



# HISTORY AND HERITAGE

150 YEARS

THE HUMAN STORY: THE HISTORY AND FUTURE OF THE  
COLLEGE OF ARTS & HUMANITIES



Mr. Starkey teaches a Latin class circa 1880 in an original West Chester Normal School classroom in Old Main. >



## IS PURSUING A LIBERAL ARTS DEGREE STILL WORTHWHILE?

Based on the growing success of the College of Arts and Humanities (CAH), the answer is a resounding “Yes.”

“Regardless of your profession, if you can ask good questions; read deeply in order to understand complicated information and communicate it articulately; really understand where someone is coming from; and not engage in just black-and-white thinking, that’s the juice,” said Jen Bacon, an English professor and former English Department chair who has been CAH’s dean since 2017.

In the wake of the 2008 recession, the number of liberal arts majors declined, both nationwide and at WCU. However, in the past four years alone, the College’s undergraduate enrollment has increased more than 15%, to more than 1,500 majors.

CAH was primarily carved out of the former College of Arts and Sciences. It comprises two art departments — Art + Design and Theatre and Dance — and six humanities departments: Communication and Media; English; History; Languages and Cultures; Philosophy; and Women’s and Gender Studies. The college now offers 22 undergraduate degree programs, 12 graduate degree programs, and 38 undergraduate minors — many of which focus on interdisciplinary approaches to social justice.

“We pride ourselves on being a regional innovator in education that cultivates interdisciplinary collaboration, artistic and cultural programming, and inclusive and engaged citizenship,” said Bacon.

Professor J. Kanan Sawyer takes full advantage of the technology in today’s classrooms for her communication and media courses. >



## AMONG THE HIGHLIGHTS:

- The English Department, with more than 70 professors, adjunct professors, and instructors, is the largest of any department in the entire PASSHE system, and faculty from this one department engage in interdisciplinary programs across campus.

- The American Sign Language minor is now the fastest growing language study.

- Embracing technology and the digital world — including communication, social media, gaming, and web content — the college's fastest growing major is media and culture, which, after just two years, already has 358 majors.

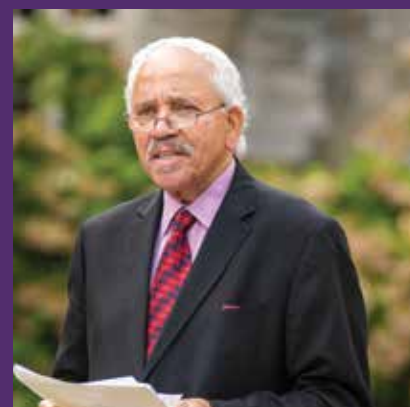
- “I overhear theatre and arts students discussing minoring in computer science and learning how to code,” said Bacon. “Our students want to make themselves as marketable and adaptive as possible in a world where they know technology is going to be part of every job, no matter which discipline they pursue.”

## PROFESSOR EMERITUS TROTMAN AND FREDERICK DOUGLASS INEXTRICABLY INTERTWINED

Professor Emeritus C. James Trotman, who taught English at WCU for 32 years (1979-2011), focused on Frederick Douglass, the distinguished statesman and abolitionist who had been enslaved and who gave his last public lecture on the campus of WCU on February 1, 1895.

The *Frederick Douglass: A Biography* author founded the University's Frederick Douglass Institute and the Douglass Collaborative, which exists at the 13 other state system universities. He was also instrumental in having the Douglass statue created and installed on campus and in the listing of FDI as a national historical landmark designation.

“Whether they were majoring in English, the sciences, or social studies, my students enjoyed reading him, identified with him, and found his causes to be stimulating,” said Trotman, who, in 2019, delivered the inaugural Dr. Clifford E. DeBaptiste Frederick Douglass Lecture. “As a former slave, a Black man, an abolitionist, an orator, and author, he is a transformative figure with whom people can find connectedness, regardless of their backgrounds.”



