

Tanya Domi: Hi! This is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of The City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: Joy Connolly is the Senior Vice President Provost, and a distinguished Professor of Classics at the Graduate Center, the home of CUNY's Arts and Science Doctoral Degrees in Interdisciplinary Masters programs. Prior to 2016, Connolly was the Dean for the Humanities and Professor of Classics at New York University. Connolly's research focuses on Roman ideas about communication, ethics and political action, particularly as they relate to the modern world. She has worked as Tino Stegall on two pieces in New York. Welcome, Joy, to the Thought Project podcast.

Joy Connolly: Thank you for having me, pleased to be here.

Tanya Domi: The Graduate Center has just been awarded a \$2.65 million grant from the Mellon Foundation to transform doctoral education for the public good. This is a thrilling and celebratory moment for the graduate center. In your role as provost, the chief academic officer, the Mellon Foundation grant has been your baby, your project. How did you come up with this exciting idea? What was the genesis?

Joy Connolly: The genesis of it was my realization that academics do everything. In contrast to the Ivory Tower picture that so many people mistakenly hold of academics as being buried in the clouds, the absent-minded professor, the person who's focused on abstract thinking and doesn't connect with people, all of these stereotypes, if they were ever true, are certainly not true now.

Joy Connolly: When I look at academics, active faculty or graduate students, I see people who have terrific research and analytic skills but they are also people who connect with people, they communicate incredibly well. They have amazing organizational skills whether designing a class or putting on a conference. They do fundraising. They do a whole array of things and this is what makes the University work as an institution.

Joy Connolly: My thinking about doctoral education and ways in which to enhance it, particularly in a moment where academics, new PhDs are having a difficult time finding good tenure-track employment in the academic job market, was to say let's surface those skills and experiences that run through the academic experience, anyway. Give them a little more prominence, identify them as things of value. Let's try to get funding to support a cohort of students who will design in company with faculty mentors in close collaboration with them a slightly or perhaps radically modified doctoral education that will prepare them for anything they want to do. It'll make them great academics because, as I said,

academics do everything, and it will make them desirable employees of the non-academic job market to.

Tanya Domi: I have to say that having worked at two universities, continuing to work at two universities, that I don't think people have a full appreciation for the breadth and depth of what the academy does offer. I think this notion of training with a new approach in doctoral education for the public good is, I think it's different from what I hear in other places. It's much more affirmative and clearly much more aggressive. Talk about how the GC in its positioning and how it's been engaging with doctoral students openly acknowledging that on everyone wants to be a professor, and also not everyone wants to teach in a university either. How was the GC selected? How it did, from its positioning, how did they get selected by Mellon for this really incredible opportunity?

Joy Connolly: That's a great question. It has a lot of great answers because it speaks well of the graduate center in so many different angles that we're on the leading edge of this. I would say, I'll try to single out just the most important things.

Joy Connolly: We have a faculty whose high-level research and commitment to social justice and equity and access and their commitment to everything that CUNY as a public university stands for infuses everything they do. That means that the faculty here are significantly and visibly perceptively more open to conversations about the reality of life that our graduate students face.

Joy Connolly: As I mentioned before that roughly half of doctoral students across the country, across all fields find employment in academia. That's the truth. It's been the truth for a while now, but if you, as you said, when you go to a lot of doctoral programs, graduate schools, doctoral faculty around the country, that's not a truth they're comfortable with. It's not a truth that they acknowledge a lot. It's not a truth they want to allow to affect the kind of education they offer, which at most schools looks a lot like the education that was on offer 125 years ago.

Joy Connolly: Here at the GC because, as I said, our faculty are attuned to the realities of life in a distinctive way, we had the great ingredient to the faculty eager to tackle this and take this on and not comfortable, not satisfied with talking about those students, terrific students who would gone on to non-academic careers as people who are pursuing a plan B or the second told, the alternative, the second plan.

Tanya Domi: Some stigma really.

