

# Investment Fund for the Future (IF2) – Entry #109

## A. PROPOSAL SUMMARY

**Title: Erie Canal Interdisciplinary Research Laboratory**

**Project Lead Name:** Greg Garvey Jose Torre  
English and History

**Project Lead email address:** tgarvey@brockport.edu

**Amount Requested: 20000**

**Name of Sponsor 1: James Willis**  
**Administration and Finance**

**Name of Sponsor 2:**

**Name of Sponsor 3:**

### A-1. Description of the Initiative

Using the Erie Canal as a focal point, we propose to establish a “humanities lab” at the College at Brockport. The “Erie Canal Interdisciplinary Research Laboratory” would be an experiential, faculty/student collaboration. The canal’s history predates the first shovel that pierced the ground for its construction; its life extends into the forward-looking present. It encompasses multiple potential fields of study—transportation, commerce, art, music, wetlands, immigration, public health, urbanization, recreation, and so on. In addition to curricular transformation, this project offers new avenues for student/ faculty engagement, and is deeply invested in connecting Brockport more deeply to its communities.

The humanities laboratory has begun to emerge as a new curricular form. In July 2016, Inside Higher Ed reported on a conference held at the headquarters of the National Endowment for the Humanities in Washington, D.C. This conference—“The Humanities Laboratory: Discussions of New Campus Models”—explored a new form of interdisciplinary research among faculty and between faculty and students. In a humanities lab, the reporter explained, “faculty members and students . . . seek to use inquiry to advance collaborative, often interdisciplinary research. The emphasis isn't on the type of experiments one might find in a physics lab, but on the collaborative aspect of conducting research together.” A small number of universities, including Arizona State University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Chicago, have already begun developing such labs.

A professor of Germanic Studies at Indiana University “stumbled,” as he put it, onto the same model. Beginning with a project on moral storytelling, this professor found an ad hoc group forming around him: “After a while, I noticed that the students called our weekly gatherings ‘lab meetings.’ Sure, we had done several joint presentations and written some small articles, with more pending. But was this a lab? . . . Many students in the lab have become the driving force behind projects and ideas. They come from different backgrounds and want to study different ideas: interactions between medical doctors and patients, legal affairs, empathy, and also what it means to fall in love.”

Taking advantage of the College's proximity to the Erie Canal and adopting the model of interdisciplinary faculty/student research as a formal starting point, our initiative will create a platform for research projects focused on the canal. We intend to engage as many aspects of the College and the community as the topic will bear. Though we will begin in the humanities, we see every reason quickly to invite collaboration between students and faculty across divisions. This year, 2017, is the bicentennial of the start of the canal project. In its 200-year history, the canal has changed its path time and again, moving as the culture has moved. Simply tracing alterations in its route over time will open interdisciplinary research questions. Our project situates itself at the leading edge of emerging humanities pedagogy and incorporates local community history into a high-impact experiential learning model for students.

## A-2. Impact Statement: What change will this project deliver in the short term? What are the expected longer term impacts?

This application will create the Erie Canal Interdisciplinary Research Laboratory, or the "Canal Lab." It will allow us to create the infrastructure to bring together faculty from across campus to explore the many ways that the Erie Canal – as a historical artifact, a cultural and economic resource, and an environmental reality – might add value to our students' experience, the campus, and the local community. This added value could take the form of course work, student assistantships, internships, and special projects constructed under the supervision of faculty. To make this work would require interested departments to think creatively about how the canal might be explored through their various disciplines and how various disciplines might approach the same topic from different perspectives in a collaborative fashion. We will also have to ask: how will canal lab projects be integrated as units in existing courses? And, what kind of research products make the most sense at the outset?

