



2020 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES  
ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES, & EDUCATION JANUARY 6 - 8, 2020  
HAWAII PRINCE HOTEL WAIKIKI, HONOLULU, HAWAII

# THE MELLON THINK TANK: ADDRESSING HUMAN RIGHTS IN MULTIPLE DISCIPLINES

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### **The Mellon Think Tank: Addressing Human Rights in Multiple Disciplines**

#### **Synopsis:**

In line with the overall theme of this year's Think Thank on Human Rights in the 21st century, our project brought together courses in political science, languages and literature, as well as health and human performance for an interdisciplinary discussion on the different ways that women and girls understand and navigate notions of sexuality across global cultures. Cross-course activities included film screenings, guest speakers, poetry readings, and cross course discussions.

## **The Mellon Think Tank: Addressing Human Rights in Multiple Disciplines**

### **Introduction**

The Andrew J. Mellon grant for the Teaching, Learning, and Solving Problems in the Interdisciplinary Humanities supports a variety of Interdisciplinary activities including a Summer Institute and yearly Think Tanks at Johnson C. Smith University. The Summer Institute is a weeklong seminar sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation designed to introduce faculty members to cutting edge research methods, innovative solutions to problems in their fields, and ways to integrate interdisciplinary approaches into their pedagogy. The program consists of daily keynote speakers & breakout sessions with a variety of experts in multiple disciplines. The first four Summer Institutes at JCSU focused on Technology & New Media; the 2019 Institute was the third on Problem Solving in the Interdisciplinary Humanities (DeForrest, 2018 & 2019).

Although “think tank” has multiple definitions, they have been used extensively to address a variety of issues, most often those regarding policy making and change (Ruser, 2018; Savage, 2016). Much as think tanks have been used to inform, frame, and elevate foreign policy debates; they can also do the same for educational, social justice, and human rights issues (Seppänen, 2015). The JCSU Think Tanks support discussions of “real-world” problems in our community through the lens of big-picture questions, thereby applying the skills we have developed during the Summer Institutes. The ultimate goal of these Think Tanks is to produce interdisciplinary curricula focusing on real-world issues that are situated within the humanities. The Think Tanks contextualize the foundation of the aligned courses (whether they be pre-existing courses, IDS Special Topics courses, or permanent additions to our curriculum) and allow those involved to connect with faculty across campus to develop learning outcomes and goals that can be co-taught by humanities faculty. Ultimately, this produces a uniquely interdisciplinary experience for JCSU’s faculty and students in order to foster a culture of humanities-based, interdisciplinary teaching and research around campus.

These think tanks join faculty, students, and other stakeholders from campus and the surrounding community into a small group aimed at devising solutions to current problems. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the 2019 Think Tank focused on Human Rights in the 21st Century.

The courses that we teach and our areas of research interest are in direct conversation with the 2019 Think Tank themes of human rights, transnationalism, fluid global borders, social media and concerns of human privacy. As a part of this think tank, our objectives were to collaborate with colleagues in other disciplines to further explore topics of interest to our students and ourselves in order to broaden our theoretical and practical understanding of the above topics.

### **Interdisciplinary Studies**

The term interdisciplinary education denotes that individuals from two or more disciplines work together to integrate their knowledge in a collaborative manner to enhance discipline practices. (Freeth et al., 2007) Interdisciplinary learning begins with one discipline serving as the foundation and other disciplines being integrated through exploration and practical application; thus deepening understanding. Discipline-specific knowledge is further enhanced with the development of interdisciplinary topics, and authentic experiences in various other fields (Chen & Ley, 2019). While discipline-specific “silos” still dominate college and university life, enthusiasm for interdisciplinary approaches has increased over the past several years. Although the efficacy of interdisciplinary initiatives have not been adequately evaluated, it is possible that engagement in interdisciplinary activities changes student and faculty thinking in significant ways (Leahey, 2018; Seppänen, 2015).

Given that any discipline involves multiple disciplines, it is relatively to make cross-course (and in our case cross-college) connections. More often than not, students from diverse majors sit in different classrooms within the same university and discuss similar topics yet connections between courses are not always as obvious to students as they may be to professors. By facilitating serious and expert-led conversations in a safe space, students can begin to unpack the layers of (mis)information and

stereotypes can help us better understand how communities perceive disease, wellness, and healthy sexuality.

### **Our Approach**

In line with the overall theme of this year's Think Tank on Human Rights in the 21st century, our project brought together courses in political science, languages and literature, as well as health and human performance for an interdisciplinary discussion on the different ways that women and girls understand and navigate notions of sexuality and wellness across global cultures. These courses included Dr. Lima Neves' POL 333: Comparative Political Systems and POL 491: Politics of Gender in Hip Hop, Dr. Butler's HED 232: Human Sexuality & Family Living and HED 438: Social & Behavioral Aspects of Global Health and Dr. Kohli's SPA 237: Techniques in Translation of Spanish and SPA 333: Introduction to Spanish Literature.

