VIEW to the U transcribed
Season 6: Adventures in Podcasting; Episode #1
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[Intro music fades in and out]

Alexandra Gillespie (AG): We need to think more about how research itself is more equitable, diverse, and inclusive. How can we make sure that everybody gets access to the benefits of research, but also access to research cultures?

My name is Alexandra Gillespie, Vice President, University of Toronto and Principal, University of Toronto Mississauga. I'm also professor of English and medieval studies here at the University of Toronto and at UTM.

We need to think about the change in environment in which research occurs. I don't think just because we're working from home now during the pandemic doesn't mean that the pandemic ends and we're all back to work in the same way that we were before the pandemic. I think that we were already looking at much more flexible and dynamic working environments prior to the pandemic and I think that the pandemic has accelerated that sort of change. What does it mean if people are working more from home, less in the office?

AG:
What does it mean if the pandemic is part of other kinds of transitions, other kinds of challenges that we're facing about the way that human beings live in the natural world, climate crisis, other kinds of crises that we're encountering and the way that we inhabit natural space, that the way we work is going to change? And if that's the case, someone like me, who does my research partly in archives, but also partly sitting on a computer at home, what's that going to look like and how do we support it as an institution?

These are really key questions and ones that we have to address.

[theme music fades in]

Carla DeMarco (CD): A familiar voice to the podcast because she was featured on our very first season almost five years ago now, but this time around she’s in an entirely new seat – physically – virtually – spiritedly – literally all of the above – at the helm as Vice-President UofT and UTM's newly appointed Principal.

The new season of VIEW to the U is “Adventures in research,” with a focus on interesting, scholarly tales, and so Professor Alex Gillespie is kicking us off with a remarkable discovery in an archive that happened quite early on in her academic career.
Hello and welcome to *VIEW to the U: An eye on UTM research*. I'm Carla DeMarco at U of T Mississauga.

*VIEW to the U* is a monthly podcast that will feature UTM faculty members from a range of disciplines who will illuminate some of the inner workings of the science labs, and enlighten the social sciences and humanities hubs at UTM.

Over the course of our chat, Alex defines the UTM research landscape, and she also talks about the ever-evolving research environment in the face of COVID and beyond, with a rethinking of how to make research more sustainable and diverse, plus she has some encouraging words about the times ahead of us.

There might also be a brief visit by a young co-worker in Alex’s home office at the Principal’s residence, also known as Lislehurst, where she’s currently living, that is also a reflection of our changed work environments – and a true sign that there’s a new principal in town – or virtual townhall or something like that!

[theme music fades out]

AG:  
My research is on the global history of the book. I'm especially interested in the book as what we sometimes call a material object or a physical object, but also in the way that the book is also a bearer of abstract ideas and the relationship between those two things and how the book can be a way we think about both abstract and empirical, or sort of physical embodied knowledge.

CD:  
I mentioned the next season of the podcast is going to be a focus on research storytelling, where people tell us an interesting anecdote about their research. And so, I just wondered if you have any favorite research anecdotes from your own career that you’d like to share.

AG:  
One of the problems for researcher when they asked for an anecdote is they immediately start thinking of all their favorite anecdotes. I think maybe my favorite one goes all the way back to when I was a graduate student, when I was about 22, and I was in Austin, in Texas, where there's a place called the Harry Ransom Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin. And I was staying in a hostel, not even a student hostel, just a hostel for travelers and taking the bus every day, quite a long way through Austin, Texas to visit this place. Having a huge amount of fun meeting all sorts of other travelers who are not academics. And each day I would go and I'd order up a different book. And these books were folio additions of Chaucer, so that means Chaucer, who died in 1400, we're talking about almost 200 years later, 150 years later when his works were being gathered up and disseminated in print.

AG:
And I was ordering these up one by one from the stacks, or from deep in the basement, in the Harry Ransom Center and examining them to see if there was anything interesting. If anyone to left any interesting notes, if there were unexpected things going on in these books and I was particularly interested in the additions being put together by John Stow, who was this cranky Elizabethan. So I was with the first tutor and antiquarian, who was especially interested in Chaucer. And one day I ordered up one book and it came up and it was quite boring. Like some collegial in the 19th century had washed it, which literally means dipping pages into acid to remove anything that anybody wrote in the margin or any interesting fungi, which had grown. I'm now very interested in fungi that grow on books. Even then, I was quite interested in that.

I didn't know that you could study them and so on. So the next day I came and I called it up again because I hadn't quite finished going through every page. And when it came up, it wasn't the same book. I'd put the same shelf mark down on the piece of paper you write down the call mark on, but a completely different book came up in a completely different binding.

