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ARTICLE

How to Run a Humanities Center

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Abstract

We're writers, artists. We're intake valves, immersed in paradox and desire, sponging up the mess of our incomprehensible world. We pause and linger in the slop of the creative process; we often, if not always, double back to reimagine and revise. We veer, wait, and witness. Academia, however, requires us to be exhaust valves, combusting fumes to stabilize an industry in crisis, with the humanities being no exception. This is not news. "Publish or perish" is real. Operational. It determines vocational futures through output, quantifiable objects, and line items. Organized by academic milestones (comps, defense, and tenure), the system forces the forfeiting of creativity and complexity to privilege the swift, slick manufacturing of ideas. This article brings together the author's experience in harm reduction to translate public health to the public humanities. This "how-to" essay isn't about how to rehab your Humanities Center. It's about how to center care despite the rapid currents of capital and productivity. Just as principles for harm reduction reject universal definitions and diagnostics, so too do I reject universal (i.e., singular) methods for how to run your Humanities Center. Rather, here I show you how to embrace the multiples: the relapses and revisions.

Keywords: care; harm reduction; humanities; Humanities Center

"What if you think about your doctoral program as harm reduction," a friend offered to my wearied laments about graduate school. He had texted to congratulate me on passing comps, but I responded despondently with, "What material impact can this work actually have?" I was a PhD candidate in the humanities, exhausted and disillusioned by my training. Phrases like "knowledge production" grounded our professionalization into the industry, summoning imagery of boxed ideas humming along conveyor belts. The intention was good—our deans, advisors, and colleagues wanted us to succeed, to secure tenure-track positions. But good intentions fail to supersede entrenched structural norms: whether in our research (produce new findings), our writing (produce new knowledge), or teaching (produce quantifiable outcomes), we find ourselves relentlessly urged toward productivity to guarantee solvent futures in academia.

But for those of us engaged in the humanities, we're writers, artists. We're intake valves, immersed in paradox and desire, sponging up the mess of our incomprehensible world. We pause and linger in the slop of the creative process; we often, if not always, double back to reimagine and revise. We veer, wait, and witness. Academia, however, requires us to be exhaust valves, combusting fumes to stabilize an industry in crisis, with the humanities

being no exception. This is not news. "Publish or perish" is real. Operational. It determines vocational futures through output, quantifiable objects, and line items. Organized by academic milestones (comps, defense, and tenure), the system forces the forfeiting of creativity and complexity to privilege the swift, slick manufacturing of ideas. Steven Osuna names the stakes: "Academic scholarship, for one, has become a form of human capital that offers rewards and status—including foundation grants, money, and prestige—that isolate the intellectual from those struggling to remain alive."[1] These monetary and status-bound incentives have the potential to influence the work we make. "There is no point in trying to hold out the university against its professionalization," argue Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. "They are the same."[2]

My friend's reminder arrived during the middle of my doctoral program, after exams and before dissertating. Specifically, I was burned out by the paucity of methodological options —the *how* of our work. At seminar tables, we spoke about liberation, abolition, and revolution. We theorized queer bodies, Black bodies, and trans bodies. We filled the gaps in our disciplinary fields and scoured literature down to its sinews. But liberation always remained abstract, and I worried that all this "body" talk allegorized human life to simplify difference, thereby sensationalizing that difference.[3] I worried about the need for new.[4] I worried about the community external to the university. The distance between the university and life lived proximal to the university is both real and exaggerated. Boundaries are porous, sometimes invisible, and casually crossed. But when our subjects become theoretical objects—when complexity is forfeited for the sake of resolution (or output)—we've crammed our theses into forced rehabilitation. Cameron Awkward-Rich explicitly argues as much:

> What would it mean to do minoritarian studies without being driven by the desire to rehabilitate the subjects/objects of our knowledge? What kind of theories would we produce if we noticed pain and, rather than automatically seeking out its source in order to alleviate it, or mining it for resources for perverse or resistant pleasures, we instead took it as a fact of being embodied that is not necessarily loaded with moral weight?[5]

In the rush to produce, we risk turning complex subjects into simplified theoretical objects.[6] These binds are what had me exhausted, texting my friend whiny lines about impact. I didn't want to make meaning. I wanted to feel meaning. I wanted myself and others to feel meaning*ful*, despite the urgencies overwhelming our world. When I complained about my dissonant relationship to theory, which was diluting concurrent to the progress I was making on my degree, my friend suggested I remember my roots.

