WISDOM MATTERS
School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences
Anticipating Rensselaer’s 2024 bicentennial, we are charting an ambitious course of transformation. President Shirley Ann Jackson has set the tone for “The New Polytechnic,” a paradigm for teaching, learning, and research that sees the technological university as a profoundly collaborative endeavor across disciplines and perspectives.

Rensselaer’s School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) has a central role in defining “The New Polytechnic.” We instill in students the kind of “long-term qualities of mind” that the American Academy of Arts and Sciences’ The Heart of the Matter (2013) considers essential to success in the 21st century: “inquisitiveness, perceptiveness, the ability to put a received idea to a new purpose, and share and build new ideas with a diverse world of others.”

In HASS, we recognize all knowledge as situated knowledge and consider multiple perspectives essential for sustained human flourishing. Our relentless focus on context and synthesis serve as the cornerstones of the translational humanities.

From within the techno-scientific crucible that is Rensselaer, HASS faculty pursue cutting-edge research and develop unique academic programs that bring a humanities logics to bear on the Grand Challenges. We harness the scientific and technological prowess needed to address problems of immense scale and complexity while situating them within the critically necessary socio-cultural context so often bracketed out of more conventional problem solving approaches.

In Among the Disrupted, appearing in the New York Times Sunday Book Review, Leon Wieseltier provides an ominous assessment of contemporary American culture where technologism and scientism become ever more dominant, and where “the nonmaterial dimensions of life must be explained in terms of the material dimensions” and “nonscientific understandings must be translated into scientific understandings if they are to qualify as knowledge.” In Wieseltier’s posthuman world, culture devolves into a discussion of business, and “metrics” and quantification replace wisdom. There is a growing understanding of the world in terms of “impersonal forces and structures” and “a denial of the importance, even the legitimacy, of human agency.”

At Rensselaer we counter these forces by seeking to produce broadly educated, practical persons who have the capacity to ask wise questions that matter: “Just because we can, should we?” and “Where is the soul in social policy?” In HASS, we embrace the “diverse world of others.”

Our experience has demonstrated to us that empathy, compassion, and wisdom emerge from attending to layers of social, political-economic, and cultural complexity through multisensory experience, fine-grained interpretation, and close attunement to dissonance. Yoked to the techno-scientific sophistication of our students, the translational humanities at Rensselaer are poised to be transformational.

We structure our educational experiences as humanities-and-social-science based laboratory-studios. Courses and programs build on the interest of students who want to immerse themselves in the techno-scientific milieu required to address fundamental problems of physical materiality but who are also creative non-conformists committed to deeply engaging with the world. For them, we develop the interpretive muscle needed to deal wisely with nuance and complexity.

STEM disciplines have received increased emphasis in American higher education ever since Rising Above the Gathering Storm (2007) tied American prosperity to our continued pre-eminence in science and technology. While this is arguably true, it tells only part of the story. The Heart of the Matter provides the other half: namely the centrality of the humanities in “educating Americans in the knowledge, skills, and understanding they will need to thrive in a twenty-first century democracy; fostering a society that is innovative, competitive, and strong; and equipping the nation for leadership in an interconnected world.”

Enduring human problems require new ways of thinking, seeing, and doing. “Translational humanities” relies on the intense interpretive work of the humanities to make non-determinist worldviews transparent and accessible.
Fairlandia
Fairlandia combines archival imagery, footage, and oral history in a mobile augmented reality application designed to provide present-day visitors with critically and culturally informed access to the historical site of the fair in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Queens, New York. Since few physical structures remain on the original site, Fairlandia brings the 1964-65 World’s Fair back to life by superimposing digital material on the existing landscape via locative technologies. The World’s Fair is a fascinating cultural form that encapsulates themes of futurism, progress, citizenship, science, industry, ethnic display, race, class, and gender. Designed and built in the midst of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements during the Cold War era, the 1964-65 World’s Fair provides a window into a fraught and formative moment in our history when the nation was grappling with race, ethnic display, and public culture.

Platform for Experimental, Collaborative Ethnography (PECE)
The Platform for Experimental, Collaborative Ethnography (PECE) is a technological platform that creates a virtual space for geographically dispersed humanities researchers to collaborate by sharing, annotating, and interrogating primary source materials. The platform supports the research practices of cultural anthropology: creative juxtapositions, deep contextualization of artifacts in time and space, and multidimensional analytic approaches for making sense of complex cultural objects that traverse geography, scale, and diverse communities. Its flexible design supports humanities researchers across multiple domains of inquiry whose key task is to produce multiple interpretations of complex social and cultural issues. Given the cultural, technological, ecological, and economic complexity of contemporary global problems, empirical research in the humanities supported by sophisticated technology has renewed urgency.

