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An Interview with Lytton Smith

Quinten Seskin

Lytton Smith, PhD, is the current director of GREAT Day, and is a Professor of English and Creative Writing here at SUNY Geneseo

Can you describe the experience leading GREAT Day last year?

It has been a fantastic experience. When you are just a faculty member, you get some sense of what students are doing, but as one of the organizers you really get to see all the different kinds of research that students are doing in their respective disciplines. There is a level of excitement you get from coming in and seeing people submit their titles and their abstracts, and I learn so much about the world from the hard work that students are doing.

Are there any challenges that you faced when conducting GREAT Day last year? If so, how do you plan to address them this year?

We were doing a lot of new things last year, for example, GREAT Day took place over multiple days when it normally takes place in just one day. Additionally, it was the first time we adopted a virtual format with time to plan it out, rather than just converting it to virtual the last minute like we have done in the past. There were definitely things we had to learn and work around, and everybody has a certain familiarity with zoom, so there were hitches here and there about people not being able to get into a zoom. But fortunately, there were not many, and I think while we are really excited to go in-person and have the single day with no classes this year, there was something quite fun about having the five days...like a full academic conference that might last over multiple days, it gives you time to look forward for things.

As we know, last year's GREAT Day was held online due to the circumstances. Are there any aspects of virtual GREAT Day that you plan to incorporate this year?

Absolutely, we are trying to make sure that we don't leave behind the opportunities of the virtual world, which is why we are moving to a new conference platform. One of the factors that we took into account when choosing to work with this new platform was the inclusion of a user friendly virtual gallery. What this means is that students can display their poster presentations in the campus ballroom, and additionally have an on-line equivalent that can be referred to if someone misses a session, or wants to look back at a poster. Additionally, if students want to record their sessions, we can host those as well. We are not quite making it a fully hybrid event because we are trying to focus on

the in-person experience, but we are now catering to people who want to add in those moments online. Essentially, by adding an online equivalent of this gallery we can reach different people like family members, or friends at other schools that wouldn't be able to be here in-person.

What aspects of GREAT Day do you find to be most impactful to the campus?

The visibility of the amazing work that students are doing is what I find most impactful. I love the fact that it's a day that—while it wouldn't happen without the tremendous efforts and management by faculty—really focuses on students, and that's what we are recognizing. I think one of the really wonderful things about that aspect is that it provides inspiration and pathways from one student to another where, as a student, you sort of see... “a student did this presentation and I learned something from it, and now I have this other thing to share.” It's another reason why I'm excited that we are back in-person and we have a single day for GREAT Day, because if you are on campus that day and you're not sure what GREAT Day is yet, you can't help but discover what's going on—it just wonderfully takes over the campus.

Are there any memorable works that have been published in the GREAT Day Journal that you remember?

Definitely, but I wouldn't single out any specific one because I would be leaving out all the others that were fantastic, and I don't mean to offend anyone. What I will say is that the journal we publish for GREAT Day keeps it alive so that it doesn't just last that one day. I believe that aspect is the other advantage of what we are taking away from virtual GREAT Day—how do we have something last longer than just the one day? Also, the fact that it is interdisciplinary effectively makes it a place for discovery, which is what I like most about it.

Is there anything specific that you hope students gain from participating in GREAT Day?

The fact that someone is presenting at GREAT Day hopefully means that they are excited about sharing their work and that they have confidence in sharing their work, but it is also a big step to take. For many people, it is their first time presenting a poster or paper. Thus, I think one thing I'm hoping is that they realize that their ideas and their research really matters, people care about them, and they have a role to play sharing those ideas. And hopefully that continues, and they sort of catch the bug and go, “where next? Can I go to a conference, or do this in another way?” We think of college as a time where you come to learn things, and of course that is true, but it is also a time where you communicate the things that you have learned. And that is maybe more important, or more profound. We are a public liberal arts college, and the public is really important to that; if you can share with the public, on and off campus, that's wonderful.