Before beginning my English doctoral program at the University of Pittsburgh, I lived in the jade landscapes of the Pacific Northwest. While I spent many days exploring the glacial

[1] Osuna 2017, 27.

[2] Moten and Harney 2013, 31.

[3] See Gill-Peterson 2024, wherein she deftly describes the destructive fallout of allegorizing human lives for the purposes of political theorization. See also Heaney 2017 and Snorton 2017.

[4] See Keeling 2016. Keeling argues that neoliberalism in the academy creates expectations on its community members, its writers, to produce work that mimics "capitalist techniques of accumulation and growth" (318).

[5] Awkward-Rich 2017, 824.

[6] I owe much to Barbara Christian, Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang. See Christian 1988. See also Tuck and Yang 2021.

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summits of the Cascade Mountain range and making minimum wage as a barista, I also volunteered with a drug outreach program that managed syringe programs across Oregon. Once a week, I set up tables in downtown Eugene—a small city two hours south of Portland—stocked the table with needles and other safer-using supplies such as cotton balls and Naloxone, and exchanged sterile syringes for used ones.

The service was simple: provide free resources to people who use drugs, thereby diminishing the spread of disease, the possibility of overdose, and the impact of stigma. Though we were judgment-free and unapologetic about it, this positionality initially required practice. Rehabilitation has long been normalized as the only logical response to drug use. Even still, health services—such as Hep C treatment, AA and NA, and even wound care—are often withheld from those not pursuing recovery or sobriety, for those still using drugs out of choice or necessity. "Prohibition or perish." When the goal is singular—when output is elevated over process (the common refrain "become a productive member of society" is driven by labor)—alternative methods for care, such as harm reduction, are obscured.

Other ways of living with and alongside addiction exist. Those other ways are organized through care, not productivity. When I became a PhD candidate, I studied exactly this—how labor and healthcare convene to analyze, racialize, and manage our lives, designating them worthy of care or a drain on the system. I studied the rhetoric of drug use—how phrases like "productive member of society" not only limit our imagination on public health care, but also dehumanize those who still consider themselves in process (which is all of us, of course). Specifically, I analyzed how rhetorics of spectacle—for example, "the new face of addiction"—fomented attention but exoticized marginalized communities. We became focused on the sensationalized, not the everyday.

"Do y'all need any volunteers right now?" I shot off an email to the local Pittsburgh syringe program, seeking both community and balm to my Pacific Northwest homesickness. "Yes, always," they quickly replied. I started working on their mobile van soon after, driving around the city and meeting with our community of drug users each week, handing out needles, Naloxone, crack pipes, condoms, and more. With each shift, I felt myself returning and, at the same time, my research straining. I wanted to honor my community, who were central to my research, yet I did not want to cast them as research objects. I wanted to honor the human. Humanize.

There is no harm reduction without retries, relapses, and revisions. As much as we look toward the future—as much as we work toward that future, with hope and frustration and sweat dripping down our necklines because the AC in the van is busted—we are also focused on doing our best to provide care in any given moment. Likewise, there is no harm reduction without community. We build relationships and listen to one another's needs, understanding expertise as lived experience. Knowledge is "produced" through the kinetic charge of having each other's back, of knowing how to perform rescue breathing, how to reverse an overdose, and how to alert others to bad bags of dope. Or simply, how to listen to someone having a shit day.

At exchange, we see people holistically, meeting them where they are and foregoing the impetus on rehabilitation to instead privilege the present moment of care. Perhaps we should do the same in our writing and research. Perhaps we could even withhold academic conventions to foreground complexity in crisis. That is, we could practice harm reduction within our university walls. My friend, who generously responded to my petulant text with gentle wisdom, offered an important reminder: harm reduction is for everyone. It can, and

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should, be applied anywhere, from a street clinic to whatever space we find ourselves in. For me, this means from public health to the public humanities.

1. Finding my people

I reached the final year of my doctoral program, my dissertation complete save the last chapter. It was at this time I was awarded a fellowship from the university Humanities Center predicated on my research in public health and drug outreach. The funding was enough to allocate my final summer to writing and my final year to thesis revisions and defense preparation. But the fellowship provided far more than that.

The funding was enough—during that hot summer when my pregnant wife was in her second trimester—to pay off the entirety of our fertility expenses. As a queer couple, we had endured 18 months of donor decision-making, blood tests for her, STI testing for me (a requirement from our fertility center), and a mandatory counseling session (also a requirement). We spent thousands on out-of-pocket intrauterine inseminations, sperm vials, specimen washing, ovulation medications, and more. We gritted through consultations, where nurses and therapists would determine if we were "fit to be parents." After a year and a half, pregnancy felt statistically, financially, and emotionally impossible. We couldn't afford IVF; we couldn't afford continued heartache. Then, in the early hours of a morning in early April, we looked down to see two pink lines on a pregnancy test. Two days later, I received an email from the co-directors of the Humanities Center congratulating me on receiving a Humanities Center fellowship.

