Dean Franco, David Phillips and Mary Foskett won NEH grant for Humanities Institute

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has awarded Wake Forest a five-year, $500,000 challenge grant to fund the University’s Humanities Institute, officially launched in October of this year. It is the largest NEH grant Wake Forest has ever received and the only NEH challenge grant awarded to a North Carolina college or university this year.

With the support of the grant, the Humanities Institute will foster scholarship that crosses disciplinary boundaries and explore creative ways to use knowledge from the humanities to solve real-world problems.

“The Humanities Institute both honors the liberal arts tradition that has long stood at the center of the Wake Forest experience and promotes innovative scholarship that is already invigorating our faculty and enhancing our intellectual community,” said Wake Forest President Nathan O. Hatch.

Through fundraising and donations, Wake Forest will match the NEH grant threefold, yielding a total of $2 million to endow the Institute to permanently support interdisciplinary programs and scholarship in the humanities at the University.
David Phillips, associate professor of the program in humanities and project director for the grant, said: “It is huge news that we got this challenge grant on our first try. Very few institutions do this. This will help us enormously to establish an endowment for Wake Forest’s Humanities Institute and make Wake Forest a leading national site for humanities research and education.”

He said the Institute will focus on three areas: faculty engagement, faculty-student interaction and public engagement. The Institute will build a collaborative community of scholars in the humanities through initiatives such as faculty seminars, reading groups, round table discussions, long-term collaborative research projects, guest speakers, events and symposia.

The Humanities Institute began as a grass-roots initiative among a group of Wake Forest faculty who received a planning grant in 2007 from the provost’s office to fund humanities-focused initiatives. Three faculty members — Mary Foskett, associate professor of religion; Dean Franco, associate professor of English; and Phillips — have worked for the past three years to lay the groundwork for the Institute, and a fourth, Sally Barbour, professor of Romance languages, joined the Institute’s executive board in June.

More than 45 Wake Forest faculty across the University have been involved in research projects and creative activities started during the planning stages for the Institute. From a reading group exploring the relationships between neurobiology and music, to collaborative research on peace and conflict management, to a faculty seminar on “Landscape and Place,” the group has already supported creative connections among faculty and students in departments across campus. The results of such collaboration have included panels at national conferences, guest speakers on campus, new books and new courses.

The Humanities Institute will celebrate its founding with a two-day symposium. On March 18, Edward Ayers will give a keynote address on new directions in humanities research. The next day, New York Times columnist Stanley Fish, Davidson-Kahn Distinguished University Professor of Humanities and Law at Florida International University, will give a talk on the humanities and public life, followed by a panel of Wake Forest faculty respondents.