Joy Connolly: Yeah, I know. These are people who valued all kinds of things that their students went on to do. That was a huge ingredient that I think Mellon took very seriously. Mellon has also good knowledge of our faculty through a couple of grants that we've already received thanks to the hard work of my predecessors, Louise Lenahan and Chase Robinson as provost, we have a grant supporting the humanities alliance, which is a collaborative grant with LaGuardia Community

College that's given Mellon great insight into the commitment of our faculty to teaching and to preparing students for careers in the community college landscape.

Joy Connolly: Mellon also knows very well and they're happy about the fact that the graduate center a couple of years ago was successful in getting an NEH grant for thinking about new directions in doctoral education, where a lot of the thinking for the grant that we put into Mellon this year was done. A few other things, I'd say we have a notably forward thinking and ambitious office for career planning and development led by Jenny Furlong, who is nationally known for her commitment to preparing graduate students for all kinds of careers. We have an active Humanities Center that's very engaged in public humanities.

Joy Connolly: I'll mention one more thing. That's our early research initiative which provides students with with small amounts of money but absolutely crucial amounts of money, lets them pursue research over the summer and also allows them to do internships outside the GC in some unexpected places. We're building a network on this grant.

Tanya Domi: There is definitely some leadership foresight here because even in the strategic plan for 2017 to 2022, I'll just read it out. We will provide our doctoral students with exceptional training and pedagogy becoming national leaders in graduate education. We will be a model, we will model innovative methods of PhD professionalization and encourage our faculty's focus on training students for both academic and non-academic careers.

Tanya Domi: It's there in black and white, in print, that had to, with all these initiatives that you've described that had to bear some influence in Mellon's thinking about granting such a generous gift.

Joy Connolly: You're absolutely right. I think they saw that we were putting our hearts and our efforts where our mouths were and they are now letting us put the money where our mouths are and fund some efforts especially around the support of the graduate students, these 12 graduate students we anticipate being able to support starting next year.

Tanya Domi: Yes. I have envy of those people. I want to talk about the Mellon Public fellows. Let's talk about the creation. It seems to be the focus, the hub of delivering this grant is through the creation of a Publics lab. Can you talk about? It seems like ... I see this Publics lab in the middle of some place and all these people walking around it and talking and sitting and engaging with each other.

Joy Connolly: My ideal location for it is, and this is a fantastical impossibility but I can't resist saying, just thinking about the roof of the building, if we have an enormous inflatable bubble, we could host an enormous building wide tent. I do think of it as a big tent project very much. That's why that image is so fitting.

Joy Connolly: We are finding physical space for this, and this will be a physical office or set of offices. What you really want to hear about, what I want to really talk about is what will happen in this space and who will be in it. The Publics lab will have a director and hiring that director is one of the first orders of business we're going to start carrying out this spring and summer.

Joy Connolly: I should say that the Mellon foundation has already wired us half the money. It's sitting in our account, they're eager for us to use it. We can't wait to go ahead with that. That director will oversee a space that will include, to begin with, a small number of people who are directly connected to and funded by the grant. But very quickly we want the Publics lab to include all students and all faculty or to be open to all of them, anyone with an interest in public facing research or connecting their research and teaching with the public. I'll get to that in a sec.

Joy Connolly: The essential ingredients of the Publics lab led by this new director will be the following. We'll have 12 public fellows. These will be graduate students who are applying to the Graduate Center and being admitted actually right now into doctoral programs in the Humanities and Humanistic social sciences. Those students will be first year students this coming fall will learn about this program this winter and have an opportunity to put in for support that will carry them through the remainder of their time here at the Graduate Center.

Tanya Domi: Wow!

Joy Connolly: It's great, yeah.

Tanya Domi: That's very, very, very cool.

Joy Connolly: These are 12 fellows who will work closely with mentors, with advisors in their doctoral program. We'll have some support structures in place for those faculty to give them time to work with these students and they'll craft in conversation, in collaboration with their faculty advisors, a modified version of their doctoral programs. They'll end up with a PhD in exactly the discipline they applied to. They'll have an experience that will be maybe 90% identical with the rest of their doctoral cohort, maybe 50% identical with her doctoral cohort. It's going to vary from person to person and program to program.

