

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY:  
**HUMANITIES LAB**

QUICK FACTS

Year founded: **2017**

Project source: **Faculty**

Duration: **7-15 weeks**

Students per year: **643**

Interdisciplinary: **Yes**

Vertical integration: **Yes**

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## PROGRAM SUMMARY

The Humanities Lab creates inquiry-based, transdisciplinary, inclusive and multigenerational courses for both undergraduate and graduate students that we call “Labs.” All Labs focus on a pressing social challenge with the common goal of encouraging students to reimagine their present and future worlds through collaborations with their peers, faculty, librarians and community members. Humanities Lab teams immerse themselves in a compelling array of questions, for example: How can we better support youth development in schools to prevent gun violence? How do we indigenize our food systems? What does it mean to decolonize “madness” and “wellness” and support Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities? Humanities Lab teams imagine and realize ethical and equitable interventions — which we call “student impact outcomes” — and then artfully share these results with the public.



### KEY FEATURES OF EACH LAB:

**Transdisciplinary:** Each Lab is taught by an instructional team consisting of: two faculty members from different disciplines (one humanist + one non-humanist); embedded librarians who bring interdisciplinary training and perspective to the research process; and collaborators from different professions, on and off campus. Undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in Labs come from humanities, arts, sciences and professional programs throughout Arizona State University (ASU).

**Translational:** Each Lab integrates local to global community partners as key architects in the formation of research questions and the translation of research into action. From within this lively laboratory, diverse student teams create “impact outcomes” such as public art, social media campaigns, white papers, op-eds and mobile apps.

**Transformational:** The Humanities Lab takes a radically inclusive approach to learning by selecting instructional teams for their passion and expertise and by recruiting multigenerational students from diverse backgrounds, many of whom are first-generation college students. Each Lab therefore forms a collective of individuals who, through the experience of taking informed action together, are often transformed in the process.

Below, we have provided illustrative examples of transformational learning in two different Humanities Labs.

### INDIGENIZING FOOD SYSTEMS — SPRING '22 AND '23

Co-taught by: [Melissa Nelson](#) (College of Global Futures/School of Sustainability) and [Myla Vicenti Carpio](#) (The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences/American Indian Studies)



Through an interdisciplinary and community-engaged approach, [this Lab](#) investigates what it means to indigenize our food systems and grapples with issues and questions regarding food sovereignty and Indigenous health. Through multiple fields and mediums (historical, cultural, scientific and creative), students engage in different ways of thinking about food and experiment with embodying the concept of “food is medicine.” This Lab focuses on learning about the complex and sophisticated Indigenous food systems of North America with a focus on native nations in the Southwest, California and Midwest, including histories of dispossession and contemporary efforts at revitalization and food justice.

#### **Student impact outcome examples** (links below and collectively, [here](#))

- Actualizing ASU’s Land Acknowledgement and Uplifting Settler Consciousness: Indigenous Garden Plot Initiative (four undergraduate students and two community experts)
- [Chi’ Chil Countermap Storymap Project](#) (three undergraduate students, one master’s student and one doctoral student)
- [Econexiones: Indigenizing Food Systems Podcast](#) (two undergraduate students and one graduate student)

## Spring '22 community partners

- Amy Juan (Tohono O'odham), Manager, International Indian Treaty Council
- Jacob Butler (Onk Akimel O'odham), Community Garden Coordinator, Salt River Pima — Maricopa Indian Community
- Jacquelyn Ross (Pomo/Coast Miwok), Davis, CA
- Thosh Collins (Akimel O'Odham), Native Wellness Institute
- Dr. Lois Ellen Frank (Kiowa), Red Mesa Cuisine
- Joseph Gazing Wolf (Lakota), ASU Ph.D. Student

## Events

- Seize the Moment and Humanities Lab Impact Outcomes Showcase at Walton Center for Planetary Health, Earth Week
- Indigenous Chef Cooking Demonstration and Tasting Event at the Engrained patio in the Memorial Union (see image box below)