AG: And I went up and I said, "This is not the same book." And they said, "Yes, it is. It's the 1561, Stow edition of Geoffrey Chaucer's works." And I'm like, "Well, yeah, but you know, printed books there are lots of copies, it's not the same copy. It's the same book." And they said, "Oh gosh, we thought we only had one copy of that edition. It seems we had two." So they actually hadn't properly catalogued it.

They didn't know they had two copies, probably someone knew, but their online ordering system didn't know they had two copies. So I take it back to my desk, this unknown copy, and start looking through it. And first of all, I realized that the cover has the letters I-S stamped on it, which is, in the alphabet at the time that it's J-S which could be John Stow, maybe. And I flip the book open, and almost immediately, it falls open to the text, The Book of the Duchess, which is one of the Chaucer's poems, that John Stow was especially interested in because it was a poem that Chaucer wrote about the wife of John of Gaunt, who was a prince in Chaucer's time. And Stow was really interested in Chaucer's royal connections, and sure enough, right there on the page is John Stow's very distinctive handwriting.

AG: And this was John Stow's own copy of his 1561 edition of Chaucer's works. And the library didn't know that they had this book, let alone that it was John Stow's. And it turned out that it was also a book that perhaps by buying it, or maybe by gift, to this day we're not entirely sure, Matthew Parker, Elizabeth the first's Archbishop of Canterbury, had gotten off John Stow and his manual answers says scribe. And he himself, Matthew Parker, had also left notes in this book. So, it was this treasure trove of all this information about the Elizabethan reception of Chaucer. So, there you are – a long story of scholarly adventuring. Much of my career has been like this, when I was not running UTM, but rather going out to visit archives around the world.
CD:
That's amazing! What a discovery.

AG:
It was really fun. It produced my very first publication in 1999. I wrote with a colleague, I wrote up some of the discoveries I made within this book, mostly about Chaucer's too. Cause there were some notes about Chaucer's tomb at Westminster Abbey in the very back of the book, which included some new variants about the text that's still there on Chaucer's tomb at Westminster Abbey.

CD:
And so, with this next question, I was just kind of thinking if you could maybe throw out some specific words that come to mind for you, when you think about the research environment at U of T Mississauga.

AG:
Well, I'd have to say interdisciplinary and collaborative. I'd also want to say nimble dynamic and forward facing. I could elaborate on those words.

I feel like one of the great things about being at UTM is that, we have the U of T juggernaut behind us, right? UTM is part of the U of T system, 1827 foundation, top 20 research institution. You know, one of the best research universities in the world, but often being a juggernaut means coming with kind of a weightiness tying you down right to tradition or too just to size as a huge institution. But because we're UTM, we're in the Western edge of this institution. And so on, we have a lightness to us, a forward movement to us, a nimbleness to us that allows for that kind of cross pollination between different subjects, allows the interdisciplinarity and collaboration between different researchers and movement in areas like robotics or medicinal chemistry or exciting connections in the digital humanities or between things like theater and drama and robotics that might not happen at other institutions. And it's a very exciting place to do research.

CD:
Absolutely. And so, we're heading into this very changed environment, and I just wonder if you could mention what you think are some of the challenges ahead with this research environment.

AG:
I'd start by saying that one of the things that the COVID-19 pandemic has both accelerated or drawn attention to make visible and certainly worsened is the extent to which opportunities to do research, to be involved in research culture, to benefit from the outcomes of the research that happens in a university environment, or that happens anywhere. These opportunities are unevenly distributed, right? So that what we're seeing is the way that the pandemics effects
have been uneven, the way that they have fallen more on people from lower socioeconomic communities for more racialized communities on indigenous and black people, the way that social injustice has been thrown up by the pandemic that's relevant to the,

Oh, I hear in the background, one of my coworkers here working from home, I'm going to get to that. I would like caffeinated kombucha because everybody needs caffeine to get through their day. Okay, thanks. That was my co-worker, Eleanor.

So one of the things I think that we have to think about in the new research environment and the context of the pandemic is how we can make our research environment one that is both about addressing inequities, how research can be about thinking about these sorts of challenges, but also research itself. We need to think more about how research itself is more equitable, diverse, inclusive. How can we make sure that everybody gets access to the benefits of research, but also access to research cultures. We need to think about those things. And also since we just met my coworker, Eleanor, who brought me my lunch, a little bit late two 27, sometimes lunch gets late for a principal. We need to think about the change in environment in which research occurs.