Joy Connolly: But the point is they'll work out a program that will both allow them to surface those skills and capacities and interests that are more public facing and non-academically, conventionally academically oriented, even as they fulfill all the standards for a PhD in whatever discipline they're in. Those public fellows, those 12 people which, and we anticipate a second cohort that the GC will fund the following year, will be the kind of icebreakers for doctoral curricula because they will, we hope, open up really potentially quite radical ways of re-thinking what a doctoral education, what a doctoral curriculum looks like.

Joy Connolly: The public fellows won't be alone. They will be mentored and in constant conversation with a group of people we call Practitioners, with a capital P. These are going to be people in residence at the Graduate Center in a wide variety of ways depending on what they're doing outside the GC. These Practitioners are PhD's who have gone on to non-academic careers. They may be able to get freed up from their work to come in for six evenings in a given semester. They may be able to convince their employers to give them six months off and they can do a six months residency full time at the GC. We're going to be open to all kinds of arrangements.

Joy Connolly: These Practitioners will be in their first port of call in the Publics lab, they'll be engaging with the public fellows with the graduate students in the special funded cohort, but their workshops, their events, casual lunches, casual contacts, they're going to be made available to a much wider group of students whom we hope and expect them to mentor.

Joy Connolly: The third component of the Publics lab is only going to kick in years four and five of the grants, this is a five-year grant. These are post-docs whom we anticipate will be GC PhD's who will have some contact with the program in its first few years. This will give them a year to explore non-academic employment while they have a firm platform and sustainable salary at the GC and they too will engage in mentoring and preparing grad students.

Joy Connolly: Lastly, at least in terms of the student experience we're going to be offering with the help of Mellon, career internships as we're calling them again. Experiences modeled on our early research institute, experiences in NGOs, in city or state agencies, in firms, in corporations, and it'll be the job of the Publics lab director to arrange those internships.

Joy Connolly: Setting it all up in this coming year, coming academic year 2018-19, we'll kick it off with a faculty seminar that will help us and the director of the Publics lab ensure that every step of the way we have not just faculty buy-in, which is a term I really don't like, but really faculty-shaping of the plan, shaping of the project from the very start.

Tanya Domi: Does this seminar last the whole year?

Joy Connolly: Yes.

Tanya Domi: So it's thematic I take.

Joy Connolly: Yup. It will pick up on the work of the NEH PhD grant I mentioned a few minutes ago.

Tanya Domi: When you talk about Publics facing, explain that to our listeners. When I think about Publics facing, and I see it here a lot at the Graduate Center more than I have in other places where faculty are really engaged. they're talking to the

media, they have a blog, they tweet, they serve maybe as advisors to the city government as experts or to the state government. Even some faculty have been even on national boards before.

Tanya Domi: When I think about a public intellectual, that's what I'm thinking about. Paul Krugman is probably, got one of the best public purchase you could ever have, a platform at the New York Times. That's real engagement. Probably, he's one of the most visible public intellectuals in the world because of that column and he's sharing his knowledge almost every day. It's exciting to think about those possibilities for me as a professional communicator working with faculty and students here.

Joy Connolly: You're right, it is something distinctive of the Graduate Center and it's been part of the heritage or the DNA of the GC since its inception. It's something that, when I first got here a little over 18 months ago, I started hearing consistently from ... especially from faculty, from students as well that it was a point of some frustration for them that given the variety, the diversity of engagement that you just described that it wasn't as well-known as it could be, that they felt that individual people might be known for what they're doing, like Paul, like other colleagues who are engaged in the public sphere.

Joy Connolly: But their question was, why isn't the GC known as an institution for its distinctive commitment to the circulation and enhancement of public knowledge or knowledge in the public good? I think that's exactly the question to ask. The answer to that question, I think in part, rests in the work of this grant to make the GC as an institution, a place that people look to and we hope to imitate as a model of public engagement.