LAB SPOTLIGHT |  
CHALLENGING FOOD SYSTEM  
HISTORIES, REIMAGINING  
THE FUTURE OF FOOD

### INDIGENIZING FOOD SYSTEMS: A RECIPE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

**COMBINE:** 15 weeks of deep reading, interactive discussion and debate, and intentional research with 2.5 dozen collaborating, multi-disciplinary, multi-generational, and culturally diverse students

**ADD:** 2 engaged interdisciplinary faculty, 1 from American Indian Studies and 1 from Sustainability, 1 director of the Labriola National American Indian Data Center, and 5 community-based thought-partners

**TOP WITH:** 2 award-winning Indigenous food sovereignty scholar-chefs

**SERVE:** a recipe for new knowledge that has the power to deeply impact a generation of doers

[In photo to the left:] Faculty, librarians, and students in Indigenizing Food Systems gathered with Indigenous leaders, ASU administrators, friends and family on Engrained's patio at the Memorial Union for an afternoon cooking demonstration and two-course tasting menu with award-winning Indigenous chefs, Dr. Lois Ellen Frank (Kiowa) and Walter Whitewater (Diné). Lab students and their instructional team designed the public event with support from the College of Global Futures Indigenous Knowledge Focal Team and a seed grant for our Transnationalizing Race series from Humanities Dean Jeffrey Cohen. Chef Frank and Chef Whitewater created a multi-sensory experience by weaving history, political economy, storytelling and song with mouth-watering, aromatic Indigenous dishes. They also participated as expert consultants and collaborators with student teams as they researched and developed their impact outcomes for the Lab.

Students in this Lab worked with each other, the instructional team, and 7 community-based expert consultants (including Chefs Frank and Whitewater) to design and implement a collection of outcomes ranging from zine-based Indigenous cookbooks to public garden plots dedicated to "Actualizing ASU's Land Acknowledgement and Uplifting Settler Consciousness" through native seed-sowing events.



## DIPLOMACY LAB: LATIN AMERICA — SPRING '24

Co-taught by: [Mary Jane Parmentier](#) (College of Global Futures/School of the Future of Innovation in Society) and [Glen Goodman](#) (The College of Liberal Arts & Sciences/School of International Letters and Cultures)

The Diplomacy Lab: Brazil Humanities Lab course focuses on a project from the Department of State that tasks students with collaboratively investigating how vulnerable urban communities in Brazil adapt to and mitigate climate risks. Students in this Lab learn the necessary background and consult with State Department representatives of the U.S. Embassy in Brasilia to ensure the local utility of the analysis and their recommendations for improved interventions and work collaboratively to produce deliverables for the Deputy Advisor for Environment, Science, Technology and Health. Students had the opportunity to participate in a global learning experience in Brazil over spring break to gain a greater understanding of what these communities face and what they are doing to address their situations. For their outcome, students presented their findings to the U.S. Embassy in Brasilia and at the U.S. Department of State's DipLab Fair in Washington, D.C. Students who attended the DipLab Fair were also invited to visit the Brazilian Embassy.

### The outcome goals are to:

1. identify the unique impact(s) of climate crisis in low-income communities, as well as the intersection of climate crisis with water, food, energy, jobs and migration;
2. demonstrate how marginalized Brazilian communities offer valuable examples of innovation, creativity and hope to address climate crises, and how their ideas may be adapted for other communities within and outside the Brazilian context; and
3. underscore the critical role of multi-sectoral, multi-scalar partnerships for simultaneously addressing climate crises and racial inequality.

### Community partners:

- United States, Department of State
- U.S. Embassy Brasilia
- ASU Interplanetary Initiative
- U.S. Consulates in Recife, São Paulo, Rio De Janeiro and Porto Alegre
- Professor Chris Boone, School of Sustainability at ASU



## RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATIVE MODEL

The program has been historically overseen by Arizona State University's executive vice president and university provost with direct oversight from the dean of humanities in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. It is managed by two part-time faculty co-directors (one from humanities and one from social science) and two full-time staff members, with administrative support for finance, scheduling and personnel matters from the School of International Letters and Cultures, the administrative home of the Humanities Lab. Additionally, staff members supervise two to three student workers per semester.

