Navigating Virtual Communities with Mellon Public Humanities Fellows

Mellon Public Humanities Fellows are prime examples of the role that our university and the public humanities can play in local communities, even virtually. We asked five 2020-21 Fellows to weigh in on their experiences supporting community organizations amidst the pandemic, how they’re “keeping it all together” and prioritizing mental health, and what advice they have for students seeking roles in non-academic settings. Here are excerpts of their responses.

Kevin Wamalwa, PhD candidate, Departments of Anthropology and African Cultural Studies, Ripple Project Fellow, Dane County Library Services. Wamalwa is supporting racial equity training for DCLS staff as well as the library system’s Beyond the Page initiative to facilitate sustainable local community programs that ensure social diversity and inclusion.

Working with the Dane County Library Services this year has been challenging, but also a real learning experience. It may be surprising that I have lived in Dane county for about eight years, but I only know a few towns and villages. Therefore, I was rightly excited at the prospects of visiting all 28 library locations around Dane County, meeting new people, and getting to know new places. However, since the pandemic has confined many people in their homes, we have learned to work online.

There is a proverb in Swahili that says, “Ushikwapo, shikamana” which can mean, “when you are held up, hold on tight.” This adage can also be rendered as, “wherever you are caught, stay there”—have the courage to hold yourself together. I have tried to live up to the wisdom of this proverb during this pandemic time. Working from home can be challenging and it puts a lot of strain on one’s mental wellbeing. I have had to learn to be kind to myself. I have looked at everything in a positive light. Being together with family the whole day, learning to balance roles, working together as a family to accommodate each other’s needs throughout the day’s academic and work responsibilities strengthens the family bond. Taking long walks, mostly an hour and a half, in the evenings has also been therapeutic. During many of these walks, I find myself singing.

If a chance comes your way, take it! I took up this opportunity to work with the Dane County Library Services because I wanted a different experience from teaching. I believe that teachers are born, and I was born one, but that is not all that there is to it. One needs to learn and explore new opportunities. If one wants to serve and directly impact the community, I think non-academic workplaces are the ideal places to do so.
Kate MacCrimmon, PhD candidate, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Early Learning Communications Fellow at Kids Forward. MacCrimmon contributes to research, community engagement, and communications for Kids Forward's Farm to Early Care and Education projects.

Working with Kids Forward has been a welcoming and beneficial experience, even in a semi-virtual environment. This opportunity has contributed enormously to my understanding of the field as a whole—not just from a scholarly perspective and work that contributes to writing my dissertation—but through the multitude of partnerships among non-profit organizations, foundations, and institutes of higher education that I’ve been invited to collaborate with to bring about creative solutions to the daily challenges early care and education workers experience.

All this work has contributed to the progress I’ve made on my dissertation. The work with Kids Forward has not only helped fill out my content understanding of the early care and education field, it has truly helped me to better organize my time and to create strict boundaries for work-life balance.

Seeking positions in non-academic workplaces can lead to unexpected connections and professional growth in the non-profit, state government, and independent foundation world for students seeking something other than an academic pathway. Working outside academia brings the opportunity to network and collaborate directly with people for whom you are trying to create change, which makes this work immensely satisfying.

Lauren Surovi, PhD candidate, Department of French and Italian, Prison Education Communication Fellow with Odyssey Beyond Bars, a program with the UW Odyssey Project. Surovi is establishing a communication infrastructure for prison educators in addition to fostering relationships on campus.

The biggest challenge has been not really being able to meet in person with my supervisors and other folks on the Odyssey Project team. This isn’t really a logistical challenge as much as it as a challenge to morale—you want to be with everyone and get to know them! For example, the Odyssey Project’s community course, taught by co-directors Emily Auerbach and Kevin Mullen, now takes place on Zoom, and they’ve invited me to join as an auditor each week.

