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Against the Tide: Colby Reaffirms Its Commitment to the Humanities

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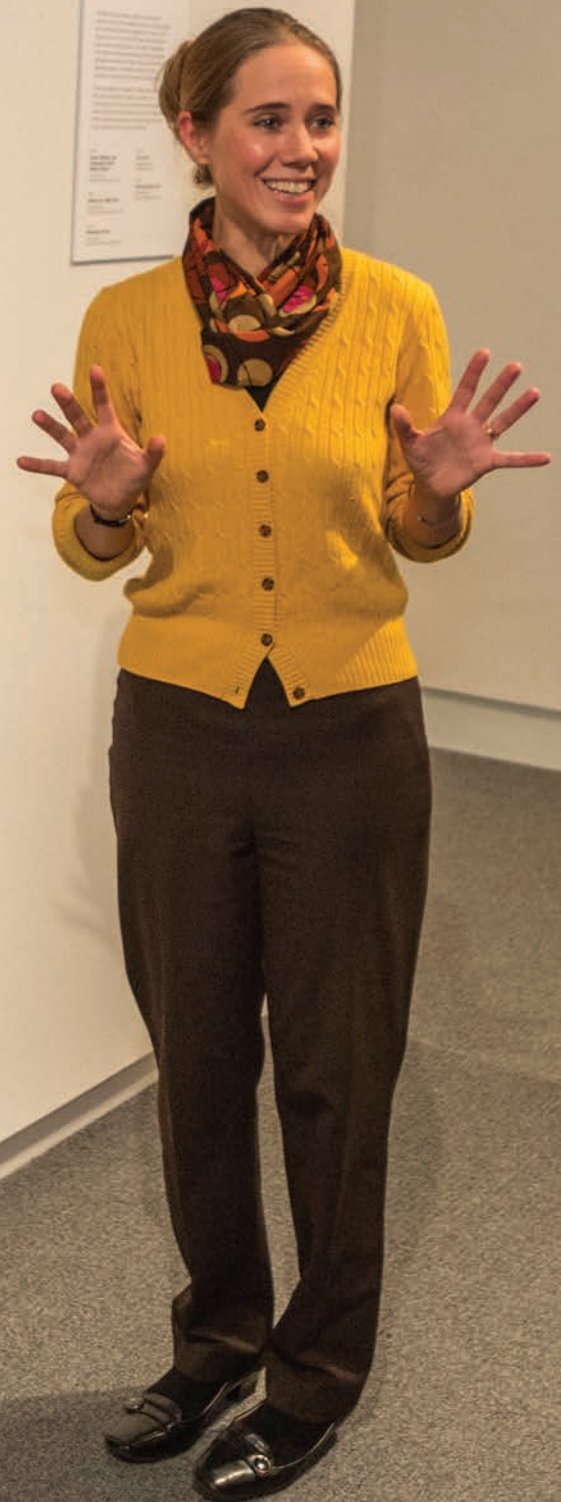
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Against the Tide

Colby reaffirms its commitment to the humanities

By Lori Ferguson Photography by Dennis Griggs

Associate Professor of Philosophy Lydia Moland, left, in the Colby College Museum of Art, discusses the painting Hannah Dustin Killing the Indians by Junius Brutus Stearns. The painting was part of an exhibit of censored art and art about censorship that was created in conjunction with the "Censorship Uncovered" humanities theme. At right are Jonathan Kalin '14 and Barbara Mejia '14.





Amber Ramirez '14 traveled to Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, in the winter of 2013 to spend time with local residents and activists pressing for justice in the unsolved and largely uninvestigated murders of hundreds of young women in the city.

Ramirez said her time in Ciudad Juárez allowed her to “witness firsthand the resistance, resilience, and strength of family members and activists. It was an honor talking to and working with these people.”

And, she said, her humanities course work at Colby taught her to think more broadly and analytically, without losing sight of humanity. “They were not just subjects and I was not just an interviewer,” she said of her honors thesis in Spanish. “My research went beyond that.”

Ramirez, a double major in Spanish and women’s, gender, and sexuality studies whose research in Mexico was funded by a grant from Colby’s Center for the Arts and Humanities, is just one example of a student who flourished through study in a discipline that some say is a waste of time and money.