I mention our fertility debt to reflect both the banality and reality of where I was during my final year of my doctoral program: my focus on research was split between wanting to start a family at thirty-eight years old. I was shipping modest funds from our family savings account to insurance companies, doctor offices, and sperm banks, all the while working the mobile van and writing my last dissertation chapter. I didn't want to teach after graduation, so I didn't want to teach during my final summer, despite the paycheck it offered. Teaching would consume my mental energy and writing time, limiting other opportunities like my outreach work. And though my department tried to endorse "alt-ac" careers, the structure of the program left little room to explore alternative opportunities. The fellowship freed me from this bind while also rescuing my wife and me from serious economic struggle. I graduated debt-free because of that fellowship, and this was but one of the ways the Humanities Center changed my professional and personal life. The co-director of our Center, Dr. David Marshall, articulates these aims as well, telling me that when he and Dr. Carla Nappi came on as co-directors, they "really wanted to nurture intellectual community.... There's a balance to be struck when allocating resources: you have to make a contribution to people's time and energy (which means just giving them money or paying for course releases to free them up some) before you can ask them to show up and genuinely be present for events." It's true: we need time and support (importantly, financial support) to make. Which is why, David continued, "We directed a higher proportion of the Center's overall budget to fellowships."

My Humanities Center fellowship year began the same week my wife started her third trimester. We were having a girl and sorting hand-me-down onesies from her sisters' kids. I was still filling van shifts at outreach while finishing my final chapter, the one I promised my Humanities Center directors and our cohort, comprised of faculty members, graduate students, and undergrads. Admittedly, I entered our seminar room skeptical that the space would prove different than any other seminar room. But my skepticism quickly waned as our

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community prioritized care—for one another, for ourselves, and for the work—before performance. We met each week to share our works-in-progress with both our internal group and the larger academic community. These colloquia were central to the Humanities Center programming, led by two directors who, I would come to understand, cared deeply about the *human* in the humanities, who cared deeply about creating, even thriving, in academic spaces.

Carla later told me her goals when she became co-director of our Center explicitly included creating "a welcoming space that was as free of typical academic institutional hierarchies as possible ... [and] to collaboratively make something together with colleagues whose ideas and way of being in the humanities-thinky-world I really respected and was inspired by." Inspiration is relational and formative. She continues, "The coming-together-ness of the project on all scales was and continues to be at the heart of the point of doing this thing, for me. We can be messy together, we can be unsure together, and in doing so we can be real with one another. And there aren't a whole lot of spaces in academia that feel that way."

2. Understanding the context without being overwhelmed by it

We know the humanities are in crisis. We know this because we experience it, of course, but also because we cease to hear about it. Through trade and academic publications, at conferences large and small, and within our own institutions and communities—the uncertain future foments unbounded discourse on the perils of AI, dropping enrollment, faculty turnover, and much more. But just as the rhetorical spectacle detracts from the efficacy of everyday care in harm reduction work, so too does it in the public humanities. Molly Hiro and Jen McDaneld—who built a Humanities Center from the ground up at the University of Portland—write, "Actively centering the humanities as practice within the program would seem a necessary first step toward one. This would mean paying less attention to the crises of the humanities and instead attending more to the routine moves of humanistic inquiry that connect to daily life."[7] This connection to daily life is what attenuates the acute nature of crisis, by not focusing solely on the spectacle, wherein we are overwhelmed by impossibility, and by centering process.

The Center for 21st Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee understands this important relationship as well: "the Center would address issues that are lived, felt, and studied deeply by both scholars and community experts."[8] I hear in these words a response to Osuna's request to de-isolate the individual. Others make similar arguments, implicitly calling for a practice of attention: "If a center can make humanistic work coherent and tangible for no one but your institution's administrators or the students who are flirting with taking a humanities course yet skeptical of its value, that's already a victory."[9] Rather than arguing for value according to capitalist concerns for productivity, value reflects community building, world-making, the betterment of life, and the knowledge and practices that make all of that possible.

While we might say knowledge is produced in our Humanities Center seminar room, more than anything, it is tended to and cared for. Each fellow met the other where they were with their work. We offered potential directions for their projects, including backtracking and waiting around. We discussed all sorts of methodologies, from autoethnography to

[7] Hiro and McDaneld 2022, 335.
[8] Basting, Johung, and Welk-Joerger 2023.
[9] Hanlon 2019.