Kevin also teaches English 100 for the Odyssey Beyond Bars program, and so he currently has a class of 10 students at Oakhill Correctional. Kevin’s also teaching remotely, via Zoom—this is really rare, and fortunate, among higher-ed-in-prison programs during the pandemic; many have shut down entirely. Every Friday afternoon I meet with two to three students from Kevin’s class over Zoom and we talk about everything from the course material and class assignments to their own creative writing. It’s so great, and really inspiring.
It goes without saying that the pandemic has turned all our lives upside-down, but being a part of the Odyssey Project and witnessing the tireless efforts of this program to improve people’s lives through the humanities gets me out of any feelings of “COVID fatigue” (as they’ve been calling it) so fast. The spirit of the Odyssey Project continues to inspire me and keep me sane when life gets hard.

Every single opportunity that comes your way in graduate school is a chance for professional development. I wouldn’t have been a viable candidate for the Public Humanities fellowship if I didn’t work to accumulate a variety of experiences throughout all my previous years in grad school. Some ideas might be joining a departmental or university committee, a student hourly position in an office on campus, or volunteering locally in Madison. Photos © 2020 Chris Bacarella for Isthmus.

Caroline Griffith, PhD candidate, Department of Geography, Tribal Environmental Issues Fellow at Midwest Environmental Advocates. Griffith is working to research, draft, and disseminate public-facing guides on tribal environmental rights.

My supervisor at Midwest Environmental Advocates has given me the autonomy and independence to feel like I am a co-collaborator on our projects. At the same time, there is enough structure and accountability to help me feel supported at the organization despite the virtual work environment.

The fellowship has had a direct positive effect on my mental health, because of the sense of collegiality and accountability it has given me while I work on my dissertation. My fellowship projects have benchmarks that feel much more tangible than my dissertation work right now, and I get regular feedback from my colleagues and Tribal partners in a collaborative work process.

I recommend that students look for people whose work they admire — and in particular those who make the kinds of impacts through their work that the student is interested in—and then ask them for informational interviews to see how they got there. I would also recommend that students go out of their comfort zone for experiences that will expose them to different types of alt-ac work to see how they feel and if they’re a good fit. Whether the experience leads you to pursue alt-ac careers or not, it will be valuable information and useful professional development.

Bailey Albrecht, PhD candidate in the Department of History, Cultural Resources Fellow at Mead & Hunt. Albrecht is working within Mead & Hunt’s Cultural Resources Group in support of engineering and architecture projects.

I have had a great experience in my position at Mead & Hunt. The first week I started working with the company, it was announced that they planned to work remote until at least the spring of 2021. This was at a time when many other companies were calling people back into work. To me, it demonstrated that Mead & Hunt cared about what was right for their employees. I think this impression has only gotten stronger.
in the three months I’ve been with them. Despite the distance, the Cultural Resources team at Mead & Hunt have really gone out of their way to foster community while distancing, and to welcome me.

We as graduate students are a lot more qualified than we think to work in different fields. I heard this a lot, but it did not really make sense until I started working with the Cultural Resources team. You don’t need to know everything about the field you will be working in, but you do need to demonstrate you understand both your strengths and where you can learn from others. Mead & Hunt produces reports for potential historic properties that might be impacted by future construction projects. I am not an expert in architectural styles, nor did I know much about the process of ensuring compliance to federal laws before beginning construction projects. What I do have is an interest in how resources are managed, experience in writing about historical context, and the willingness to listen to others and develop new skills.

Finally, right now I think graduate students have a real opportunity to redefine who we are and what we can do. The reverse is also true; the university needs a greater understanding of the communities they serve. There are amazing opportunities to do so outside of the academic world. I think COVID-19 will push many of us outside of the academic system, and that it can be hard to deal with this reality. But I think it also presents a great opportunity to share our abilities and knowledge with a much wider portion of society. Photo from Mead & Hunt’s Cultural Resources.

Learn more about the Mellon Public Humanities Fellowship or explore other opportunities for public humanities scholarship, for undergraduate and graduate students. Please reach out to Aaron Fai, Assistant Director of Public Humanities at the UW-Madison Center for the Humanities at fai@wisc.edu.

NOTE: The call for applications for the 2021-22 Mellon Public Humanities Fellowships has been delayed as we secure new funding, and we aim to provide an update about the next call in December 2020 or January 2021.