Tanya Domi: I think that's true. I think what is happening here is really different and some of it comes from being public and really having to fight in there for public funds, you're all part of the challenge of being publicly funded now is very challenging. It's difficult, more lucky to be in New York State. Nonetheless, there's a hunger or thirst for wanting to lean forward and really go there, that I see here that it's a little bit more edgy. When you've got big endowments with other schools, it's kind of you can sit back and you're very well-resourced and you're thinking about things and more long-term. It's slower, I think, it's even slower. There's something about being here and the air here at 34th and 5th, that is just a little bit more edgy. They do lean forward and it's exciting to work with people like that.

Joy Connolly: I think that's true. I gave a presentation to a number of program faculty and students in literary fields last year, last academic year. I was talking about the need for change and the hope that I had given the assurances and ideas of faculty and students I've talked to that the GC would be a front runner in changing doctoral education. A couple of the faculty pointed out that one of the reasons they hold back is not because they're lacking in backbone or courage but rather they want to protect students.

Joy Connolly: They don't want to get so far out in front that the education they offer students is seen by the world at large as preparing students for a world that doesn't exist, i.e. they'd be training students for work that then their students would fail to get.

Tanya Domi: I see.

Joy Connolly: My response to that was, well we cannot wait for the IVs of the world to change the world because they've won that contest, they're not going to change the rules by which they've won the game. It really rests with us to shake it up and in partnership with the terrific colleagues we have at private universities and universities around the world that are better resourced. We can and should and we have the people power and the brain power to make people think differently about what a doctoral education can and should be.

Tanya Domi: What is the ... Ultimately, what's the goals and objectives that you want to see manifest at the end of this five-year grant, which I'm sure is going to continue in different ways? You'll leverage it for other ideas. Where does this ... where do you want to be in five years? Where do you want to see the Graduate Center in five years?

Joy Connolly: I'd love it if it were absolutely common knowledge around the United States and ideally around the world if the Graduate Center were known as a place to send top students, undergraduates, or people recently having finished an undergrad degree, people who wanted to pursue a doctoral degree that would not be the same old doctoral degree, that students who are bright, who are innovative, who are creative, and who want to change the world for the good. If we can take significant steps to raising the Graduate Center's profile as a place where our doctoral students view the circulation and the production of knowledge as a public enterprise, that's one goal.

Joy Connolly: A second is, and this is heart of the track, I have to confess. A second is if we can find ways to measure the impact of change in the public perception of PhDs, especially in the humanities, and I think we can start small here by measuring the reaction of the judgments of our elected officials and the city and state people who fund the CNUY and fund the Graduate Center, if we can talk to them as we're doing now and ask them what's their sense of the value in the role of a Humanities PhD, I bet you right now, we'd get some pretty dispiriting answers. Answers that are probably coming out of lack of familiarity with what we do.

Joy Connolly: At the end of five years, if I'm able to send our elected representative's annual report saying, "Look at what we're doing here with this public impact that were having. Look at the ways in which we're preparing Humanities PhDs to make a real difference in the world. By the end of that five years, those elected representatives wouldn't be able to get away with the easy answers about the Ivory tower. they would be ... they would have a little stack of reports on their

desk that would have changed the way they are viewing the value and role of a Humanities PhD.

Joy Connolly: Thirdly, I just want to ... this is really closest to home. I know that my colleagues around the building and I share the hope that we'll improve the educational experience that we're giving our students and their sense of being supported in whatever they choose to do, that this will be front and center in the institution's identity.

Tanya Domi: We look forward to hearing about the progress over the next five years. I want to thank you for being here today.

Joy Connolly: You're more than welcome. Thank you for having me.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to the Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Provost Joy Connolly. the thought project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV located at the Graduate Center in the heart of New York City, with production, engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman and Jack Horowitz. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.