AG:
I don't think just because we're working from home now during the pandemic, doesn't that, the pandemic ends and we're all back to work in the same way that we were before the pandemic. I think that we were already looking at much more flexible and dynamic working environments prior to the pandemic. And I think that has accelerated that sort of change. What does it mean if people are working more from home, less than the office, what does it mean? If a pandemic is part of other kinds of transitions, other kinds of challenges that we're facing about the way that human beings live in the natural world, climate crisis, other kinds of crises that we're encountering and the way that we inhabit natural space, that the way we work is going to change. And if that's the case, someone like me, who does my research partly in archives, but also partly sitting on a computer at home, what's that going to look like? And how do we support it as an institution? These are really key questions and ones that we have to address.

CD:
Yeah. And I couldn't help but think about the great example you gave earlier, just about finding this book in an archive, that there's going to be probably a little blip for some researchers that won't have the opportunity for some of those great discoveries, but this isn't forever, right?

AG:
This isn't forever. But another thing that I, and colleagues who work in those archives have been thinking about is like, what's the carbon footprint of those archives, right? And that's not a covert question, right. But it is a question about how human beings inhabit the natural world and what kinds of challenges we are looking at in the future about the way we inhabit the natural world. Do you have to keep an archive dry and you have to keep it at a certain
humidity level, as well as dry. You have to keep it less. These are institutions that are being built out of a particular kind of carbonized economy, and that's going to change over the next few decades.

So, I feel like the pandemic is an opportunity for us to confront the fact that things don't stay the same. And we are in a moment of great transition and they can feel daunting. It's also a huge opportunity. It's an opportunity for us to transform things and to make new opportunities and make them in terms that are more just for more people. I hope I believe that's true. And I believe universities, especially UTM, we have a really important role to play in doing that. Yeah.

CD:
And I know you've always been a huge advocate and champion of research from your early days at U of T Mississauga, as well as last year, you were a special advisor to our office in the office of the vice principal of research. So I just wondered if you have some words of encouragement or, things you'd like to say to the research community at UTM right now, the people who are just starting out on their research careers, but also, people who've been around a while that maybe just need to be feeling a little inspired.

AG:
Big sigh, for me, we're at the end of the summer, we're coming. I shouldn't say that there's still officially some summer left. So, don't say where at the end of summer that we can all feel the end of summit and the air a little bit, the last few days we're coming towards the end of the summer and all of summer has been in the pandemic. And we've all been gearing up for the return to sort of the new normal in September summer is often time for our research and it perhaps hasn't been time for our research and the way that it normally is. And that I suspect has been kind of hard for other people. For me, of course, it's been stepping into this new role and there's been very little room for research. So solidarity with my colleagues who have not been able to get to the research that they wanted to get to or expected to be able to get to those who haven't been able to get into their labs, those who haven't been able to visit archives or go and meet their collaborators overseas.

Like, I know it's tough, but what I will say is that as you say, Carla, this is not forever or being a researcher is very much about being a flexible dynamic thinker about working your way around obstacles when you come up against them with your mind and with the resources that are available to you or in a way not available to you. And I have enormous trust in the resilience of this research community here at UTM, we do extraordinary things and we will keep doing extraordinary things. And in the end, so many of us are here because we love our students, but also because we love what it is we do. And our research environments, I hope that people will hang on to that and keep doing what they do because you know, I look forward to seeing the results as principal.

CD:
Okay. That is fantastic. I think that's exactly what people need to hear right now in the interest of, I don't want to take up too much of your time. I know you've got lunch waiting there and another meeting, but I just wanted to thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me and it just, it's lovely to see you.

AG:
Yeah. It's really nice to see you too.

[theme music fades in]

CD:
I would like to thank everyone for listening to today's show.

I would like to thank my guest Professor Alex Gillespie, Vice President, UofT, and Principal, UTM, and faculty member from the Department of English & Drama at UTM and in Medieval Studies at UofT. She is the busiest person I know, especially given her new role and the situation we are all in at the moment, and I am so extremely grateful she had some time to chat. I'll likely to be relistening and turning to her message of positivity when I need a boost.

If you want to hear more about her work, I interviewed Alex in 2017 for the first season of the podcast, and she talks about how gaming relates to her Chaucer research as well as the impact of humanities research.

I would like to thank the Office of the Vice-Principal, Research for their support.

If you are a researcher based at UTM – so a faculty member, postdoc, grad student or undergrad – for this new season, please consider getting in touch with me for your best anecdote, a funny little thing that happened to you on the path of discovery or perhaps your own significant eureka moment.

Also, there will be a survey for listeners of the podcast coming out soon for some research project that I am doing, so please if you have two minutes, consider filling out the questionnaire which I'll link to on our site.

Please also consider taking 30 seconds to rate the podcast in iTunes: it helps others find the show and learn more about our great research community at UTM.

Lastly, and as always, thank you to Tim Terrific for his tunes and support.

Thank you!