By considering broader theoretical approaches in the fields of human rights and cultural theories, we examined how cultural norms, social media and government policies shape the way that women and girls see and identify themselves. Our objectives were to 1) allow students the space to discover and recognize for themselves that their particular area of study and research interest are actually intertwined with other disciplines, 2) Highlight perspectives they may have not previously considered; 3) further develop students' critical thinking skills, and 4) encourage them to continue to make connections between multiple disciplines. A variety of in-class and out-of-class events was presented. In class, we began with a "syllabus review" as our starting point for cross-course connections and discussions. For example, in the Global Health class, students were asked to do the following: Review Dr. Lima-Neves' syllabus and the "HED 438 & POL 334 project" documents (in handouts folder - click on files) then create 3 discussion questions or topics. These can be things you want her students in POL 334 to address, those that link the two courses, or some combination of both. We then had weekly discussions addressing the student-generated questions.

Out-of-class activities included film screenings, guest speakers, poetry readings, and Day of the Dead activities. The films in our series entitled “Global Voices in Charlotte Multicultural Film Series were as follows:

- TCHINDAS The Empowered LGBTQ community in the Cabo Verde Islands, West Africa, through the eyes of the country's first openly transgender woman, Tchinda Andrade. Introduction by Dr. Terza Lima-Neves
- PARENTS OF THE YEAR Set in Southern California, this is the true story of an immigrant mother's courageous struggle to educate her children in America. Introduction by Dr. Jasleen Kohli
- COCO On Día de los Muertos, a young would-be musician, Miguel, crosses into the afterlife on a quest to meet his ancestor and understand his family legacy. Introduction by Dr. Jasleen Kohli and Dr. Mario Bahena
- ABOUNA (“OUR FATHER”) Set in the Republic of Chad, Abouna tells the story of two boys, Amine and Tahir, and their quest to find their father, who has seemingly disappeared without a trace. Introduction by Dr. Aman Nadhiri

We also held a symposium entitled “A Conversation on The Politics of Global Health: Cultural Perceptions and Understanding Disease Across International Communities” in which we explored: how illness/disease is perceived in communities around the world, how this impacts the ability of members of these communities to receive/accept care, the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, and the historical relationship between states. Our panelists were Dr. Philip E. Otienoburu, one of our Biology Professors and the Director of our Center for Renewable Energy & Sustainability (CRES); and Ms. Muriel Samuels, a chef and nutritional counselor from Sierra Leone.

In order to examine human rights, sexuality, and wellness through music & popular culture, we brought in two experts on hip-hop: Dr. Msia Clark and Dr. Antonia Randolph. Dr. Clark created and teaches the courses “Black Women & Popular Culture” and “Hip Hop & Social Change in Africa” at Howard University and has authored a number of books on the topic. Dr. Antonia Randolph teaches in

the Sociology Department of Winston Salem State University and is the author of “The Wrong Kind of Different: Challenging the Meaning of Diversity in American Classrooms. These scholars engaged our students in our classes and also spoke to the broader University community.

In Dr. Kohli’s Spanish classes, students across disciplines engaged in conversations on race and identity. Through the study of multicultural voices in texts written in Spanish, students observe the agency of the voice that tells the story, thereby creating multiple genres of life writing such as autobiography, memoir, biography, captivity narratives and many more. They also created a Digital Storytelling Project centered around the Mexican festival of the Day of the Dead. The Day of the Dead altar serves as a cultural landmark, where students and members of the local community share a dedication to a lost one while creating a common discourse about personal loss. Students discussed the creation of a hybrid, transnational space as witnessed in these Digital Narratives and mirrored in contemporary Latinx literature. As visible in these digital narratives, the creation of newly formed memories often has roots in rituals that have been orally passed down in a pre-migrant setting. The act of visiting these rituals becomes a way of re-affirming a new identity, at the same time, enables these subjects to become the absolute agents of a newly established self.

### **Conclusion**

Response to our activities were overwhelmingly positive. Students, speakers and guest faculty all expressed interest in participating in more events like this. Plans for the next academic year are underway. A variety of other courses are being considered such as HED 234: Healthful Living, HED 231: Nutrition & Health, POL 333: Comparative Political Systems, POL 491: Politics of Education. We would also like to explore ways to measure the impact these activities on students’ understanding and what effect they may have on student learning outcomes. It is possible, if not probable that the collaborative relations between teachers and students of multiple disciplines allow students to develop a broader educational vision and imagine new possibilities across the curriculum.

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