

SUMMARY

Duke seeks to nurture the development of Visual Studies, thereby fostering collaboration within and across the humanities and with engineering and the computation sciences. Visual Studies matters because, on the most basic level, it touches virtually every aspect of the humanities and makes intellectual connections across numerous disciplinary and intellectual boundaries. “Visual literacy” is key to a general education, closely following reading, writing, and text-based literacy as an important skill that also comes with its own methodologies, historical traditions, and applications--specializations which are dispersed through a wide range of humanities departments. With this Visual Studies Initiative, we seek not only to develop and strengthen interdisciplinary humanities-based teaching and research in Visual Studies but to create the infrastructure that will allow the initiative to flourish.

We will build upon a foundation of inter-departmental faculty-driven planning, interdisciplinary collaboration fostered by Franklin Humanities Seminars and the University’s major arts initiative. We will also take advantage of Duke’s ability to combine theory and practice and to support creative ways in which the doing and the analyzing of visual culture can work in tandem, each enriching the other. In addition, Duke has forged important and productive connections between faculty in the computational sciences and engineering and faculty in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. The Mellon Visual Studies Initiative will build upon these foundations and develop true distinction in a field that will significantly impact the next generation of students as well as some of our most creative faculty.

We will create a program that includes historical and presentist perspectives, develops students’ visual literacy, and connects theory and practice. To achieve these goals, we will hire and support a cadre of faculty in the emerging field of Visual Studies. Cluster hiring supported by the Visual Studies Initiative and its programmatic and research enhancements will allow Duke to attract energetic younger scholars as well as senior scholars looking to move in exciting new directions. We will also create undergraduate and graduate courses of study that foster visual analysis and that complement and deepen Duke’s disciplinary strengths. Finally, we will enhance digital resources and the delivery of these resources. The University will create an administrative infrastructure to support this initiative along with the physical redevelopment of Central Campus.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Visual Studies, as this phrase is broadly used, does not name a discipline, but an emerging object of inquiry. That object, to borrow Gertrude Stein’s definition of visual culture, entails not only “what is seen” but also “how we look at it.” Innovative research in visual culture may be pursued from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. At the same time, the differing humanities and social science approaches may share objects of study without sharing interpretative methods.

Visual Studies at Duke, however, is much broader in conception, linking fields of theoretical inquiry that are not encompassed by art, art history, or film and media studies as traditionally pursued. Visual studies in this wider sense does not concentrate upon visual representation in the ways art and art history have traditionally done, but rather seeks to fashion a transdisciplinary frame of reference, capable

of addressing cultural objects that are produced across a broad spectrum of areas in the humanities. Thus, Visual Studies can embrace such fields of inquiry as aesthetics and perception theory (as addressed in philosophy courses), the social uses of visual materials (as analyzed in cultural studies, anthropology, and literary theory courses), environmental studies, and archeological studies (prehistory), as well as the full array of performing, studio, and digital arts.

At its best, Visual Studies breaks down the academic barriers between practice, on the one hand, and theory, on the other. This is crucial because it unifies areas of the humanities that, traditionally, have experienced divisions within departments among those who teach the analysis of a subject and those whose primary role is the production of cultural objects.

We believe that we are harnessing the particular energies of this moment and of this student generation, elevating them to something more profound. As members of the Internet age, students are no longer passive consumers of popular culture but also producers. We hope to build on student interest in production but intentionally to give it context, content, shape, disciplinary function and form, methodology, rigor, and, perhaps most important, history, thereby increasing our students' visual literacy.

Duke has the unprecedented opportunity to transform nearly a third of our physical campus as an academic village, including residential space, academic space, and campus services, that will model our commitments to interdisciplinarity, internationalization, the arts, and the integration of living and learning. Intellectual activities on Central Campus will be supported by a library facility focusing on visual studies and a shared digital media resource to support faculty and students working in photography, film/video/digital, visual arts, and digital music. The transformation of Central Campus, part of which is scheduled to open in 2009, will create a vibrant intellectual and residential community, making it an ideal home for the Visual Studies Initiative.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Faculty Development

Developing and supporting a cadre of talented and accomplished Visual Studies faculty is at the heart of our Initiative. We will augment current faculty expertise in Visual Studies, using a cluster-hiring strategy. This approach increases the chance of attracting stellar faculty and provides the opportunity for a synergistic group of colleagues to be in close contact and conversation, sharing ideas, research, and teaching. The Initiative will allow us to attract a new generation of faculty for whom interdisciplinary connections are essential or who are already very accomplished in their fields and are now looking for innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to visual analysis and research and state-of-the-art resources and collections.

Graduate Student Development

A critical element in recruiting outstanding Visual Studies faculty is the ability to support creative and talented graduate students who will in turn enter the professoriate. We will create the Mellon Graduate Fellowship Endowment in Visual Studies through a combination of Mellon funds and challenge funds from another donor. Doctoral students in departments affiliated with the Visual Studies Initiative will be eligible to apply for these prestigious, competitive fellowships. Fellows will be expected to engage in Initiative activities and programming during their fellowships.

In addition, we will develop an array of Visual Studies graduate courses that will lead to a graduate certificate in Visual Studies.

Undergraduate Certificate

A hallmark of a Duke education is the opportunity for students to engage with world-class faculty in

cutting-edge research and emerging fields. We will develop an undergraduate certificate in Visual Studies through an RFP process for faculty working collaboratively across disciplines. To complement the development of the Visual Studies undergraduate certificate, we will provide funding for two students each summer to work on emerging projects with Visual Studies faculty and graduate students in research teams.

Visual Studies Programming and Resources

To nurture the development of Visual Studies and to foster collaboration within and across the humanities at Duke, we will provide rich Visual Studies resources for this project that will include visiting scholars, faculty grants for collaborative projects, and library infrastructure.

Visiting Scholars: Over the course of the grant, we will bring in a series of short-term visiting scholars to work with Faculty Steering Committee as we develop the program; they will also engage with the university community throughout the course of the Mellon initiative through public events and guest lectures in undergraduate and graduate classes.

Faculty Grants for Collaborative Projects: We will support the further development of the Visual Studies Initiative by establishing a pool of funding to encourage collaborative, interdisciplinary research grants, seminars, working groups, and conferences.

Library Infrastructure and Visual Studies Collections: As a growing number of faculty across a variety of departments seek to incorporate visual materials into their teaching and research, we must expand our digital collections, collaborate to avoid duplication of effort on campus, and facilitate the use of these rich resources by faculty and students.

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