



CONNECTICUT COLLEGE



A History of Excellence

A LOOK BACK AT CONNECTICUT COLLEGE'S FIRST CENTURY

Katherine Bergeron, President



If excellence can be defined as a continual striving for greater achievement and impact, then Connecticut College has been committed to excellence for the whole of its hundred-year history. That commitment was certainly evident at the founding of Connecticut College for Women in 1911, with its progressive vision of educating graduates to step confidently into the world to make a difference. It is just as clear today in our mission of educating students “to put the liberal arts into action as citizens in a global society.” We fulfill this mission by striving for greater achievement and impact in the full range of the work we do: in the excellent research and scholarship produced by our faculty; in our distinctive academic programs; in the diversity, equity, and shared governance of our campus; in our efforts to educate the whole person; in our adherence to common ethical and moral standards; in our commitments to community service and global citizenship; and in our stewardship of the environment. This overview sketches the hundred-year history of Connecticut College both to chart the development of our educational mission and to create a context for understanding the excellence we seek today.

The First Seventy-Five Years: 1915-1990

The campus had just one academic building when Connecticut College welcomed its first students in 1915, but the views from the hilltop were as expansive as the perspective on the liberal arts. Having dared to open before it was finished, the College embraced the forward-looking vision, commitment to hard work, and openness to change—in short, the striving for something greater—that still defines its character today. Among the sixteen programs of study on offer were Design in Fine and Applied Art, as well as Music, making Connecticut College the first baccalaureate institution in the country to have music and art as fully-fledged academic majors. Students were also given the unusual opportunity to integrate career training into their academic programs. In fact, nearly half of the original majors were designed with professional pathways in order to ensure students' success in their lives after college.

This vision of integrating a rigorous curriculum in the liberal arts with practical preparation for the world evolved over the next decades, establishing a strong foundation for the College's future. In the 1920s, the College established an honor code at the same time it began designing its first library. Both have become signature features of the landscape and culture—the honor code establishing the soul of the College, the library locating its heart. Situated to the north, Palmer Library overlooked a majestic view of Long Island Sound to the south, fixing two cardinal points of the campus map. Academic buildings began lining up to the east while residence halls appeared to the west, creating a central open space, now called Tempel Green, that is still the core of the campus.

It was Katharine Blunt, the College's first female president, who built most of the campus during her long tenure from the Great Depression to the end of the Second World War. In addition to residence halls, academic buildings, and a non-denominational chapel, she oversaw the creation of the Connecticut College Arboretum as well as Palmer Auditorium, a 1,300-seat Art Deco performance hall designed to serve the campus and the surrounding community. Both spaces went on to inspire notable educational opportunities. In the 1940s, the American Dance Festival was established at Connecticut College, bringing great artists like Martha Graham and José Limón to teach and perform in summers for the next thirty years. During the same period, the celebrated Connecticut College Professor of Botany, Richard Goodwin, co-founded the Nature Conservancy and, with Professor of Botany William Niering, later inaugurated one of the first majors in environmental studies in the nation. These programs continue to be distinguished to this day.

A second wave of campus development occurred in the postwar years under the leadership of another visionary president, Rosemary Park. With a focus on building both the College's reputation for academic excellence and its capacity to support a larger student body, Park invested in laboratories, residence halls, an infirmary, and a large dormitory complex to the north, as well as a center for physical education and recreation. She also revised the curriculum, retreating somewhat from the vocational elements of the original concept, in order to strengthen research and create the College's first graduate programs.

More profound changes would be on the horizon with the advent of co-education. Charles Shain was ultimately responsible for overseeing the successful transition, in 1969, from an all-women's

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institution to one that opened its doors to men. The debut of a modern art building and, later, a modern library signaled, with their uncompromising profiles, the arrival of this brave new era. Investments in intercollegiate athletics soon followed. It was not long, in fact, before the College joined the New England Small College Athletic Conference and, under the leadership of President Oakes Ames, began planning for a new athletic complex on the Thames River.

But the community was expanding in other vital ways as well. The late 1960s had exposed a striving for excellence of a different kind, as students, faculty, and administration recognized the urgency of making the College more racially and ethnically diverse. Efforts in the early 1970s led to new admission policies and the christening of the College's first multicultural center, Unity House. The 1980s brought further commitments to and support for LGBTQ students and students of color. These were reinforced by the relocation of Unity House, in 1990, to the center of the campus.

The Next Quarter Century: 1990 to the Present

If the first seventy-five years of the College's history are characterized by the evolution of the campus landscape along with the needs of a changing student body, the next period is distinguished by a revolution in teaching and learning. Apart from a single research building in 1995 to house physics, astronomy, and environmental science, the Connecticut College map would see virtually no expansion for the next twenty years. The achievements from the 1990s onward, rather, have been about reaching out: across the disciplines, into the community, toward the wider world.