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fictioning, from ecological to activist. We stayed after a colloquium ended to finish our coffees and talk to one another about publishing, our frenetic schedules, or last night's episode of *Survivor.*

At the end of my fellowship year, and at the end of my doctoral program, my optimism and imagination for the humanities were appreciated, due in full part to the community I was privileged to study among. I believed in the Humanities Center; I believed in their commitment to beautiful, collaborative, and creative composition. I believed the Humanities Center could be that bridge between theory and our communities, the bridge called the public humanities. I matured under the compassionate, collaborative spirit of other artists, writers, and teachers. Together we made meaning, but we also felt deeply in that making. We cared.

Just weeks after my graduation, the Humanities Center placed a job call for a postdoc. I applied.

3. Honor the human in the humanities

Care within the public humanities will ask us to elevate "how" over "what" or "why." Rather than the "what" of object analysis or the "why" of cultural criticism, "how" stymies the metaphorization of material issues to instead center temporal exchange. That is to say, when I'm in the syringe exchange van, I first ask *how* to wrap the crack pipes. And if there's time, I'll ask *why* we wrap them four in a brown paper bundle. *How* is method. *How* is living our lives one day at a time. *How* is tending.

I am now the postdoctoral associate and program coordinator for the University of Pittsburgh Humanities Center. I run the day-to-day operations of the Center, so my co-directors can focus on big-picture possibility. I love my job. I love supporting others in their research. I love being *in medias res* alongside writers, artists, and scholars. Our Center cohort is comprised of faculty, teaching, graduate, undergraduate, and visiting fellows, each occupying a different moment in their work and career when they step into our seminar room. Some apply for our fellowships to finish dissertation chapters, as I did. Some have articles or book projects in mind. Others seek connection across distant disciplines, such as computer science and literature. Others want to design a new course, apply for graduate school, or invite us into their archives. The differences among us are what bind us. Together, we share the vulnerability of being in process.

When I became a postdoc, I wanted to pay my experience as a fellow forward: the time given to write, the encouragement toward creative alternatives, relationships across disciplines, and, most importantly, the feeling of being seen as fully human, as messy and unsure. As I was immersed in hierarchical dilution, as I was privy to the normalization of the phrase "work in progress," so too did I desire the same for each new fellow. It was the connection to daily life. And it is this connection to daily life that continues to inspire not just my work at our Center—the emails, the bits of conversations, and the meetings—but this attention drives my academic and creative career: I strive to be present in my writing to make slow arguments or loiter in complex questions. At the Humanities Center at the University of Pittsburgh, we read each other's writing every week—really reading it—while attending one another's colloquia, art openings, and book launches. We support each other in the loitering.

Lest it seem I've strayed too far into narrative abstraction (a causalty of my own criticisms!), let me be clear. This "how-to" essay isn't about how to rehab your Humanities Center.

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It's about how to center care despite the rapid currents of capital and productivity. Just as principles for harm reduction reject universal definitions and diagnostics, so too do I reject universal (i.e., singular) methods for how to run your Humanities Center. Rather, embrace the multiples: the relapses and revisions. There are many ways to run a Center. But when in doubt:

1. On the first day, explicitly clarify with the new cohort that you do, in fact, read their work. It should not go without saying. This simple, proactive promise, a promise to attend with presence, forges trust despite the intrusive shadows of institutional negligence.

2. Develop this communication style as habit; bring it into the seminar room, into an inbox, and into the work itself. "Work in progress." Say it with italics, repeat it, gesticulate. You know fellows will want to present their best. That's ok too. But curate the ethos of your space toward process.

3. On the first day, introduce the new cohort to the Center space. Show them where the coffee is. Have the Center co-director, whose coffee palette is refined, choose the beans, the carafe, and the brew method. Spend months explaining to your fiscal managers why you purchase coffee outside of internal catering. Reprocess the same invoice five different times.

4. When you don't know the answer to something, don't front. I learned this early in the outreach van. Support requires fewer answers than you might expect, yet enlists more attention than we ourselves often experience.

5. Create a clean, keen esthetic representation of the Center. This will require time and resources, of course, but a well-designed newsletter, for example, ensures that key content is easily engageable.

6. Prioritize community outreach. Reach out to neighboring programs and departments about fellowship programing, steering committee service, and cross-posted event possibilities. Chat with faculty about research interests; build a spreadsheet and begin researching grant opportunities. Make the Center a home for those seeking respite—vocational and financial—from the crush of regular duties.