Economic uncertainty, a shifting job market, and rising tuitions have some colleges and universities—and students—moving from the humanities to more apparently lucrative majors in business, science, and engineering. Harvard reports a 20-percent decrease in humanities majors in the past decade. Stanford administrators are concerned that 45 percent of its undergraduate faculty are in humanities but they teach only 15 percent of students.

Tech CEOs have entered both sides of the liberal arts debate. President Barack Obama recently took a shot at humanities study, saying workers in manufacturing or trades may earn more money than art history majors. (He later apologized.)

No apologies from Colby.

The College is doubling down on its belief in the value of study of the humanities—an essential subset of the liberal arts. President David A. Greene in his inauguration speech Sept. 13 emphatically reaffirmed Colby’s mission, declaring, “Colby’s commitment to its liberal arts traditions must be unassailable.”

“The liberal arts,” Greene said, “prepare students to enter a dynamic world where one can expect to have several different



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—Kerill O'Neill, the Julian D. Taylor Associate Professor of Classics and Director of Colby's Center for the Arts and Humanities



Associate Professor of French Valérie Dionne and students examine satirical art of the 18th century.

jobs and even careers; they provide deep context and effective tools for analyzing problems, synthesizing data, and thinking creatively about solutions; they encourage strong writing and speaking skills; they instill an appreciation for art and ethics; they educate an informed citizenry to participate in governance; they prepare individuals to lead, inspire, and innovate.”

In that first major public address at Colby, Greene confirmed a path taken after the economic downturn of 2007 by then-President William D. Adams (now chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities) and the Board of Trustees, which, propelled by a \$750,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, created the Center for the Arts and Humanities in the fall of 2012.

Established alongside Colby's robust programs in environmental and biomedical science and other areas,

the center is the focal point that brings innovative interdisciplinary programming to campus and supports course work already underway, said Kerill O'Neill, the Julian D. Taylor Associate Professor of Classics and the center's director.

Alumni, students, and faculty maintain that—contrary to critics who call for a more narrow, vocational approach to higher education—a humanities and liberal arts background is invaluable in a myriad of endeavors.

Lydia Moland, associate professor of philosophy and a member of the center's executive committee, said she heard from a former student now in medical school. “He told me that he's kept his books from his undergraduate humanities courses,” she said, “and that the way we approached learning at Colby now informs his approach to medicine.”

Another former student, Moland said, is with National Public Radio in New York and using the knowledge she gained in her arts and humanities courses to frame discussions of complicated social issues. “We're giving our students tools that they can use daily, not only to improve their quality of life but also to approach complex subjects from many different angles,” she said.

And Colby is coming at the humanities in a very different way.

According to O'Neill, the humanities programs at many colleges focus on opportunities for faculty, by awarding research grants, for instance. Colby's approach is very student focused, with students heavily involved in the

humanities center's activities. “We listen attentively to them and trust what they tell us they want to see, hear, and learn,” he said. The aim is for faculty and students to be partners in the pursuit of knowledge in a multifaceted way: through arts and humanities lab courses and an annual humanities theme.

The humanities theme enables faculty and students to collaborate with the center to organize a year's worth of courses, speakers, exhibitions, and performances around a particular topic such as terrorism or censorship.

This approach affords faculty a powerful vehicle for highlighting the many perspectives that the humanities can bring to a subject, Moland says. Two years ago the theme “Comedy, Seriously” examined the topic from a variety of perspectives including philosophy (What is humor?), psychology (Why do we laugh?), physiology (How do we laugh?), and the classics (an examination of ancient comedy).

This year's theme is "Migrations," a broad concept developed by Associate Professor of Art Tanya Sheehan and Assistant Professor of Music Natalie Zelensky.

Sheehan—whose own research cuts across art history, American studies, and diaspora studies, among others—says migration can mean movement of living things, objects, or even ideas across time and space. The response has been "incredibly positive," she said, because the topic itself touches on major issues in humanities, arts, social sciences, and sciences, among other disciplines.

When she arrived at Colby last year, she was drawn to the Center for the Arts and Humanities "as a space where real intellectual work happens across the disciplines." The center's lab courses further broaden the sense of academic community at Colby, O'Neill said, promoting experiential learning and a hands-on approach (common in biology and chemistry, but innovative in the humanities).

"We're taking a pedagogical approach that's more commonly associated with the natural sciences and applying it broadly across the humanities," O'Neill said. "Through their work in the field—whether it be in a local elementary school, the College art museum, or the library's Special Collections—students learn important life skills: the ability to analyze, synthesize, problem solve, and communicate."