The project will increase student engagement in a variety of disciplines, add vitality to the college campus by re-centering the Erie Canal in our physical and intellectual landscape, and add vitality to the relationship of the campus to the Brockport community. For example, history students might work with CIS students to design an app that surveys the impact of the Erie Canal on the development of Brockport; students in the Theater and Music Studies Department might find it beneficial to complete some of their course work through the lab, and then contribute a project based on the musical traditions the canal engendered. Every project done through the Canal Lab would have the high impact of engaged, experiential learning. At the same time, the products would rebound positively to the college. For example, in my recent Rochester Reform Trail class – a 4/500 course in History – we conducted the research necessary to create a virtual audio tour of the Rochester Reform Trail, my NEH funded Landmarks of American History and Culture Workshop. I coordinated with the College to create a phone audio system; the students created the content; a graduate assistant edited and coordinated the final product and created the trifold to print and distribute; yet another student recorded the audio. This low-cost product created a hands-on experience for graduate and undergraduate students; resulted in a product that educates the general public and engages the community with the college. Similar projects of various levels of complexity and cost could achieve a variety of goals consistent with the college's mission and strategic plan.

The impact of the project will reach well beyond student learning by making Brockport a focal point for local history and for the history of one of the most transformative public works projects of the antebellum period. If the idea of the Humanities Lab gains traction nationally, having the basics in place

on our campus early in its development will put the College at Brockport in an advantageous position relative to our peers.

## B. STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

### B-1. To be a Great College at which to Learn

The “Canal Lab” intersects all four of the priorities of the new strategic plan. It is most integrally connected to Engagement and Transformation. The project as a whole grows out of engaged learning practices in its emphasis on faculty/student research collaboration. It is a research project that aligns with community on several levels. On the most local level, it will add a dimension to The College culture by emphasizing its links to the canal. It will also develop local history by communicating the town of Brockport’s history and cultural through a new commitment of the College. Incorporating the Humanities Lab as a form into the life of the college will be a curricular transformation in itself. Since the Erie Canal project has inherent boundaries—things related to the Erie Canal—the form could likely be replicated in other projects. The project leads will no doubt work to produce both student learning and actual research that are excellent in quality and relevance.

### B-2. To be a College engaged with its Community

### B-3. To be a Sustainable Institution for the 21st Century

### B-4. To be a Great College at which to Work

## C. IMPLEMENTATION PLAN AND BUDGET

C-1. Identify the specific activities to be funded from the Investment Fund, estimated time-line for implementation, and for activities anticipated to be ongoing, plans for continued funding.

**Item 1:** Workshop supplies

**Item 1 Amount:** 3000

**Item 2:** 2 Graduate Assistants

**Item 2 Amount:** 12000

**Item 3:** Research Projects

**Item 3 Amount:** 5000

**Item 4:**

**Item 4 Amount:**

**Item 5:**

**Item 5 Amount:**

**Item 6:**

**Item 6 Amount:**

**Item 7:**

**Item 7 Amount:**

**Item 8:**

**Item 8 Amount:**

**Item 9:**

**Item 9 Amount:**

**Item 10:**

**Item 10 Amount:**

**TOTAL EXPENSES, ALL ITEMS: 20000**

**Matching Fund:**

**In-Kind Services: Provide FTE and name of personnel who have committed to in-kind services.**

## D. ASSESSMENT PLAN:

### D-1. What are the anticipated outcomes and specific measurements for success?

By the end of the 2017-2018 Academic year, the project leads will consider the Erie Canal Interdisciplinary Research Laboratory a success if it achieves the following six goals:

- 1) Specifications for canal lab projects detailing Interdisciplinary collaboration, student/ faculty research, and clear deliverable projects.
- 2) Specifications for integrating "Canal Lab" units into existing courses.
- 3) A set of "Canal Lab Fellows" with specific proposals under development or ready to launch.
- 4) A detailed plan for the pursuit of external funding.
- 5) A web presence connected to My Brockport and the Brockport Digital Commons.
- 6) A public event featuring an original project developed by Leads and GAs.

## E. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

E-1. Please provide any additional information to assist in the review of the proposal, including why the initiative cannot be funded from divisional resources.

**Upload up to three supplemental files here (not required):** [On file]

**Signature of Project Lead:** [on file]

**Email:** tgarvey@brockport.edu

**Signatures of sponsors are on file in the Administration and Finance Division.**

**Sponsor 1 Comments:**

**Sponsor 2 comments:**

**Sponsor 3 Comments:**

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