Core funding totaled approximately \$200,000 in 2022-2023. The program has been funded since its founding primarily by the provost's office and augmented by strategic initiative funding (2021–2023) from the president's office. As of spring 2024, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences will support the Humanities Lab for \$250k annually. Core funding covers the staff salaries as well as research funds for Lab instructors along with operating expenses. The Humanities Lab also has a small gift fund that is used to support student teams. We intermittently receive ad hoc internal grants from the humanities dean's office to contribute to unique student outcome opportunities (e.g., covering travel to D.C. for [Diplomacy Lab](#) students to present impact outcomes to the State Department).

## BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Features of the Humanities Lab that we see as crucial to its success and important for other higher education leaders to understand include:

**Emphasis on the importance of the humanities to tackle social challenges:** Humanities Labs are premised on the belief that technology alone will not resolve contemporary public health, civil rights and environmental crises. Questions posed in the humanities disciplines about history, culture, ethics, storytelling and power are essential for developing healthier, more sustainable and more just futures. All Labs offer humanities general education credit, and all Labs are taught by one faculty from a humanities department.

**Emphasis on the importance of the humanities for building professional skills:** Each Humanities Lab has its own webpage that describes the student teams' projects. Students can use these descriptions to demonstrate the professional skills that they cultivated in their Lab, such as collaborative research, communication skills with and among diverse groups and various publics, and project design and management. Examples of past team webpages include [Food, Health & Climate Change](#) and [Deconstructing Race](#).

**Emphasis on transdisciplinary, inclusive and collaborative design at all levels (teaching teams and student teams):** Humanities Labs bring diverse (and often historically excluded) stakeholders together to formulate inquiry-driven action. Humanities Labs attract a diverse group of faculty and students because the challenges posed often foreground the perspectives of marginalized and racialized communities. In addition, we have worked to make sure that all students can apply our courses to their degree programs (see below). Two Labs that illustrate this best practice are [Indigenizing Food Systems](#) and [Disrupting Dis/Ability](#).

**Emphasis on integrating Humanities Lab courses into different programs of study/majors:** Labs as omnibus/special topics courses allows us to 1) attract students using general education requirements; and 2) use multiple cross-lists that reflect each faculty member’s home unit as well as reflect other majors that might attract student enrollment. See for example [Designing the Future University](#), which carries cross-listings for Humanities Lab (HUL), English (ENG), Future of Innovation and Society (FSIS), Human and Social Dimensions of Science and Technology (HSD) and Sustainability (SOS). Note these cross-listings are for undergraduate (400-level) and graduate (500-level) courses. Whereas historically we have used multiple general education designations to reflect the interdisciplinarity of our courses (e.g., Humanities and Social Science designations), the Arizona Board of Regents revised the general education requirements in 2023 limiting all courses to a single general studies designation.

**Emphasis on community-embedded student research:** All Labs to varying degrees work with community consultants (on and off campus). In some cases, community partners pose specific social challenges to student teams. Two Labs that illustrate community-embedded research and action are [Language Emergency](#) and [Avanzando Education Pathways](#).

## CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

**UNEVEN STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITHIN AND ACROSS LABS:** Factors that contribute to this include:

- **Multigenerational classrooms:** A strength of our model is the multigenerational composition of most Labs — students can range from first-semester undergraduates to doctoral candidates and every category between. While students often report positive experiences collaborating across these differences (particularly undergraduates expressing excitement to work with graduate students), this dynamic also creates challenges for faculty and students alike. Faculty are typically not used to accounting for a range of student backgrounds, uneven preparation (academically and sociologically) and dynamic student needs. Students often need time to adjust as well. One semester (on campus, 15 weeks) provides a very short runway for working out these intricacies, and our fully online, asynchronous Labs are even shorter (7.5 weeks).

