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# Students Present at MUSE Humanities Conference

Feb. 7, 2020

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Undergraduate students from colleges across Illinois — including Illinois Wesleyan University — presented creative work and original research during the MUSE Undergraduate Humanities Conference at IWU on Saturday, Jan. 25.

The conference was organized by students who participated in the [First-Year Humanities Fellows](#) program. The Humanities Fellows were enrolled in a humanities-focused writing seminar and attended various events in Chicago that expanded their knowledge of subjects that comprise the humanities, including literature, philosophy, religion and language.

Mike Theune, a professor of English and director of the writing program, said the students organized the conference in an effort to extend their passion for the humanities beyond their [First-Year Experience](#). According to Theune, who served as the students' faculty advisor, "the conference was a total success."

"Everything the student co-organizers hoped would happen did. Throughout the day, students presented fascinating, original scholarship and creative writing to curious, engaged audiences," he said.

Among the student-presenters was Johnny Whitfield '20, a computer science and English-writing double major. Whitfield shared a collection of poetry titled "Which Will Tip the Scales," a collection of eulogies honoring his father who passed away in 2014.

"I very much enjoyed the experience," he said. "It's been wonderful to see other students who care about their writing and want to share it."

Erin Burnison '21, an English-writing major, said she also enjoyed presenting her creative short story, as well as watching her peers and students from neighboring colleges share their work.

Participating colleges included Augustana College, Bradley University, Illinois College, Monmouth College, North Central College, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Southern Illinois University, the University of Chicago, University of Illinois at Chicago, Washington University and Western Illinois University.

"There are tons of really talented and passionate people here," Burnison said.

Jon Recchia '20, an English major who attended the conference to support his talented friends like Burnison, added that events like these help prepare students for their future careers.

"I think it's a great experience for the future, especially for an undergraduate who is pursuing graduate school. Students gain exposure to public speaking, and it's a great resume builder," he said.

Theune agreed, adding that it "takes maturity and poise to present work to new people."

"This is a professionalizing step. Students work hard to polish their material and present it to a new, unfamiliar audience," he said.

In addition to developing professional skills, students also had the opportunity to hear from a panel of professionals who work in the humanities. The panelists included Julie Hile, the founder and president of the Hile Group, a performance consultancy in Normal, Ill.; Emily Kelahan, associate professor of philosophy; and Anna Scanlon, Director of Illinois Wesleyan's Writing Center.

"I was deeply impressed by how the panelists articulated the value of their humanities background in their professional lives," Thuene said.

The conference concluded with a presentation from keynote speaker Andrew Delbanco, a professor of American Studies at Columbia University and the recipient of a National Humanities Medal. Delbanco discussed the importance of engaging with history and literature through the lens of his new book, *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul from the Revolution to the Civil War*.

Through the many presentations, Theune said the conference offered students and faculty across Illinois the opportunity "to gather with like-minded scholars and artists to share their work, to feel a part of a community."

"The humanities are in peril across the nation. It's important that a liberal arts institution such as Illinois Wesleyan show its support for the humanities whenever it can. MUSE was a strong showing of such support, and it revealed, again, how vital, energizing, and revealing humanistic work remains."



Johnny Whitfield '20, a computer science and English-writing double major, presents at the MUSE Undergraduate Humanities Conference.



Julie Hile, the founder and president of the Hile Group, a performance consultancy in Normal, Ill.; Emily Kelahan, associate professor of philosophy; and Anna Scanlon, Director of Illinois Wesleyan's Writing Center lead a panel discussion during the MUSE Undergraduate Humanities Conference.



Andrew Delbanco, a professor of American Studies at Columbia University, delivers the keynote address at the MUSE Undergraduate Humanities Conference.

By Vi Kakares '20