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Cornell Launches Program to Inject the Humanities into Tech

\$20 million initiative's goal is to address ethical quandaries in the fast-changing digital world

by Leslie Brody

A new Cornell University program aims to help liberal-arts students bring humanistic values to technology fields and address ethical quandaries in the fast-changing digital world.

The school plans to formally announce the \$20 million initiative on Thursday. A group of students at Cornell's College of Arts and Sciences in Ithaca will be able to get specialized courses in computer science, free summer sessions at Cornell Tech's new campus on Roosevelt Island and internships in New York City.

School officials said they hope to develop a pipeline of leaders who can tackle issues such as the misuse of social media, privacy breaches, the integrity of electronic voting and automation's impact on jobs.

"We're all seeing today the incredible challenges of producing digital technology that reflects humanistic values," said Daniel Huttenlocher, dean of Cornell Tech. "The goal is to start to train students who are thinking about these issues when designing technologies."

This program comes as many college students nationwide are moving away from liberal-arts degrees and toward fields with clearer job prospects, such as engineering and health sciences. Many face a heavy load of student debt.

Just below 12% of the bachelor's degrees conferred in 2015 were in the humanities, down from about 15% a decade earlier, according to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences.

The new initiative, known as the Milstein Program in Technology and Humanity, will be the first



A view of Cornell Tech's new campus and main academic building, the Bloomberg Center, on Roosevelt Island in New York City in September. Photo: Drew Angerer/Getty Images

to bring undergraduates in Ithaca to Cornell Tech's graduate campus. The program will choose about 25 students yearly for the four-year program, growing to a total of 100 at a time. The first will be picked from this year's pool of applicants to the College of Arts and Sciences for the fall of 2018.

Funding comes from the family of Howard P. Milstein, a 1973 Cornell graduate who runs a range of banking and real-estate companies. His son Michael, a 2011 Cornell graduate who works in the family business and was involved with the initiative, said he wanted to foster an "interdisciplinary approach that can help unlock the value of liberal arts in the 21st Century."