Kara McShane, Assistant Professor of English and Co-Coordinator of Digital Studies at Ursinus College, has served as both leader and collaborator in developing a variety of remarkable digital initiatives during her six years on campus.

by Cynthia Mwenja, PhD

Tying the Past to the Future at Ursinus College

Digital Humanities

The drive toward promoting digital programs at Ursinus began before McShane's arrival, with Meredith Goldsmith, Professor of English and Associate Dean. Goldsmith formed a working group on Digital Humanities to educate the entire campus about the possibilities of expanding offerings in this area. Additionally, Goldsmith took a summer fellowship opportunity in Duke University's Humanities Writ Large program to acquire a digital toolkit and ideas for scaling digital work.

Within literary studies, Goldsmith knew, discipline-specific technologies were taking root, with archival work particularly bring repositioned digitally. When the English Department's medieval line opened up in 2013, Goldsmith pushed to include a Digital Studies component in the job. McShane was an ideal candidate for the position, having experience with both archival and digital literary scholarship—as well as strengths in pedagogy and linguistics. McShane had worked on two digital initiatives through the University of Rochester's Robbins Library: the Camelot Project and the Middle English Text Series. She is now the general editor of Visualizing Chaucer, another Robbins Library Digital Project, which offers a bibliography and numerous images which have been created to illustrate Chaucer's writing. Despite this variety of digital experience, however, McShane did not at first fully comprehend the extent of her experience; colleagues had to point out the impressive strengths in digital humanities she had developed through her pursuit of the various Robbins Library projects.

Digital Liberal Arts

As Goldsmith brought her fellowship experiences back to Ursinus and McShane joined the faculty in 2015, they expanded the focus of the Digital Humanities working group to encompass Digital Liberal Arts (DLA), thereby including all disciplines on campus. This working group also involves Library and Information Technology (LIT) staff "who are interested in incorporating digital projects into the curriculum and furthering digital literacy initiatives on campus," says Christine Iannicelli, Associate Director of Research, Teaching, and Learning Services. This working group has fostered a number of fruitful partnerships between departments and with LIT staff. McShane says that the wide-ranging group of DLA members spent a few years simply building capacity across campus, helping people in all departments to see that the DLA focus allows faculty and students to continue pursuing one of Ursinus' core questions—"How can we understand the world?"—through a digital lens.

Bears Make History

As the DLA working group continued building campus capacity, McShane developed and taught a course called "Bears Make History: U.S. Higher Education and Digital Entrepreneurship in the Archive and Online" (BMH) in collaboration with Susanna Throop, Professor and Department Chair of History. This course was designed to prepare for Ursinus' sesquicentennial celebration in 2019. Throop says that working with McShane to co-develop this course was "a constant joy" and that they learned both from and with each other. When McShane originally broached the idea, Throop found the thought of working together to develop the course very appealing. As medievalists in their respective fields, Throop notes, they are often asked to do things outside their comfort zones and tend to see new challenges as opportunities. Students in this first iteration

of BMH, working in teams, launched three public-facing digital sites. The course, cross listed in English and History, now runs every other year.

Housed on a dedicated web page—www.ursinus.edu/academics/history/bears-make-history/student-digital-history-projects—student projects in this course have focused on subjects such as the history of LGBTQ+ groups on campus and what has happened on campus in times of political crisis. As McShane reports, BMH students move beyond mere participation into professionalization. They work with metadata librarian Andy Prock to digitize artifacts, and learn to work with Omeka—an open source library and archival software program—from Iannicelli. Students also learn professional courtesies such as making and keeping appointments with these professionals and how to interact with guest speakers. Students who have completed the BMH class often become DLA Fellows.

DLA Fellows

The establishment of a DLA Fellows program is a strong example of initiatives related to the burgeoning digital focus on campus. Piloted

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by McShane and now overseen by Iannicelli, the program trains students to help everyone on campus—students and faculty alike—with their digital projects. This program acts as a sort of "writing center" for digital projects, McShane explains. DLA Fellows receive training in using a number of digital tools; they lead workshops and class sessions, and they help faculty, staff, and students create digital projects. Iannicelli credits the DLA Fellows with being "instrumental in encouraging faculty to incorporate more digital projects in the classroom and providing support to students every step of the way" as they learn to work in digital spaces.