7. Remove hierarchies. When David and Carla came on as co-directors, David told me, "We created a new graduate fellowship and a new undergraduate fellowship. We continued the visiting fellowship program, and we worked with the dean to increase the worth of the faculty fellowship from one course [release] to one semester (which means two and sometimes three courses). We also worked with the dean to create a new co-teaching fellowship. These fellowships generate an annual cohort of twenty-odd fellows, and these are the people who really constitute the Center each year." What this means: bring undergraduates into the Center. Offer pro-seminar courses that introduce them to research in the humanities. Schedule some of these seminars to occur during the same time as Center events. This way, undergraduates will indeed attend those events, despite the fledgling intimidation around grad students and faculty fellows. This intimidation wanes once they understand themselves as an equal part of the community. After all, undergraduate fellows offer some of the more interesting questions and projects.

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8. Invite current fellows to nominate visiting fellows to nurture relationships external to the university. Envision community as a watershed.

9. Build relationships with other Centers at your university. Ask them to sponsor fellowships. Promote each other's events.

10. Spend a summer interviewing Humanities Centers from around the country. Distill it into a 10-page research document with clear graphics. Underline the main takeaway: directors need to be cared for. That is, to be sustainable, Centers need at least one salaried staff person in addition to directors.

11. If possible, cater some of your events. Students are most likely hungry and sort of broke. Faculty too.

12. Design a course to be held externally to the Center that will act as a feeder for undergraduate fellowships. Name the class "Knowing Humans: An Introduction to Research in the Humanities." Design the course to fulfill several catalog requirements. Teach Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*.[10] Read aloud from the preface, "Nouns name the world. Verbs activate the names. Adjectives come from somewhere else… . These small, imported mechanisms are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity. They are the latches of being." Pass out fragments from Sappho. This is exactly what my co-directors have done.

13. Pair undergraduate fellows with mentors. Pay the mentors. Schedule the undergraduate colloquia for the end of term. Mark it as celebration. Be ready to be inspired by their creativity and optimism.

14. Stick to the schedule during colloquia and events. Lay it out for presenters and respondents… multiple times: no one is ever disappointed if one goes under time.

15. Speaking of respondents, bring them in from outside the Center, as well as asking another fellow. As David says, "This helps to strike a balance between bringing exciting new voices in the conversation who know a lot about the subject at hand and people who can bring the rest of the fellows' cohort into the conversation because they embody the fact that being present for someone intellectually is not dependent on knowing a lot about what the presenter is doing."

16. Halfway through the colloquia, open it to the wider audience. This is when the energy intensifies, when one comment spurs another, and people start raising two hands.

17. Normalize the raising of two-hands to convey, "This comment or question is so urgent and so on point, we cannot yet move from it."

18. Privilege junior faculty in your programming to foster innovative research, enrich diversity, and support those en route to tenure.

19. Buy copies of books published by fellows. Line your Center walls with them.

[10] Carson 1998.

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20. Start a text thread with the co-director and other fellows who love *Survivor*. This is not mandatory but highly encouraged.

21. Repeat steps 1 and 2 as often as needed.

22. Be playful. *Play* and *care* have always been cognates.

23. Finally, and of course, ask your co-directors how to best run a Humanities Center. They might say, as Carla did, "Try not to take over a Humanities Center during a pandemic! Otherwise, I think it works best—and this is always, always a work in progress—when you are able to honor and nourish your vision for what a space and its communities can be, despite the inevitable encroachments of the endless expectations that others will have of what a humanities center (and thus, your humanities center) should traditionally do. Like anything in academia, change can be glacial and it's always a balance...but it's important to hydrate, take naps, and nourish the Weird and the Risky and the Probably-Won't-Work-But-Let's-See-What-Happens-Wheeeee!"

I hope to have shown tangible examples of running a Humanities Center focused on human care and intellectual tending. As the program coordinator, I am in the minutia, supporting the Center fellows as well as the co-directors, so that everyone can sustain focus on their projects—academic, creative, lived—amidst the stubborn crises pressing on us from all sides. I would not succeed in the work I'm doing without those who have already labored with attention and care, those who worked the soil so that it may be tended: my Center's co-directors, Carla Nappi and David Marshall. While I am not a director myself, I am an advocate and practitioner of harm reduction. I know that by reducing pain, estrangement, and expectation in our communities, we release one another to pursue our own, self-defined goals. And it is this that leads to health and human flourishing.

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