So a philosophy professor is doing a lab? In an art museum? Exactly.

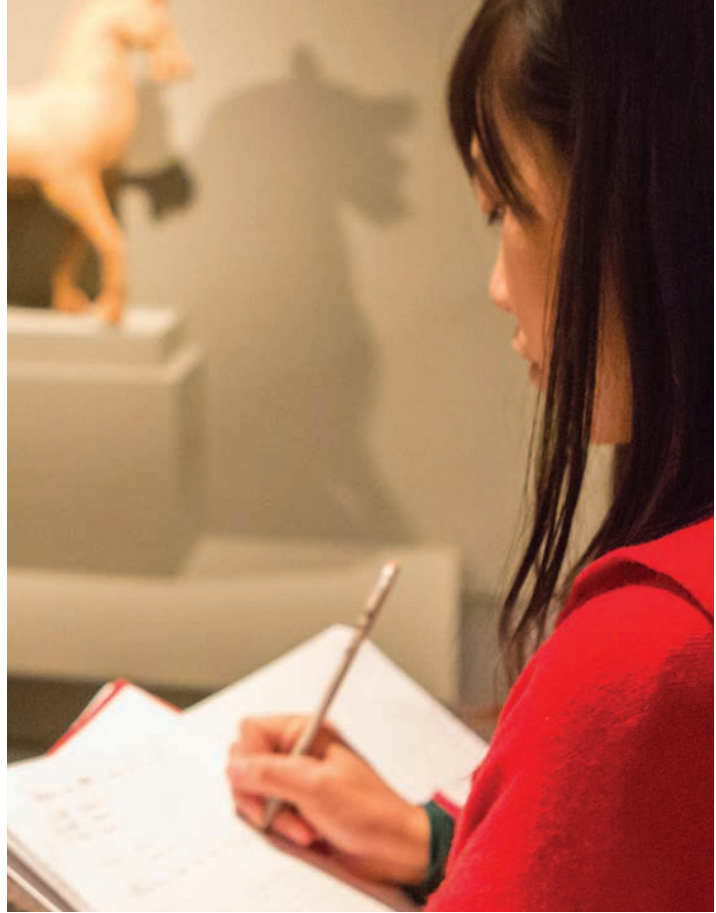
"It adds another way of understanding what students can do in certain kinds of classes," Moland said. "Structuring a course as a lab really shifts your understanding of where the knowledge is coming from—students become partners in the knowledge being generated, rather than just recipients."

"Our students are becoming adults and finding out what the world is like," she said. "They're asking the big questions: 'Who am I?' 'Why am I here?' 'What's the meaning of life?' They're at the perfect place in life to be making these inquiries."

And with Colby and humanities opening their eyes, they know there likely is no one answer.

That's what Ramirez concluded about Ciudad Juárez, that the problem, like much in life, isn't black and white—also a takeaway from her work in women's studies and philosophy, she said. "There is no one solution," Ramirez said. "There's no one story. There are different voices and different needs [in Ciudad Juárez], but they all want justice."

It's a lesson she's taken to heart. Ramirez is now in Indianapolis working as a paralegal in a nonprofit that works with non-English-speaking immigrants. The experience has told her there is a shortage of immigration attorneys to tackle complex immigration cases. Liberal arts degree firmly in hand, she plans to go to law school. ©



SO WHAT DOES A HUMANIST ACTUALLY DO?

Kyle Layne-Allen '13, an English and classics major, working in sales for a small mobile marketing firm:

"I'm interacting with people constantly, through presentations, e-mails, phone calls, etc.," Layne-Allen said. "I'm using the communication skills I developed in college every day. I learned to write well in my English classes. And the arts and humanities labs, which enabled us to debate our ideas and present them to large groups, taught me to think outside the box and develop confidence in my presentation abilities. And translating all of those Latin texts taught me discipline and perseverance."

Alex Richards '09, a history and classical civilization major and now associate director of sales strategy at UBS Wealth Management:

"When analyzing an issue, for instance, I think about why people might be thinking, feeling, or acting the way they are," Richards said. "My humanities studies have increased my ability to empathize and to look at a problem from another's perspective. I know it sounds clichéd, but studying the humanities really teaches you how to think and communicate effectively."

For more about the Center for the Arts and Humanities visit colby.edu/centerartshumanities