Paige Szmodis is an Ursinus graduate and current MLIS student at Simmons University as well as one of the first group of four students at Ursinus to be a DLA Fellow in 2017 under McShane. Szmodis credits the DLA Fellow experience with sparking her interest in pursuing her MLIS degree; she says that, as DLA Fellow, she learned a wide variety of digital tools, including Omeka for digital curation, basic HTML/CSS, and mapping programs. She not only taught others to use these tools, she was also able to use them on her own projects. As part of the Pennsylvania Consortium of Liberal Arts (PCLA), Ursinus held s summer conference with

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other members of the consortium, including Bryn Mawr, Muhlenberg, and Gettysburg; this conference helped to "contextualize what students, scholars, and librarians were doing in the field beyond Ursinus," according to Szmodis.

GIS

One aspect of digital studies that has been taken up across the Ursinus campus is the use of GIS mapping technologies. Environmental Studies faculty had been using such technology,

and Goldsmith brought it to the humanities; as she says, "landscape is a perennial topic." Ursinus has a license for ARCGIS, and they offer faculty training in its use. Last summer's training lasted two days, with a focus on how to use the software one day, followed by syllabus development strategies to use the software the next. Goldsmith also advocates the use of QGIS, which is an open source mapping software. Each tool, she says, can serve different purposes.

Digital Studies Minor

Starting in 2017, the Digital Liberal Arts group met regularly to build a new Digital Studies (DIGS) minor, which was approved in December 2020. To get the program off the ground, McShane and Iannicelli, who now co-coordinate the program, reached out across campus to identify courses to be cross-listed in DIGS. As the program's website states, "Digital Studies is an interdisciplinary minor that introduces students to the approaches and mindsets they need to engage in digital work within and across disciplines. The minor provides students with curricular opportunities to develop the technical, analytic, and improvisational skills crucial to digital work and has a strong foundation in ethics."

McShane is one of the faculty members teaching the "Introduction to Digital Studies" course required in the minor, and one of the foundational courses for the new minor has been "Bears Make History" course she and Throop developed together. Ursinus supports this sort of collaboratively co-taught class, with a focus on approaching questions from different

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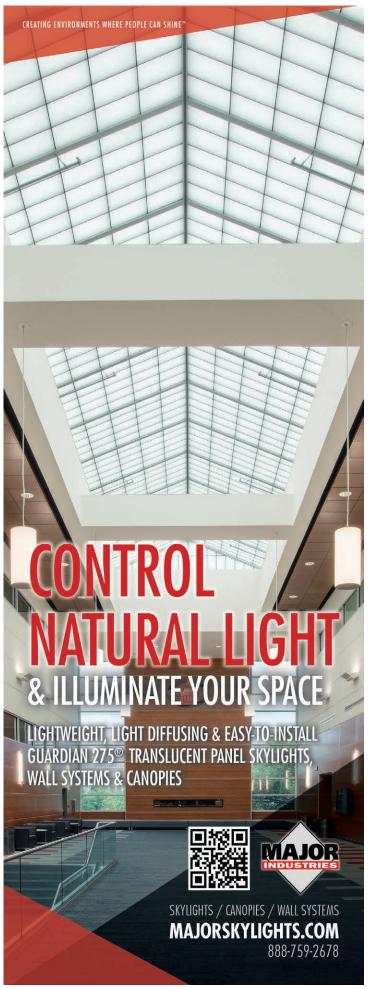
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disciplinary perspectives. McShane has taught several classes collaboratively, including "Identity in the Digital Age," for which McShane collaborated with a psychology professor.

Identifying classes that fit the bill for DIGS can be tricky, McShane says, because they're not media studies and not limited to digital humanities; they are truly interdisciplinary. DIGS students are also required to do applied work; they can meet this requirement through completing a summer Spark internship or becoming a DLA Fellow. McShane and the others forming the minor organized the course requirements around three sets of skills. One set of competencies lies in developing the mindset and technical skills needed to participate in digital liberal arts; these courses can include computer science or an arts focus. The next set of required skills lie in situating the digital within a specific discipline; to be included in the minor, at least a quarter of the course must be a discipline-specific digital project. The last set of courses fully focus on digital projects; this category includes classes like BMH. This wide range of required courses is designed to help students think across boundaries.

