Duke India Initiative Funds Duke Faculty Projects

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On December 1, the Duke India Initiative (DII) held its first year-end gathering, bringing together members of the Duke community to network, learn about the initiative’s programming, and hear from faculty grant recipients about their DII-funded projects.

45 students, faculty, and staff gathered as Suzanne Katzenstein (Kenan Institute for Ethics); Volker Blum (Mechanical Engineering and Materials Science); Erika Weinthal (Nicholas School of the Environment); Chris Sims (Center for Documentary Studies); and Ana Barros (Pratt School of Engineering) gave short presentations on their DII-funded projects, which covered topics including India’s corporate social responsibility law, water service provision and politics, and creating photovoltaic materials for solar energy. While the grant recipients come from varied academic backgrounds and represent a wide array of Duke departments, their projects all center on the same core principles: taking an interdisciplinary approach to tackling tough issues in India and deepening Duke’s ties with Indian scholars and communities.
Chris Sims, Undergraduate Education Director at the Center for Documentary Studies, saw an opportunity to forge connections with Indian artists and improve representation through the center’s gateway course, DOCST 101: Tradition in Documentary Studies. Sims felt that the class, which already included a week on India, focused too much on American and European perspectives on other cultures. “I wanted to include documentary perspectives of India by the people from India itself,” Sims said.

With his funding from DII, Sims plans to travel to India in February 2018 for the Jaipur Photography Festival, where he will meet with Indian photographers and learn more about their work. Sims will then develop a series of lectures to include in the course and invite one of the photographers to visit the class at the end of the semester.

By incorporating the perspective of Indians into the course, Duke students will not only gain a better, and more authentic understanding of the country, but also an understanding of the importance of representation in documentary storytelling. “Who tells the story, or who gets to tell the story, can significantly shift the idea or understanding of a place,” Sims said.

To learn more about the Duke India Initiative, please visit https://igs.duke.edu/units/duke-india-initiative or contact Rohini Thakkar at Rohini.Thakkar@duke.edu