International, interdisciplinary, engaged: these were the watchwords under President Claire Gaudiani, as the College made significant educational investments to ensure it was preparing students for citizenship in a global society. In addition to hiring more international faculty and expanding the number of world language offerings, the College created new programs to engage faculty and students with each other, the community, and the world.

Among the most notable were the unique certificate programs in four new centers for interdisciplinary scholarship: the Toor Cummings Center for International Studies and the Liberal Arts; the Ammerman Center for Arts and Technology; the Holleran Center for Community Action and Public Policy; and the Goodwin-Niering Center for the Environment. Operating like honors

colleges, these programs have allowed select student cohorts to infuse interdisciplinary coursework, research, internships, and community-based learning into their four-year courses of study. Over the past twenty-five years, more than 1,300 students have completed certificates, adding considerable value to their general education and their majors.

In 2005, the Center for the Critical Study of Race and Ethnicity was founded, under President Norman Fainstein, as the fifth such program, dedicated to research on race and social difference. While it does not oversee a certificate program, the center has supported faculty and students for over a decade in advancing justice in the academy.

These achievements in engaged learning have intersected with a renewed emphasis on learning for life beyond college. In 1999, Connecticut College introduced a distinctive, multi-year career program that guarantees internship funding for rising seniors who complete the required workshops and mentoring. Four out of five students now participate each year, making this nationally recognized program one of the most defining elements of a Connecticut College education. As will be discussed below, the combination of intentional, interdisciplinary coursework, global immersion, community involvement, and career preparation has come to represent, in an even more significant way, the meaning of a liberal arts education at Connecticut College.

The expanded perspectives brought by these educational developments inspired, over time, the thoughtful repurposing of existing facilities. The former Palmer Library became the Blaustein Humanities Center, bringing together key departments with classrooms and public meeting spaces for the campus community. The former center for physical education became the College Center at Crozier-Williams, offering large function rooms, small eateries, and other convening spaces to support the work of students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

Such internal expansion intensified under the leadership of President Leo Higdon, as the College undertook a series of imaginative interventions to increase the use, value, and impact of critical campus properties. The addition of a new Fitness Center, nestled between the tent-like roofs of the Athletic Center, radically increased not only the square footage devoted to fitness and wellness but also the value of the athletic complex to the campus community. The renovation of New London Hall transformed the College's oldest academic building into a state-of-the-art science center, combining life sciences and computer science to create new possibilities for research and teaching in bioinformatics. The award-winning restoration of the historic Steel House, a rare example of 1930s pre-fab architecture, created a fitting home for our Office of Sustainability. The renovation of a space in the Smith-Burdick residence halls transformed our ability to support LGBTQIA students. And finally, the renovation of the Charles E. Shain Library, another award-winning project planned under Higdon and completed under President Katherine Bergeron, has recharged the modern spirit of the building while adding essential new resources to support student learning and collaborative education for the 21st century.

Just as the library project was being launched, the Connecticut College faculty were beginning a renovation of a different kind, with the aim of increasing the value and impact of the College's general education program. This curricular renewal, developed over a number of years, brings us to the present moment. The effort resulted in Connections, a powerful expression of the College's mission for our time. Modeled on the strength of the certificate programs offered through our centers for interdisciplinary scholarship, this new integrative curriculum—designed to inform the educational

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experience of every student—represents the first major reform of the College’s general education program in forty years, and the most ambitious achievement to date in the evolution of teaching and learning at Connecticut College.

Liberal Arts for the Interconnected World

Connections emerged from a growing awareness on the part of our faculty that the College’s approach to general education was no longer serving the current generation of students. Participation in the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education between 2006 and 2010 provided evidence that, while our majors and certificate programs were providing excellent academic outcomes, the initial experiences of students in general education and introductory courses needed improvement. The faculty recognized that 21st-century students require new integrative skills to make their way in the world. They recognized that success

will be increasingly defined by how well students are able to communicate and collaborate with other people. And they recognized that students’ future professions will require them to work with people all over the globe in as-yet undefined industries. As a result, the faculty designed a curriculum that is as progressive as the one that inaugurated Connecticut College a century ago. Connections is meant not just to develop the capacities normally associated with the liberal arts—critical and creative faculties, linguistic abilities, powers of observation and interpretation, technical prowess—but also, and more importantly, to encourage students to put all these things together in new ways.

It is designed, in a word, to unleash creativity—helping students discover the center of their own curiosity and passion, and guiding them, along a meaningful pathway, to bring that passion to every dimension of the college experience: to courses and research, to clubs and activities, to jobs in the local community and abroad, and ultimately into their lives beyond college. The goal is to encourage personally meaningful intellectual inquiry: to promote thinking across disciplines, to expand problem-solving skills, and to develop an appreciation for the complexity of cultural understanding.