McShane says that DIGS students much develop certain habits of mind, including persistence and the knowledge that they "will break" the technology. She encourages students to "break" programs on purpose to see what happens, then to find out how to fix what went wrong. She wants them to know that there will be glitches and they probably will not get things right the first time—and that is absolutely ok. McShane says that launching the new minor under Covid has been a challenge, but she has continued to approach her classes in a spirit of exploration and play. Five students have already declared the new minor, which has mainly been advertised by word of mouth at this early date.

A Vision of Leadership and Collaboration

As Throop says, McShane is a "rare leader who collaborates" to build grassroots support, while McShane describes herself as a sort of "connector, or hub." Further, Throop says, McShane "inspires confidence"—her incredible talent for getting things done means that the people working with her are enthusiastic and confident.

Goldsmith says that McShane is really good at getting students to think about combining the liberal arts with professional training and getting people to understand how these two facets interact. Beyond grounding professional training in liberal arts sensibilities, Szmodis says, McShane is "endlessly encouraging of her students' research and professional interests." Szmodis credits her work with McShane for helping her to overcome feelings of intimidation in learning to work with new technologies.

McShane's leadership extends to considerations of ethics in her work. As Goldsmith says, McShane is great at connecting digital studies to ethics and ethical obligations by considering questions of representation and accessibility in digital spaces. McShane says that students are sometimes surprised that issues of equity and inclusion are reproduced in digital spaces. Since the digital space is simply a tool, McShane says, it replicates social inequalities and often even exacerbates them. In McShane's view, if people use digital tools

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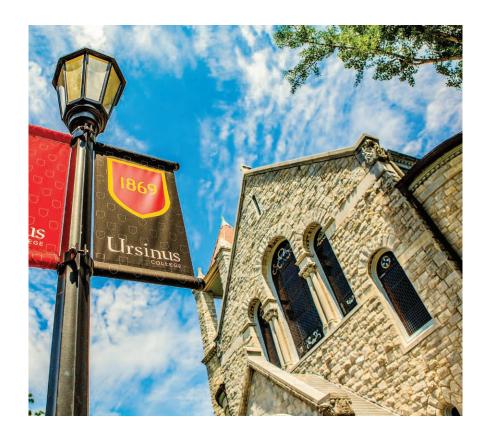## Connecting you with emergency responders - *fast.*

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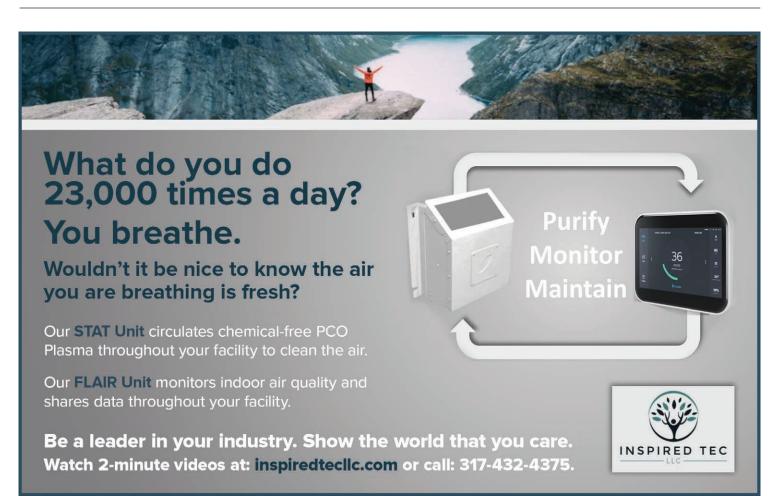715.386.8861
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critically and well, which is increasingly needed, we can solve problems and decrease biases. McShane teaches her students that digital spaces have tremendous capacity for social change. In their digital projects, students can do things like amplify long-missing voices of BIPOC students on campus when it can be a struggle to find these viewpoints and subjects in the physical archives. Digital tools, like all other tools, have weaknesses and challenges; McShane aims to teach her students to use these tools responsibly and well.

Throop says that McShane is driven by curiosity and real intellectual passion. She has a commitment to the communities she is a part of, and she is able to both generate a vision and attend to details. New initiatives take both vision and work, Throop says, and McShane is able to do both those things—create a vision, then do the work to bring that vision to reality. McShane is really the full package, Throop says: "She can lead, dream, and execute."

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