“I experience tremendous joy living and working in a learning community.”

MAUD S. MANDEL, WILLIAMS' 1811 PRESIDENT
SPEAKING TRUTH

“In this age of contradictions, where it’s so hard to believe in anything, believe in yourself.” That was the message award-winning journalist Bob Schieffer delivered at Commencement on June 3. He also urged graduates to remember that truth “is the glue that holds democracies together, as crucial to our system of government as the right to vote.” For complete coverage of Williams’ 229th Commencement, visit commencement.williams.edu.
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Back cover illustration: Eric Hanson
Intentional Joy

LIFE HAS BEEN A RUSH OF JOYOUS ACTIVITY SINCE THE WILLIAMS BOARD OF Trustees appointed me as the college’s 18th president in the spring. First the happy blur of the public announcement in March, then campus meetings with faculty, students and staff. Next came my family’s relocation, which was a significant endeavor after 16 years of living in the same home. And now this inaugural column—my first official “meeting” with many of you in the Williams community of alumni, parents and friends, as well as faculty, staff and students. As I told a campus audience during a visit in April, it’s hard to capture just how thrilling it is to finally have the opportunity to say hello. My early meetings with fellow Ephs confirmed the sense that I’m joining a welcoming and supportive community, eager to partner with me for the future.

As I mentioned in my April remarks in Chapin Hall, I began my own educational journey at Oberlin College. I credit that experience with making me a curious person—forcing me to question every assumption and ground my opinions in evidence. Over the course of 20 years at Brown, I committed myself to instilling in students that same appreciation for the power of inquiry and evidence. The Williams presidency is a thrilling opportunity to extend those efforts further and more boldly. And the timing couldn’t be more apt: In the face of competing truth claims and an overabundance of input, young people face many temptations to retreat into politicized corners—to talk only to those with whom they agree, and to narrow the influx of information. They need robust educational opportunities to teach them how to sift through information, analyze data, form ideas and opinions, and develop the communication skills and moral courage to engage thoughtfully across many forms of difference.

This issue of the magazine, which arrives in your mailbox at roughly the same moment I arrive at Williams, includes some vivid examples. Perhaps the most prominent is “Deconstructing Borders,” a conversation among professors who study and teach about the complex interactions among identity, community and social media. The faculty come from diverse disciplines, including Africana studies, religion and computer science, but they converge on profound questions about the relationship between community and technology.

Elsewhere in the magazine, you’ll find the story of a new class on free speech that has drawn students into discussion of difficult topics from very different viewpoints, and another piece about Cindy Frantz ’91, now a professor at my alma mater, who has studied the psychology of apologies and their connections to the environment.

There’s much more here, including a fun feature that looks into some of Williams’ most colorful myths. These nuggets of Williams lore—the stories we tell each other—can also play a role in how we constitute our community when they’re approached with an appropriate degree of skepticism and good humor.

Earlier I referred to the last few months as a “rush of joyous activity.” My reference to joy is absolutely intentional. As I hope you will discover, I experience tremendous joy living and working in a learning community. Williams is without a doubt that community.

—MAUD S. MANDEL, PRESIDENT
THE DANGER OF NORMALIZATION
As a proud Williams alum who was shaped by the institution’s stated values (including a commitment to diversity, equity and sustainability), I was shocked to see the Williams platform used to elevate the Heritage Foundation in the spring 2018 issue (“Election Results”). I certainly commend the effort to spotlight a variety of political actors. The danger is ending the conversation there and normalizing the Heritage Foundation’s role in the political landscape without offering a transparent and balanced account of its values, goals and impact.
Heritage is considered a “massive marketing machine” for right-wing ideology and is pushing conservative policy even further from the common good. It increasingly influences policy to the detriment of human rights, healthcare access and the environment.
Is Williams proud to be affiliated with something so at odds with the intellectual ethos of our community?
—GABRIEL JOFFE ’11, BOSTON, MASS.

MORE LESSONS
I was delighted to discover that your recent article about Winter Study, “50 years of Lessons” (spring 2018), included one of my most memorable experiences at Williams, the Back in the U.S.S.R. course of 1980. The accompanying photo looked rather familiar, and a quick check of an old album confirmed that it was one of the many pictures I took on the trip. I am pleased to see the picture reach a wider audience and hope that it evokes fond memories for many of those fellow students who accompanied me.
—JOHN DUFFIELD ’80, DECATUR, GA.