GK-12 Triple Helix Community-Situated Research
The GK-12 Triple Helix Community Situated Research Program examines the relationship between STEM research and the social issues facing local low-income and minority communities such as health, environment, poverty, crime, and information access. The triple helix collaboration strengthens the bonds between the community and the university while promoting knowledge production among middle school and university students that engenders greater public awareness and civic activism. The GK-12 Graduate Fellows, a select group of Rensselaer graduate students, collaboratively work with teachers in community schools to foster student engagement with the STEM disciplines: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. The purpose of the collaboration is to instill in middle school students the motivation to persist in STEM disciplines as a vehicle for social good.

HASS Inquiry
HASS Inquiry courses activate inquiry-based learning rooted in the traditions of the liberal arts. These courses, offered to first-semester first-year students, are designed to stimulate thought and inspire social responsibility by requiring the integration of multiple disciplinary perspectives and the cultivation of habits of mind—ways of thinking about, perceiving, understanding, and questioning—that are long valued in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. Using a flexible instructional format, these courses span multiple disciplines within a thematically coherent context in courses such as “Minds and Machines,” “Worlds on Display,” and “Social Problems and The Wire.” These courses purposefully straddle the socio-technical divide.

Programs in Design and Innovation (PDI)
PDI integrates technical, social, and formal analysis with creative synthesis—all in response to specific problems in the world. PDI students move among
the technical, social, and formal dimensions of a given problem and undertake a comprehensive inquiry into a problem's various human contexts. PDI understands context as a set of variables at play alongside technology and highlights their dynamic interaction, recognizing that neither can be neatly separated as independent and dependent variables.

PDI achieves integration through a combination of curricular innovation, pedagogical innovation, and educational cultural change. Across each of these domains, PDI is successful in counteracting the disciplinary compartmentalization pervasive within higher education.

TRANSLATIONAL HUMANITIES ENGAGES COMMUNITY

Rensselaer is situated in the city of Troy, an urban community offering opportunities for reciprocal teaching and learning. Rensselaer students are engaged in service learning opportunities via an Arts, Community, Technology internship program that partners with The Sanctuary for Independent Media in North Troy, and a Public Service Internship Program that partners with many sustainability-related public sector and not-for-profit endeavors in the region.

Sustainability Education and Research Networks

Connecting Rensselaer faculty, staff, and students with regional sustainability educators in K-12 and collegiate environments, the Sustainability Research Network sponsors Eco Ed, a sustainability education module for area middle schoolers and their teachers; research symposia; and Earth Week events integrating arts, music, and cultural heritage, talks by creative practitioners, exhibits, and activities. “Sensing Environments,” the 2014 Earth Week theme, brought SRN participants to campus for a massive multi-cultural participatory drumming festival; a symposium exploring scientific and artistic uses of sensors; and a commissioned concert at the Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC).

Community Arts, Creative Practice

Art X@Rensselaer catalyzes the creative collision among art, science, and community. The history of human thought permeates the contemporary arts and sciences and is translated into community arts projects. One area that conjoins art, science, and community is BioArt: a burgeoning field within new media arts that involves artists collaborating closely with scientists to work with communities to illuminate the unintended consequences of climate change, brownfield mitigation, and other environmental challenges. The Sanctuary for Independent Media, a non-profit located in North Troy, is integrally aligned with Rensselaer and provides an urban laboratory for the development and dissemination of community arts that merge art and science with practice and progress.

Deep Listening

Centuries ago, philosophers and learned societies understood music and sound to be pervasive, permeating the entirety of the material world and deeply affecting human experience. Music was not only pleasing sound, but—at root—a means of understanding the diverse relationships between humankind and the universe. Conceived as part of the trivium/quadrivium curriculum for teaching thinking skills, music represents one of the original pathways critical to a liberal arts education. This is perhaps even more the case in our technological times. Rensselaer hosts the Center for Deep Listening, which builds contemplative practices into everyday life in order to attune participants to new perspectives and connect them to auditory environments in ways that generate new insights.