Foreign language students in the late 1970s.

## DIGITAL INNOVATION IN THE LIBERAL ARTS

**M**arrying the digital age with the liberal arts is at the core of two innovative digital history classes co-taught by History Professors Charles Hardy III and Janneken Smucker since 2014 and the resulting student-created media projects:

**Goin' North: Stories from the First Great Migration to Philadelphia** ([goinnorth.org](http://goinnorth.org)), which focuses on the influx of African Americans from the South beginning in 1916. Students utilized early 1980s cassette audio recordings of interviews that Hardy and others conducted with the migrants for WHY? public radio; and Philadelphia Immigration ([phillyimmigration.nuncenter.net](http://phillyimmigration.nuncenter.net)), which compares and contrasts the stories of European immigrants who settled in the early 1900s with those who emigrated from China, the Soviet Union, Iraq, West Africa, and Latin America 100 years later.

For **Goin' North**, which won the 2016 Roy Rosenzweig Prize for Innovation in Digital History from the American Historical Association, undergraduate and graduate students created a digital archive of more than 600 objects; edited the transcripts of the digitized interviews while curating the audio with images, links, and GPS

coordinates; wrote brief biographies of individual interviewees; and created digital stories, interactive maps, and walking tours.

For the latter project, students did the same *and* conducted interviews themselves.

"We wanted to empower students to be creative and open up the parameters of what a history assignment looks like," said Smucker.

Added Hardy, "Because of all the time they spend with the life story of a single person who they otherwise wouldn't interact with, students build empathy with someone different from themselves and say, 'My God, this is an amazing person.'"

That describes Alabama native Charles Vance, a 15-year-old who journeyed for six long, hard years before reuniting with his father in Philadelphia in 1923. Ben Spohn M'16, now the oral history program manager at the Hagley Museum in Wilmington, DE, focused on the story of Vance, who became a construction and steel mill worker.

"I caught the bug," said Spohn. "Vance had a tremendous life, but if Charlie hadn't spoken with him, nothing of his story would remain. I came to view oral history as something absolutely necessary to do."



1950s Chess Match. >



^ Theatre and Dance students in the Broadway Cares: Equity Fights AIDS fundraiser.

## DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

**D**iversity and social justice issues, such as structural inequality, have long been a major focus of the English, history, language, and philosophy faculties. They helped implement the original diversity requirement for the University's general education program nearly 20 years ago. In order to graduate students who are committed to creating a just and equitable society, the College now offers 56 of the 93 courses that meet the University's diverse communities requirement.

Other examples include the Holocaust & Genocide Studies programs, which the late History Professor Irene Shur pioneered four decades ago, and women's studies, whose first course was offered in 1970.

Stacey Schlau, professor emerita of Languages and Cultures, led what was then the women's studies program from 1985 to 2001. After the introductory course became the first to fulfill the interdisciplinary requirement in 1986, she saw the program and its minor grow, eventually gaining a major and a second minor. This led to it becoming an academic department, all the while retaining its activist component. Its



The DNA Discussion Project.

students and faculty, for instance, played a leading role in developing a sexual harassment policy focused on advocacy.

The DNA Discussion Project, which Anita Foeman, professor of communication and media, launched in 2006, also heightens students' diversity, equity, and inclusion awareness. Since then, more than 3,000 participants — mostly students and faculty members but also the general public — have completed a pre-test survey about their perceived ethnicities; taken an Ancestry.com DNA test; and then discussed their results with other participants.

While the tests often confirm what participants have thought about their backgrounds, many are surprised. "Italian"

descendants may discover that, genetically, they are also part Middle Eastern; African Americans may make the sobering discovery that one of their female ancestors probably was raped by her white slaveholder.

"Many people often identify as one race or ethnicity, but after they get their results, they realize that they share a lot of genetic ancestry with other people that they didn't expect," said Bessie Lawton, the professor of communication and media who teamed up with Foeman on the project in 2011.