Your reference to Professor Charles Dew ’58 and his Winter Study course The Historian as Detective (“50 Years of Lessons”) brought especially happy memories to mind. My wife, Isabel, and I were the first parents—possibly the only parents—to participate in that Winter Study course with Williams undergraduates. (Perhaps Sarah Barnes ’84, quoted in your article, was one of the students in our class.)
It was January of 1982. It was a great course. Just being able to hold rare documents in our hands was thrilling. And our experience in the class resulted in two published articles. Isabel’s was in The New York Times education section, describing the course and her reaction to it. My article in the CPA Journal reviewed George Washington’s will, the original of which I studied at Williams.
Thanks for the memories.
—STUART KESSLER, PA ’83, ARDSLEY, N.Y.

A FINE JOB
I wish to congratulate you and your staff on the spring 2018 Williams Magazine. It’s remarkable how the stories therein give one a good reminder of the college and the campus yet manage to speak to alums on subjects to which they can relate. Among the stories that are truly new to us oldsters—and, in this case, fascinating—was the one on Winter Study. I wish Williams had offered this back in the early ’60s. “The Language of Family” involved kidney transplants; having had one myself, I could definitely relate. Toward the end of the magazine was the article on the typewriter (“Re-learning How to Write”). A wonderfully laid out and brightly illustrated story on a timeless product. If your purpose is to keep alums informed about their alma mater with interesting stories and excellent writing (not to mention outstanding design and high-quality reproduction), I think you’re doing a fine job. Keep up the good work.
—WINSTON WOOD ’63, NOVATO, CALIF.
SILO SONGS

A historic wooden silo in Pittsfield, Mass., is the site of a new, immersive sound installation. *Silo Songs*, a collaboration between Hancock Shaker Village and Brad Wells, Williams’ Lyell B. Clay Artist in Residence, is inspired by hymnals and song sheets from the college’s Shaker Collection and the library at Hancock Shaker Village. “To be invited into a project where I get to play with sounds is a gift,” says Wells, who is the artistic director of the Grammy Award-winning ensemble Roomful of Teeth. Learn more—and listen—at bit.ly/silosongs.
A FUTURE IN PHYSICS

Bingyi Wang ’18 has been named among the inaugural class of Knight-Hennessy Scholars, the largest fully endowed scholarship program in the world. The scholarship supports up to 100 high-achieving students from around the globe in their pursuit of any graduate degree at Stanford University.

A physics major from Xuzhou, China, Wang says she plans to seek a Ph.D. on her way to becoming “a conscientious physicist, using science and technology to improve human lives and promote social change.”

At Williams, Wang was a teaching assistant in the physics and Asian studies departments as well as co-chair of the student group Women and Gender Minorities in Physics and Astronomy. As a researcher in experimental atomic and laser physics, she worked collaboratively with physics professor Tiku Majumder and other colleagues on a project to probe theories of atomic structure in heavy atoms. Their results were published in the February 2018 issue of Physical Review.

“Bingyi has grown into a true junior colleague, an important scientific contributor to all of our ongoing work and a mentor of younger students in the lab,” Majumder says. “I am looking forward to hearing about her exciting future endeavors as she heads to Stanford.”

TRUSTEES JOIN BOARD

On July 1, Williams welcomed Mariam Naficy ’91 and Gretchen Howard ’95 to its Board of Trustees.

Naficy is the founder and CEO of Minted, an online marketplace that crowdsources prints, stationery and other high-end paper goods developed by independent artists and designers and then sells their work. In 2013 she received a Bicentennial Medal from Williams in recognition of her entrepreneurial success. She is a former class associate agent and admission representative.

Howard, who was elected by the Society of Alumni and appointed by the trustees, is a partner at CapitalG, a venture capital firm financed by Google’s parent corporation, Alphabet Inc. She chaired her Williams class’s 20th reunion. As an undergraduate, she was captain of women’s ice hockey and helped lead the team’s transition from club sport to varsity sport.

The Board of Trustees also reappointed Elizabeth A. Anderson ’87 and William C. Foote ’73. Richard R. Pickard ’75 stepped down when his term ended on June 30.