In practical terms, first-year students begin with specially engineered introductory courses, supported by a new, team-based advising system, to set them on the right path. In the sophomore year, students are asked to step back and reflect on the things they care about the most. That reflection functions as an important frame for all the choices sophomores make: the choice of their academic major; the choice of how or where to study abroad; but, even more important, the choice of that element most central to Connections: the Integrative Pathway.

The Pathway is a set of interdisciplinary courses and other experiences organized around a central theme.¹ It is where students will formulate and explore their question over the next three years. In the junior year, they expand on that inquiry further by doing internships and research in the local community or around the world. And in the senior year, they tie it all together in an integrative project. The goal, in the end, is for every student to explore different cultures and identities, for every one of them to grapple with complexity, for every one of them to contribute to the community, for every one of them to put the liberal arts into action in their own unique way. We see it as the new liberal arts for our interconnected world. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation awarded the College \$1.55 million to support the development of Connections over three years.

The College's new strategic plan, *Building on Strength*, is built on the strength of this educational vision. The plan has three major priorities: to elevate the College's academic distinction, to deepen the student experience, and to support a more just and sustainable community. These, too, are interconnected. The College recognizes that there is no distinctive academic program without a vibrant life beyond the classroom, that there is no vibrant student experience without sustaining a more just community, and that a just community is a necessary condition for any truly distinctive educational endeavor. Motivating all three priorities is the ideal of what the legal theorist Susan Sturm has called full participation: the commitment to create an environment that allows all people to thrive, to achieve their full potential, and to contribute—to the college, to their community, and ultimately to a vibrant and healthy democracy. This is another, more pointed expression of what it means to fulfill our mission by putting the liberal arts into action.

The plan envisions Connecticut College becoming a leader in integrative education. It envisions the College advancing its excellence in scientific research and the arts. It envisions developing the best liberal arts career program in the country. It envisions more competitive athletics and wellness for all students. It envisions renewed efforts in sustainability. And, most importantly, it envisions an exemplary community based on understanding, dialogue, and a deep respect for difference. Two initiatives are already underway in support of this goal: a Mellon-funded faculty development program in equity pedagogy and a new Institute for Leadership, Dialogue, and Diplomacy to expand educational opportunities for students.

To make this vision a reality, the College must grow its endowment, expand and develop programs, and invest in facilities. As in the past, our approach will be on thoughtful interventions that enable our existing spaces to carry the greatest impact. We have entered the silent phase of the College's next comprehensive campaign to generate the appropriate support. Some projects are underway; others will take many more years to complete.

One has already come to fruition. In January 2018, the College completed renovations of the ground floor of the Blaustein Humanities Center to create the Walter Commons for Global Study and Engagement. This new facility is a visible manifestation of the College's strength in global education—a vibrant new center that amplifies the impact of our distinctive international programs

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¹ As of early 2018, nine Integrative Pathways have been developed and approved by the faculty on the following topics: Bodies/Embodiment; Entrepreneurship; Liberal Arts; Global Capitalism; Peace and Conflict; Public Health; Social Justice and Sustainability; Cities and Schools; and Power/Knowledge. A number of new pathways, focusing on creativity, migration, and food, are in the initial stages of development.



by bringing together our center for world languages and cultures, educational programs abroad, the centers for international study and the critical study of race and ethnicity, and opportunities for local and global engagement. All are housed under one roof, encouraging students to put their language study into perspective while integrating a personally meaningful global experience into their four-year course of study.

In a similar vein, we plan to showcase the strength of our career programs by bringing them to the heart of our campus as we also place that kind of learning at the center of a liberal arts education. The concept we are currently developing includes the career center in the redesign of the College Center at Crozier-Williams—to create a hub of alternative learning and community engagement beyond the classroom. In the fall of 2015, the College received the largest single gift in its history, a gift of \$20 million from Rob Hale '88 and his wife Karen Hale, focused on strengthening our career program, our athletic program, and financial aid. A new campus master plan, now underway, is considering strategic renovations to the campus center, the career center, and the athletics center in order to increase their impact.

Finally, building on our historic strength in the arts, we have plans to elevate the venerable Palmer Auditorium into a site that will not only inspire cutting-edge performance and research but also situate the arts fully in the context of a liberal arts mission focused on equity and justice. The College has received two gifts totaling \$20 million to support an historically informed renovation and expansion of the building.

We undertake these ambitious plans with the full awareness of the increasingly challenging national landscape of higher education. But we move forward with the same conviction that motivated our forebears when they undertook to create a modern College with an educational mission responsive to the needs of its time. Our comprehensive review of the curriculum and our strategic planning work have reinforced for us the value of ongoing review and evaluation in clarifying institutional purposes and priorities in fulfillment of our mission. The insights we have gained shed light not only on the progress we have made so far but also on the good work that lies before us. ■