S&T's Zine Lab Helps Students Rediscover the Power of DIY Publishing

Faculty members from Missouri S&T and East Carolina University (ECU) are helping students explore new forms of independent publishing through a grant from the Public Interest Technology University Network (PIT-UN). In 2025, Drs. Ryan Cheek, Rachael Schneider, and Carleigh Davis of S&T joined forces with Dr. Erin Clark of ECU to launch Zine Labs on both campuses. These creative spaces celebrate the do-it-yourself spirit of print culture and the freedom of expression that zines embody.

Zines—originally short for fanzines, a do-it-yourself offshoot of magazines—are non-commercial, self-published booklets that exist outside traditional publishing systems. Free from editorial gatekeepers, they have long served as vehicles for underground ideas, community stories, and cultural experimentation. Typically exchanged at zine fairs or through informal networks, zines cover everything from punk rock and politics to science fiction and technical communication.

As Cheek explained, zines are "not one homogeneous genre," but rather a vibrant collage of voices and perspectives. Some scholars, like Stephen Duncombe, have even argued that Thomas Paine's Common Sense could be considered a zine, an early example of independent publishing in the public square. "The idea of not being subject to gatekeepers has long resonated within society," Cheek said. "Zines are a manifestation of that."

Building on this spirit of independence, the Zine Lab gives students a space to experience zine-making firsthand. It is stocked with typewriters, stamps, papers, markers, stickers, and other materials that encourage creativity and individuality. The team continues to expand the lab's resources, even exploring the addition of a letterpress.

In addition to hands-on creation, the lab houses a growing collection of zines that students can borrow and read. It also hosts events, supports programming such as the K–12 STEM Fair, and provides zine-making kits for classroom and community use.

Thanks to the PIT-UN grant, S&T's Zine Lab has collaborated with groups such as LGBTQ+ Rolla and Spectrum, while ECU's lab has partnered with organizations including a domestic violence shelter.

The grant has also opened doors for graduate students in S&T's technical communication program to collaborate with faculty on research. Work related to the Zine Lab has been presented at the 2025 Association of Teachers of Technical Writing conference at S&T and at the Special Interest Group on Design of Communication conference.

"This has been a great opportunity to give our graduate students experience working on research with faculty," Schneider said.

The project's success has also been supported by leadership beyond the lab itself. Cheek credited Dr. Casey Canfield, an S&T associate professor of engineering and engineering management, for helping the university engage more deeply with the Public Interest Technology University Network. "She was the first to get a PIT grant on our campus," Cheek noted. "I think this is an organization where humanists belong—one that values ethics and rhetoric." The network, a coalition of universities and foundations, focuses on promoting public good and advancing technology for the benefit of society.

Cheek believes that zines and print culture are experiencing a resurgence. "We've been reached out to by the ACLU of North Carolina, and we're planning a collaboration with the City University of New York at the Oculus," he said. He also drew parallels between zines and modern independent media movements: "The idea of freeing yourself from gatekeepers isn't unique to writing disciplines. Think of independently published books or journalists turned podcasters. Podcasting, too, bypasses the gatekeeper."

Cheek hopes the Zine Lab will continue to grow organically and empower students to discover the power of their own voices. "We want students to have the materials and confidence to publish zines themselves," he said.

In an era dominated by digital platforms, the Zine Lab reminds us that creativity can still be handmade, shared, and powerfully personal.

Dr. Ryan Cheek, assistant professor of technical communication, helped to organize the zine workshop. An S&T student (sitting) receives his assistance during the event.