Number of times, including this year, that Williams’ athletic teams have won the Directors’ Cup in the award’s 23-year history. Six Williams teams finished fifth or better nationally, 10 finished in the top 10, and 15 finished in the top 20. Overall, Williams finished 125 points ahead of second-place Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The cup is awarded by the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics to the best all-around sports program based on team performance in NCAA championships.
NEW DIRECTION

AFRICANA STUDIES PROFESSOR Rhon Manigault-Bryant will use a Mellon Foundation New Directions Fellowship to attend film school. The fellowships allow faculty to seek training outside their discipline. Manigault-Bryant has long been interested in how some black, male filmmakers represent black women, often by playing the roles themselves.

“I was teaching Introduction to Religion, the year Tyler Perry’s *Madea Goes to Jail* came out, and I overheard some of my white students parodying the film, which depends on filmic representations of the main character’s faith,” says Manigault-Bryant, whose research has focused on religion and womanist/black feminist thought.

“I decided then to develop the knowledge necessary to help students interpret representations of black women on the big screen.”

Movies such as those from Perry, Eddie Murphy and Martin Lawrence often center around the black church, and “the characters played by black men in drag conjure multiple historical stereotypes, especially the mammy figure,” she says.

Manigault-Bryant will attend NYU’s Tisch School, complete a book about how film influences popular representations of the black female religious body and gain the skills necessary to help Williams students become critical spectators of popular visual media.

“I’m eager to put my formal training to use and make documentary film,” she says.

ILLUSTRATION: MIKE LOWERY

AT A GLANCE

Dixieland was all the rage at Williams in 1954, when a group of students formed the band Phinney’s Favorite Five. Now, more than half a century later, four original members are still swinging as the Williams Reunion Jazz Band (WRJB), a reunion staple that also draws crowds year-round at performances all over the country.

WRJB had a full schedule at reunion in June, with Clifford and Kingsbury celebrating their class’s 60th. Halsey and Hayne have their reunions in 2019.

WRJB plays the popular Delta Queen Mississippi riverboat tour for alumni.

For Williams’ bicentennial in 1993, WRJB performed to a sold-out crowd with the Boston Pops at Symphony Hall in Boston.

In 1954, a group of students met in Baxter Hall to form Phinney’s Favorite Five. Both the building and the band are named for James Phinney Baxter, Class of 1914, who served as Williams’ president from 1937 to 1961.

Fred Clifford ’58 (tuba), John Halsey ’59 (piano), Tom Hayne ’59 (drums) and Bob Kingsbury ’58 (clarinet) reunited in 1983 as WRJB.

The band is busy year-round with gigs up and down the East Coast.
A CLOSER LOOK

IT'S SOMETHING

FOR THE SENIOR EXHIBITION IT’S NOT NOTHING AT THE WILLIAMS COLLEGE Museum of Art, English and studio art major Phoebe Mattana ’18 says she focused on the idea of “the camera as a gun—a tool of oppression in modernist consumerist culture used to sell not only products and services but also a set of cultural ideals.” Her photos make use of products like eggs, jelly, laundry detergent and beer “to draw attention to the body as a consumable object.” Mattana was among the nine senior studio art majors who exhibited their work in May and June.

CATCHING UP WITH WATSON FELLOW ROB HEFFERON ’18

Rob Hefferon ’18 is among the select few to win this year’s Thomas J. Watson Fellowship. The $30,000 stipend enables the Spanish and political science major to spend a year traveling the globe and examining important societal issues as they relate to coffee. Williams Magazine caught up with him before he headed overseas.

Why coffee?
I view coffee as having the potential to be an empowering force, to lift people up and bring them together in community. But in many ways, it is instead used as a tool of inequality and separation.

Where will you travel?
My project aims to visit countries all along the supply chain. I plan to start in the Netherlands at the World Coffee Expo and then visit Tanzania, Panama, Colombia and Japan.

What do you hope to learn?
I hope to look at ways that power imbalances within and between countries cause the dynamics I mentioned earlier. My goals are to understand the coffee system better and to use this [opportunity] as a lens for exploring my place as a privileged, global citizen. Whether I end up working in coffee in the future or something else entirely, I'm looking forward to seeing how this year can build my communication and planning skills while deepening my understanding of these issues that are tied up in—but go far beyond—coffee.

