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On LGBT Studies at VCU: An Interview with Richard Godbeer

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On LGBT Studies at VCU

An Interview with Richard Godbeer

I decided to organize a speaker series examining local, national, and global perspectives on the HIV/AIDS crisis before arriving at VCU in 2014. When I was interviewed for the position of founding director at the Humanities Research Center, I was struck by the university's commitment to scholarship that relates directly to the challenges we face in our world today and to engaging with those challenges in local, national, and global contexts. As I became aware of the remarkable scholarship on HIV/AIDS by faculty in the College of Humanities and Sciences, including by Dr. Christopher Brooks (Anthropology) and Dr. Christine Cynn (Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies) as well as the amazing work being done by the Center for Cultural Experiences in Prevention, led by Dr. Faye Belgrave (Psychology) and the VCU HIV/AIDS Center on the MVC campus, led by Dr. Daniel Dixon, it struck me that the Humanities Research Center could develop a speaker series that would highlight the ways in which the humanities have been integral to study of the epidemic and its impact.

In addition to prompting path-breaking medical research, HIV/AIDS has inspired literature, art, drama, and music; historians of cultural and political history as well as scholars of gender, race, class, and sexuality are writing important studies of this ongoing tragedy. Throughout history, medical crises have often prompted economic, political, and social crises; they have also had a profound impact on cultural attitudes. The HIV/AIDS crisis has coincided with and complicated intense public debate in the U.S. and elsewhere about race relations, LGBTQ rights, and access to healthcare. The Spring 2016 speaker series, entitled "HIV/AIDS: Local, National, and Global Perspectives," examined from a broad range of disciplinary and methodological perspectives a phenomenon that continues to destroy lives and wreak havoc in countries across the globe. It considered the interplay between medical, political, cultural, literary, and artistic spheres of thought and activity; and it explored the interrelationships between local, national, and global events in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It also highlighted the fatal price of silence in communities where religious attitudes, gender ideologies, racial prejudice, and homophobia have prevented effective responses to the virus.

The speaker series was linked to three undergraduate courses taught that semester and attracted large numbers of students as well as considerable attention within the local community; the second event (on the History of HIV/AIDS in Richmond) was broadcast on the local NPR station. We began with two events examining the history of the epidemic locally and in the Commonwealth of Virginia. We then broadened out to consider national perspectives on the continuing crisis, and concluded with several speakers addressing HIV/AIDS outside the United States, including a moving talk by Justice Edwin Cameron, who sits on the Constitutional court of South Africa. Justice Cameron has long been a courageous activist for gay rights and the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa, and is himself living with HIV/AIDS.

Scholars in the humanities have played a central role in shedding light on the impact of HIV/AIDS on societies and cultures across the world. This speaker series demonstrated the profound relevance of humanities scholarship to contemporary society and the benefits of thinking about important phenomena and issues from multiple perspectives that incorporate different disciplinary methods and insights. It reminded us that the epidemic is still ongoing and has an especially grim impact on racial minorities in the U.S. for a range of reasons that humanities and social science scholars have been examining. Since the speaker series, a growing number of scholars have continued to study the history of HIV/AIDS and its impact. I am confident that the Humanities Research Center will continue to highlight this research in future years. For example, we look forward to featuring Dr. Christine Cynn's forthcoming book in our MEET VCU's AUTHORS series next year.

HIV/AIDS is an ongoing challenge that effects all of us. Everyone, including undergraduate students at VCU, needs to be aware of the ongoing threat posed by the epidemic and the enormous impact it has had and continues to have on our world -- personally, locally, nationally, and globally. This is not an abstract or distant problem; it continues to wreak havoc in our local communities and awareness of that is our strongest weapon against continued infection.

Since its formal launch in 2014, the Humanities Research Center at VCU has established a reputation for organizing accessible, well-attended public events that address often challenging and sensitive topics. The Humanities Research Center sees itself as an outward-looking enterprise committed to fostering informed and constructive conversations about our past, present, and future as illuminated through humanities scholarship. We welcome to all our events members of the local community as well as students and faculty. This is in close alignment with VCU's overarching commitment to vital and transformative community engagement.

The GLBTQ Studies Hiring Initiative, approved in the spring of 2017, concluded early this year with the hiring of three stellar young scholars:

Christopher Ewing (History) is currently completing his PhD in the Department of History at the Graduate Center, CUNY. His dissertation examines the intersections between racial and sexual politics in Germany since World War II, focusing on conceptualizations of Islam within gay rights movements in the Federal Republic. Ewing's work complicates our understanding of racialized discourse in a decolonizing and post-colonial Europe, and highlights the ambiguous, multilayered attitudes of gay rights activists toward people of color in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Ying-Chao Kao (Sociology) is completing his PhD in the Department of Sociology at Rutgers University. His dissertation project examines the efforts of transnational conservative networks to reverse the trend in Taiwan toward greater acceptance and protection for LGBTQ people. His work promises to enrich our understanding of LGBTQ politics in the early twenty-first century, global conservatisms, and the roles played by religious movements in the contemporary world.

Madison Moore (GSWS) received his PhD in American Studies from Yale University in 2012. He is currently a European Research Council Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of English at King's College, London. His scholarship examines the production of art by marginalized individuals and groups in times of duress, applying a broad range of theoretical scholarship to queer-of-color performance and aesthetics. After winning a series of prestigious fellowships, Dr. Moore has completed his first book, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric*, which will be published in April 2018 at Yale University Press.

These three scholars will join faculty already here at VCU who work in LGBTQ Studies to advance VCU's goal of integrating the rigorous interdisciplinary investigation of diversity across the globe in all its forms into the College's curriculum, research profile, and community engagement efforts. Their arrival will position VCU to become a national leader in the field of LGBTQ Studies.