Decay?

Katina Rogers, PhD

My provocation today is one of rotting logs and critical hope. Given the myriad challenges facing higher education today, how might we nevertheless create conditions for flourishing? I take inspiration from an unlikely source: mycelium, the tiny root-like threads of fungi. When you walk through the woods and see a fallen tree, you might see it as a loss. But look closer and you'll likely find an entire ecosystem, filled with fungi and insects. Mycelium is the key to that transformation, slowly breaking down decaying matter into fertile soil and channeling nutrients between species to support new life.

Universities are arguably in a cycle of decay, their foundations eroded for decades through disinvestment. But if universities are akin to rotting logs, might we find emerging life amongst the ruins? Much like the multispecies connections fostered by mycelium, resilience in this moment requires deep interdependence and relationship. Right now, creating the conditions for flourishing means making space for liminal work that may or may not bear fruit, but that connects people in authentic relationship.

Moreover, some of this work is simply not that hard. As universities work to prepare graduate students for a complex and changing world, certain steps—like maintaining an openness to a wide range of future pathways, or thinking expansively about what constitutes meaningful scholarly work—are not as difficult or costly as some would have us believe.

We face so many difficult problems in this moment. Engaging with one another as full and complex humans does not need to be one of them—and it may be the key to our collective wellbeing.

From the Archives to the Community: Creating an Ecosystem for Graduate Education in the Humanities

Daina Ramey Berry, PhD

Humanities graduate students are often told they must learn to “translate” their skills for the world beyond the academy. This talk argues that the problem lies not with students but with programs. Graduate students already possess deep training in interpretation, research, and communication; what they lack are institutional structures that make those strengths visible and connect them to meaningful work. Creating an ecosystem for graduate education is therefore an institutional responsibility, not a matter of individual career initiative. Community-engaged learning, internships, public scholarship, and partnerships with local organizations, built into graduate training rather than added on, give students sustained opportunities to bring their research into public life. Projects such as podcast creation and public-facing writing ask students to address audiences beyond the academy and reveal skills they may not have recognized as professional strengths. The talk also challenges the assumption that the archive and the community are separate spaces. Humanities inquiry has long been oriented toward public understanding, and graduate education has narrowed something that was always meant to circulate. Programs that help students know their environments, articulate their skills, and see humanities graduates thriving across policy, nonprofit, and public-facing careers restore that broader purpose.

Naming (Not Shaming) Our Skills

Robert Townsend, PhD

Doctoral students are often great at describing the content of their studies, but struggle to name the skills they developed during their programs. Humanities doctoral education needs to recognize the skillsets PhD students are developing, not just research and writing skills, but also other capacities such as project management and grant writing. Survey data show that PhDs draw on these skills throughout their working lives, whether or not they hold academic positions, so recognizing them early helps along any potential career path. For those who move beyond the academy, the ability to articulate these skills clearly and often is essential. This presentation will try to bring these questions to the surface, and encourage faculty and students to start building a shared vocabulary of skills.

Specific and Local: Professional Development as Scholarly Formation

James Van Wyck, PhD

Professional development in the humanities is about far more than career outcomes. In this talk, I'll argue that it is better understood as scholarly formation: a process that helps graduate students gain the confidence to pursue research projects that matter to them and to the world. Along the way, they develop habits of mind and vocabularies specific to their discipline, and expertise and skills that grow together, each reinforcing the other. This formation is specific and local. What can a philosopher do that a historian can't, and vice versa? The answers live in academic departments, where faculty can help students recognize, articulate, and value the methodological strengths of their discipline and the broader possibilities those strengths afford them, and develop the vocabularies and dispositions to bring their disciplinary methods and research agendas into conversation with a diverse range of interlocutors. Departments are the natural locus for this work, but they needn't do it alone: they can partner with a range of offices, alumni, and external partners to bring professional development into the department—rather than having students seek out resources entirely outside doctoral training requirements. Since graduate students are shaped most by what happens in their departments, the messages they hear from departments and faculty mentors matter a great deal. Rooted in departmental cultures open to a range of outcomes, scholarly formation can begin even before students arrive on campus and continue through their training and into alumni engagement, preparing stronger scholars for the professoriate and beyond.

We are training scholars and a way of being.

Annie Maxfield

Five years of rigor teaches a PhD to find the hole in every argument, to wait for an advisor's endorsement before acting, to introduce themselves by subfield and topic area, to value recognition, and to thoughtfully polish their work to perfection. Each habit is a strength in academia, yet each can become a hindrance the moment a student asks, "What else could I do?"

This is not about career diversity. It is about formation working exactly as it is designed, and it is invisible to the students living inside it. By making these mindsets more visible and creating a language around the shared experience of scholarly formation – we can start to understand – and potentially change the complexities of career decision making in the doctoral training context.

So, what if career development is not a remedial service tacked at the end, but the other half of scholarly formation itself? What if we judged a doctoral program not only by the knowledge it produces, but by whether it prepares people to decide, act, and belong beyond the academy?

How can we cultivate scholarly formation in a new way – that preserves the rigor while dissipating the habits of mind that can limit possibilities? The world needs intelligent, ethical humanists across all industries – especially right now.

What might we change in year one, not year five, if we took that seriously?