H. Ganse “Binks” Little, who joined the Williams faculty in 1963, died on March 14. He was 85.

Little served as chair of the religion department for 20 years during a time that witnessed the development of a landmark introductory religion course. He also was chair of the Committee of Undergraduate Life, paving the way for student membership on standing committees that, until then, were strictly composed of faculty.

“Almost immediately following his faculty appointment in the Department of Religion, it became apparent that Binks Little had the potential to become a significant leader in his department and in the college generally,” says John Chandler, Williams president, emeritus.

Little is survived by his wife, Susan, three sons, including William Little ’85, and six grandsons.

IN MEMORIAM

WILLIAMS NAMES CHAPLAIN

THE REV. VALERIE BAILEY FISCHER JOINS Williams in July as chaplain to the college. She has more than 11 years of college chaplaincy experience, nearly a decade in ordained ministry and strong foundations in experiential education and social justice. “I am inspired by how the chaplains, faculty, staff and students are engaged in issues of faith and religion in a variety of ways,” she says. “I am excited to be part of this process as chaplain to the college.”

At Framingham State University, where she was university chaplain, Bailey Fischer helped students from a variety of religious, moral and philosophical traditions form and strengthen their communities.

Raised in the African-American Pentecostal tradition, Bailey Fischer joined the Episcopal Church as a young adult. She has a B.A. from Penn State and an M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary. She is completing a dissertation in Anglican studies and U.S. Episcopal Church history at General Theological Seminary.

American politics is typically defined by winners, but hindsight provides an opportunity to reconsider some political losers. In Legacies of Losing in American Politics (University of Chicago Press, 2018), political science professor Nicole Mellow and co-author Jeffrey K. Tulis review three key moments in American history with an eye on the “losing” side to reveal that “the very mechanisms that caused the initial failures facilitated their eventual success.”

The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment (Harvard University Press, 2018), by history professor Alexander Bevilacqua, retraces the routes that Christian scholars traveled “to acquire, study and comprehend Arabic manuscripts” and argues that the Western effort to understand Islam happened through “the scholarly commitments of a select group of Christians.”

How did America’s view of gay marriage change so dramatically over the last 25 years? In From Tolerance to Equality: How Elites Brought America to Same-Sex Marriage (Baylor University Press, 2018), political science professor Darel E. Paul writes about how the country’s educational and business elites led the way for cultural change, and he provides a “road map to the emerging American political and cultural landscape.”

RECENTLY PUBLISHED

In his survey course The Modern Middle East, history professor Magnus T. Bernhardsson covers topics including cultural diversity, radical religious groups, the impact of imperialism and the discovery of oil. His book Mið-Austurlönd (which means Middle East in Icelandic and was published by Eymundsson in 2018) is based on the class, and “each chapter is like a week in this course.”

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MAUD S. MANDEL WASN’T LOOKING TO BECOME A COLLEGE PRESIDENT.

Her entire professional career—more than 20 years—had been at Brown University, teaching history and Judaic studies, establishing policy and practice as a faculty leader, and, most recently, working to enhance the undergraduate academic experience as dean of the college. She was committed to the place and to the people. ¶ Then, in late November, she received a call. A search was under way for Williams’ 18th president. Would she be interested in learning more? ¶ It was, Mandel says, “an opportunity too good not to explore.” ¶ She knew well Williams’ “enviable position of being a leader in the liberal arts college landscape, modeling answers to the questions facing higher education in the 21st century.” As she got to know more about the college, it became clear to her that, “given where I’ve been professionally, it was a great fit on every side. The presidency of Williams really spoke to me.”
IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES announced Mandel’s appointment in March, she began talking with students, faculty, staff and alumni—lots of them.

She addressed the campus community one sunny day in April, explaining that it was “gratifying and enticing to discover Williams through the eyes of those who love it.” The many emails, letters and packages of “purple paraphernalia” she and her family received “made clear to us the character of the community we are joining: its tight-knit and supportive culture, its whimsical sense of humor and its intellectual energy.”

That kind of intellectual energy has fueled Mandel’s life and work since her childhood. She remembers at a very young age accompanying her father, Barrett Mandel, to Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., where he taught Modern Drama and other English courses. “He’s a really gifted educator, and I used to go to his classes with him,” she says. “I learned a love of literature and theater and, also, how to teach in creative and interesting ways.”

