News

Humanities Institute Hosts Annual Undergraduate Research Symposium

by Hope Melk
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
SHE/HER/HERS
hope.melk@uconn.edu

The Humanities Institute held their annual Humanities Undergraduate Research Symposium on Friday, April 10, for the students and faculty of the University of Connecticut. The symposium featured five separate panels ranging from the arts to political nuances.

The first panel was titled "Society, Future, and The Case for Hope" presented by two of the Humanities Institute Undergraduate Fellows, Josephine Burke and Sugita Mahendarkar.

Burke kicked off the panel with her presentation "Higher Education in Prison in Connecticut: An Overview of Experiences, Constraints, and Institutional Politics." Her project, she stated, "serves as an in-depth review of higher education and prison in Connecticut." Her study consisted of "a literature review, taxonomy of courses offered within each program, interviews with faculty and former students who have participated in HEP in Connecticut, and a review of Connecticut criminal justice policies and reports," Burke stated.

"Institutional constraints and unequal power relations at the individual and institutional levels inhibit high education in prison programs in Connecticut more than overt forms of censorship, such as book banning," she concluded.

The second speaker was physiology and neurobiology major Sugita Mahendarkar. Her project, "Building Agency in Connecticut's Kids (BACK): Sexual and Reproductive Health Education in Connecticut," is a sexual and reproductive health workshop conducted in middle and high schools across Connecticut.

The second panel was run by a small group of students and was part of a larger project titled "The Balance of Power: Trump's Second Term and Connecticut." Four of the students, Christi Thrower, Charlotte Harvey, Anna Heqimi and Dan Stark, presented their articles they've written over the course of the semester. Professor Amanda J. Crawford oversaw the program and divided the Balance of Power into four sections: immigration, executive power, education and communities.

These articles have since been published in major news sources such as CT Community News, the CT Examiner, WSHU and Connecticut Public.

"The second week of January we started to publish..." Crawford said. "But the stories have continued to be published. I think we had some published in the Hartford Courant just two weeks ago."

Kai Febus, a political science and human rights major, started the third panel focused on fascism, political resistance and social movements. Febus' research was titled "Bodies as Test Sites: Puerto Rico & Ethnocide."

Febus described how after the acquisition of Puerto Rico by the United States in 1898, many Puerto Rican women were subjected to medication testing. Most notably, researchers in collaboration with Planned Parenthood did not provide adequate information when testing new oral contraceptives on poor, working class women during the mid-20th century, according to Febus.

"By framing the medical trials within the concepts of ethnocide, this research contributes to ongoing conversations about colonialism, reproductive justice, and the ethical responsibilities of scientific institutions," Febus said. "It overall calls for a much deeper recognition of how colonial power has historically shaped medical research and the lived experiences of marginalized communities and how that may heavily impact their futures."

The second panelist was history major Danielle Lillis. Lillis' presentation focused on the idea of "Gender, Rebellion, and Power: Roman Miscalculation of Boudica's Revolt." Her project described the Boudica Rebellion and the cultural shift in how the Romans viewed women.

"It was not until Boudica and her army sacked, destroyed, and burned down two cities that the Romans considered her to be dangerous, largely because she was a Briton and a woman," Lillis said.

The final panelist was Elly Hume, an individualized major in maritime archaeology and classical studies. Her presentation was titled "Assessing the Nuance of Roman Identity in the Ottoman Empire after 1453 CE." Hume's work took a deep dive into the Roman identity after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. It looked through the lenses of two prominent historians at the time, George Sphrantzes and Michael Kritovoulos, to identify the role of collective memory and trauma has in Roman society.

To start the fourth panel, titled "Environment, Place, and Legacy," Michael Wynn in his presentation "Environmental Inequality in the South Bronx" aimed to locate the process by which environmental injustice occurs in urban America.

"It has been argued that the presence of highways, truck routes, and waste facilities in the South Bronx is not by accident but is a product of historical racial segregation, redlining, and urban development, in which economic development has been considered more important than social justice," Wynn said.

Through his research, Wynn argued that the connection between pollution and poverty creates a divide in health equality.

The second panelist, Nicholas Benda, is a maritime studies and American studies majors at the Avery Point campus. His presentation "The Land of Sunshine and Flowers: Steamship Companies, Nature, and Early-20th Century American Interest in Cuba" described the significance of The Cuba Review and Cuba Bulletin in the midst of the Spanish-American war.

The final panelist of the environment panel was James Weitlauf and his project "Railroad Ferries in American Maritime History." Weitlauf outlined the history of transportation of goods over rivers through ferries.

"In 1858 the first railroad ferry Shore Line began service across the Thames. While today this system may seem antiquated, the railroad ferries played an integral role in quick service of transport of both goods and people across the Northeast, including the famed Charles Dickens who wrote about his experience on the ferries in 1867," Weitlauf stated.

The final panel of the night consisted of two speakers, Kim Butynes and Breanna Bonner, presenting in "Art, Media, and Attention." Butynes started the panel off with their project, "The Thing (from out of this 'polarized' world): How Horror Movies Expressed American Political Fears in Trump's First Presidential Term (2016-2020)."

They compare new age movies such as The Joker (2019) and The Hunt (2020) to movies based around the Cold War as a form of polarization and commentary on Trump's second term.

"Although mainstream news networks largely took the films at face value and saw them as another vessel of polarization, an unexpected medium combatted the partisan narratives and formed a sort of 'cultural diplomacy.'" Butynes said.

They argued that even in the midst of "Trump's second reign of terror" cultural diplomacy through unconventional forms of media gives hope for communication through a bi-partisan lens.

Finally, symposium organizer Breanna Bonner concluded the event with her dialogue-style presentation, "Beyond Survival: Gun Violence Prevention Workshops." Her project opened with a playthrough of slam poetry video "The Heart and the Fist," and participants were invited to reflect on how they felt. Participants then established some community agreements to further meaningful conversation. The activity ended with an art-based reflection focusing on reflecting on personal experiences and values of making a safer future without gun violence.

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