Added Foeman: "My favorite comment people make is, 'Oh my goodness, if I didn't know this about myself, what don't I know about other people?' So, they look at others less judgmentally."

Carnival of Ruin.



## VIBRANT, RELEVANT CULTURE

CAH encompasses creative disciplines that tell the human story and influence culture. One such thought-provoking gem is *Carnival of Ruin*, both an exhibit and a theatrical, musical dance performance. It was created by three Theatre & Dance Department faculty members to encourage citizens to reduce, reuse, and recycle.

Presented both virtually and live at East Goshen Township Park in May, the performance featured eight student and alumni dancers dressed in costumes made from plastic bags, soda cans, hula hoops, bottle caps, and repurposed clothing. The set was a tent crafted from thousands of plastic bags.

The University's John H. Baker Gallery and the Chester County Art Association also exhibited the stunning sets, props, and costumes. Constance Case, associate professor of theatre created the costumes; Gretchen Studlien-Webb and maria urrutia, associate professors of dance, choreographed the performance. [Ed. note: Professor urrutia prefers lower case spelling of her name.]

"This faculty/student collaboration highlighted the devastating impact of plastics on the globe with an 'Aha!' moment," said urrutia. "From a distance, the costumes and set pieces seem so beautiful. But when people got closer, they realized that the costumes and the tent were made of thousands of crocheted-together plastic bags, which will take hundreds or thousands of years to decompose."

The college's cornucopia of other artistic and cultural programming includes art exhibits, artists in residence, and the Poetry Center's WCU Poetry Conference, which, since 1995, has annually drawn a who's who of American poets as presenters. The Center's new director, English Professor Cherise Pollard, has also instituted a new Poetry & Pedagogy Conference that offers teachers tools for teaching poetry in K-12 classrooms and beyond.

Meanwhile, to improve their peers' environment, students in Assistant Professor Scotty Reifsnnyder's art design for social good class have created murals in the WCU Resource Pantry, which helps students with financial needs, and in the Ram Shop, the Dub-C Autism Program's convenience store that provides students on the autism spectrum with job and social skills.

Classic art, art history, drawing, and painting classes are now joined by courses in digital media, digital object design for 3D printing, visual branding, and design for the social good. >





↑ Outside class “rooms” now and then.  
Top: RUCCAS Pop up Class.

## RAISING A RUCCAS

The newest example of CAH’s social justice-focused interdisciplinary education is the Urban Community Change (RUX) major, part of the University’s Rustin Urban Community Change Axis (RUCCAS), a hub that provides resources for Philadelphia-area urban changemakers.

The RUX major, launched this fall, builds upon CAH’s highly successful, 10-year-old Youth Empowerment & Urban Studies (YES) interdisciplinary minor. Both emphasize in-the-field experiences. Said program director Hannah Ashley, “Nothing is more important now than envisioning what the world tells you is impossible — reordering our economy to save the climate, true racial justice and healing — and making those changes happen with others. And that is actually a learnable knowledge base, from how people built movements throughout history, to how to collaboratively partner, to how to sustain the self as a change-maker.”

The major attracts both traditional and returning students who want to turn their experience into a degree and enhance their theoretical knowledge; first generation and students of color enroll in both YES and RUX in high numbers. One is Brandon Holiday, 28, holder of an associate’s degree and head program orchestrator for OnesUp. Like any number of Philadelphia organizations that partner with RUCCAS, the North Philadelphia grassroots nonprofit works on the ground with urban communities, in this case specifically to improve the wellbeing and futures of 16- to 24-year-olds.

When Ashley described the RUX major to Holiday, he said, “That would be amazing for our program participants, and also for me.”

“Urban community change is no small task,” Holiday reported just weeks into the fall semester. “But my classes are already shaping how I look at my work with youth and how I choose to engage with the community.

“It’s been a big eye-opener.” **WCU**

Next issue’s 150th anniversary history feature will focus on the College of Business and Public Management.