Her mother, Ruth Mandel, is director of Rutgers’ Eagleton Institute of Politics. Before that, she was founder and director of the institute’s Center for American Women and Politics. “I learned so much from my mom,” Mandel says, particularly “the intellectual rewards that can come from building an academic institution—what is really possible when you can creatively lead an institution in ways that somebody hasn’t before.”

Mandel has drawn deeply from both her parents’ lives and lessons. In the classroom she encourages her students to consider the complexities and constraints influencing their subjects’ choices, particularly those choices that might seem immoral or ethically ambiguous in the context of our own times. In doing so, she challenges students to move past simple value judgments to a deeper understanding of the forces shaping human behavior over time.

As a young faculty member at Brown, she immersed herself in the work of the history department, the Judaic studies program and faculty governance. She served on or led committees concerned with planning and priorities, equity and diversity, and hiring and tenure. In 2014, the year she became a full professor, she also completed a two-year term as director of Judaic studies and was named dean of the college, Brown’s senior undergraduate academic officer.

Among her many accomplishments as dean, stewarding the academic experiences of 6,500 students, she led the establishment of the Brown Learning Collaborative. A peer-to-peer program, the collaborative is aimed at strengthening student learning in what Mandel calls “core liberal arts competencies”: writing, reading, research, data analysis, problem-solving and public speaking. She was also deeply involved with expanding experiential learning opportunities, including those rooted in undergraduate research and community engagement. In addition, Mandel oversaw the creation of the First-Generation College and Low-Income Student Center (FLiCenter). One of the first centers of its kind in the country—and developed in partnership with students and staff—the FLiCenter supports Brown’s first-generation and low-income students in achieving their academic and personal goals.

“I learned early on at Brown the importance of working collaboratively, which is really a placeholder for listening closely,” Mandel says. “Campuses are full of really smart people, and, if you listen closely, they have very good ideas. You take the very best ideas and move them forward, working through disagreements until you come to a viable consensus. To me, the best models of leadership at a college or university tap into the collaborative energy of multiple constituents in this way.”

In announcing Mandel’s departure from Brown, University President Christina Paxson praised the changes she brought about as well as her leadership style. “Both inside the classroom and as a senior academic leader, Maud’s impact on the undergraduate experience at Brown has been nothing short of transformative,” Paxson stated. “She is a deeply knowledgeable higher education leader.”

Says Mandel, “I see myself as an educator, first and foremost. What’s central about that role is thinking critically about evidence, teaching students to challenge assumptions, how to find answers to the questions they have, exposing them to explorations and topics that they didn’t know were out there, and helping them figure out what they’re curious about.”

At Brown, she taught courses on aspects of Jewish and European history, including antisemitism and Islamophobia, the history of the Holocaust, Zionism and the birth of the State of Israel, and the history of minorities in Europe. She plans to continue teaching at Williams once she’s settled.

“I take such joy in teaching,” Mandel says. “So much of what has shaped my career is helping students find their own way intellectually, personally and morally—and to help them figure out their pathways through education.”
After attending public school in Princeton, N.J., Mandel headed to Oberlin College, where she majored in English. She studied abroad in Aix-en-Provence, where she became close friends with members of the Armenian refugee community living there. In long conversations in which they recounted the circumstances that led their families to France, Mandel heard echoes of her own family’s history of diaspora, displacement and genocide.

Mandel’s grandfather, a shopkeeper from Vienna, was imprisoned in Dachau during Kristallnacht in 1938. At the time, the Nazis were pressuring Jews to leave Europe, and her grandfather was released only after her grandmother procured a ticket for him to travel to Shanghai by boat.

The couple instead made their way to Hamburg with their infant daughter—Mandel’s mother, who in 2015 related their story to The Star-Ledger of New Jersey. The family boarded the St. Louis, a German ocean liner bound for Cuba with 937 Holocaust refugees. The ship arrived in Havana but was turned away. Requests to dock in Florida and Canada were also denied, and the captain was forced to return to Europe.

Mandel’s family and others were dropped off in England, where her grandfather eventually joined the British Army. Her grandmother and mother moved to the English countryside. Other refugees went to France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Historians estimate that as many as 250 of the passengers aboard the St. Louis ultimately perished at the hands of the Nazis.