- **Process and product:** Every Lab course will have several student teams and therefore several impact outcomes. There is strength in this diversity, and an overarching goal is to emphasize the process of collaboration and collective effort towards research-informed positive social change (even small bites). Still, faculty, students and community members alike remain invested in a fully realized “product” for any given project. The challenge for Humanities Labs staff is how best to support faculty and students as they navigate the dance between meaningful process and fully realized product.
- **Faculty support:** Over the years we have created and experimented with several ways of supporting faculty with pedagogical tools and strategies to help them comport with the Humanities Labs model (e.g., converting “topics to cover” to “inquiries to guide exploration”; interactive workshop-style activities instead of lectures; co-teaching over serial teaching). Nonetheless, each teaching team, each Lab focus and each set of students is different and often has different needs. The challenge is finding the sweet spot that combines typically meaningful tools and specifically catered tools and supports. Additionally, sometimes we don’t learn that faculty are straying from the Humanities Labs approach until it’s too late in the semester to steer them back on track.
- **Student enrollment:** Lab courses have historically received multiple general education designations (e.g., Humanities and Arts, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Global Awareness and/or Cultural Diversity in the U.S.) due to their interdisciplinary focus, which has tended to attract students from various majors seeking to fulfill their graduation requirements with courses that relate to their passions. The Arizona Board of Regents’ recent changes to general education requirements require that courses carry only one designation, which means the Humanities Lab must change its strategy in order to make its courses accessible to the greatest number of students. In response to this challenge, we will continue to expand our ASU partnerships where Humanities Lab courses earn other credits like capstones, thesis and applied projects, and so on.

**BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS:** Working with communities is key to the Humanities Lab model. However, challenges include misalignment between community priorities/timelines and the academic calendars, and public outcomes created by students for community partners that may toe a delicate line between students’ proprietary ownership and that of the community partner. Moreover, building trust takes time, and we have encountered specific concerns regarding partnerships with Indigenous communities that require acknowledgment of enduring legacies of violence (structural and direct) and creative, proactive approaches to building reciprocity.

**INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES:** As state funding has decreased, ASU has responded with alternate funding models that create pressure for academic units (“schools” at ASU) to generate revenue to operate, primarily through online instruction. Academic units can be reluctant to release faculty (even senior faculty) to teach a relatively low-enrollment Humanities Lab over courses for their home unit. Our relatively lean budget precludes offering units funds to pay

adjunct faculty to cover courses. Despite interest in and commitment to interdisciplinarity, school directors are not always willing to release faculty to teach Labs. We counter this challenge by focusing on the advantages of teaching an interdisciplinary Lab, which includes attracting new students to the academic program and encouraging new models of transdisciplinary project-based pedagogy.

**CAPACITY:** The core Humanities Lab staff is very small (two full-time staff, two 10-hour/week faculty directors and one to three student workers), and we work with a very lean (and not likely to grow from inside the university) budget. At current capacity we are able to offer no more than 12 Labs per academic year (five to seven per semester). In order to grow, we will need to pursue external funding but are limited in our capacity to do that. These constraints on capacity curtail what is possible for the Humanities Lab as an institutional structure and therefore our mission, particularly in terms of scalability.

### **GOALS AND PRIORITIES:**

- Curate several Lab series focused on thematic social challenges such as health and wellbeing, citizenship and belonging, and imagining just futures.
- Apply for external funding to support thematic Lab series.
- Develop more multi-generational Labs focused on local high schools.
- Offer at least one Diplomacy Lab each year.
- Continue to expand online Humanities Lab offerings to make them as accessible as possible to all ASU students.

**The historic campus of Arizona State University is located in Tempe, Arizona, with three additional campuses in the Phoenix metro-area and five Innovation Zones — 33.5% of students are first-generation and 34% receive Pell Grants. ASU identifies as a new prototype for the American public research university, with additional hubs in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and Hawaii. Arizona State University acknowledges that our Arizona campuses are positioned on the historic homelands of Indigenous communities including the Akimel O’odham (Pima) and Pee Posh (Maricopa).**