The Joy of Exploration

Mandel gets to know members of the Williams community at a reception in April.
Having grown up with stories of refugee flight and deportation, Mandel felt a sense of kinship with the Armenian refugees she came to know in France. She returned to Oberlin with a deep desire to understand more. “But I took courses in Russian and Ottoman history to learn as much about the Armenian experience as I could,” she says. “That was the beginning of my academic journey into the study of minorities, displacement, integration and history.”

The summer after she graduated from college, Mandel took a job with the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA), founded in 1949 to help resettle the large numbers of Russian Jews migrating to the United States. Mandel thought she would pursue a career in immigrant law, and she felt a strong connection to NYANA’s mission. Around the time she worked there, the organization provided assistance to 20,000 Jewish refugees, the largest influx in any single year since immediately after World War II.

But, she says, she “really missed school.” Reflecting on her experience with the Armenian refugees in France, the work she was doing with NYANA, and her family’s history, she realized she had the makings of a comparative research project that became her dissertation at the University of Michigan and, ultimately, the focus of her teaching and scholarship at Brown.


“This all started when I studied abroad: thinking about Jewish minorities and Armenian minorities, these very different but parallel backgrounds, and the impact of the French state,” she says. “My work as a historian began with these initial questions that took root as a college junior while studying abroad. I took these questions with me to graduate school, where I was immersed in the discipline of history as a tool for answering these questions.”

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**“Williams, with a handful of peers, is in the enviable position of being a leader in the liberal arts college landscape.”**

—WILLIAMS PRESIDENT MAUD S. MANDEL

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**THREE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT MAUD S. MANDEL**

1 **SHE IS AN AVID WALKER.** After college, when she was working for the New York Association for New Americans, Mandel got into the habit of walking from the offices on Fifth Avenue and 17th Street in Manhattan to her home in Brooklyn every evening. “It was the perfect thing to do, living in New York without significant financial resources,” she says. “It was a great way to see the city and interact with people. I’d grab a sandwich, get some good exercise and enjoy being on the Brooklyn Bridge.”

Walking is now a “major hobby,” and she and her husband, Steve Simon, were well known for nightly walks around their East Greenwich, R.I., neighborhood. “I’m sure the people of Williamstown will get tired of seeing us march around,” she says with a laugh.

2 **SHE REVELS IN HER WORK.** While addressing the campus community in April, Mandel related a story about her final interview with the Board of Trustees. Michael Eisenson ’77, board chair and head of the presidential search committee, noted that Williams was looking for a president who would “revel” in the job. Mandel joked that she knew of many college presidents “who would not say that they revel in their jobs on most days. Having said that, and as I hope you will see, I am that person. I experience tremendous joy living and working in a learning community.”

Reflecting later on why that’s the case, she says, “I don’t know the source of that joy, exactly. I think it’s that I find people fascinating. And the communities and college
It’s not surprising, then, that inclusion is a central focus of Mandel’s presidency at Williams, which began on July 1.

She’s quick to point out that Williams has made meaningful progress on issues such as access to higher education and diversification of the student body, faculty and staff. “But a subsequent issue that higher ed is dealing with, one that’s particularly interesting to me, is thinking about how institutions themselves will have to change to reflect the changing nature of the student body,” Mandel says. “Inclusion in higher education has come to mean not just: ‘We want to bring people here from different walks of life.’ Once the people are here, we have to consider what has to happen to ensure that they are successful in their journeys through these institutions.

“Differences among people can sometimes lead to misunderstandings, largely due to ungrounded assumptions and lack of deep knowledge as to the origins of those differences,” she says. “How do we create environments where students can successfully learn about each other and interact comfortably with people and ideas that challenge them?”

It’s a crucial endeavor at a time when people are more likely to listen to voices they agree with rather than engage across difference or risk being called out publicly. That kind of “uncomfortable learning,” so central to the Williams experience, is also at the core of the liberal arts—the value of which is under increased scrutiny.

Mandel says it’s necessary for leaders in the liberal arts “to frame what we’re doing so that people can understand how profoundly powerful this kind of education is for students as they move forward not only as professionals but also as members of the global community. These are skills students have worked on their whole lives. But in that high-octane, four-year experience that a liberal arts education provides, they can make light years of advances on these competencies. These are transferable skills that they can take with them no matter what they do.”

The challenges facing higher education are “bigger than just our schools,” she adds. “But Williams, with a handful of peers, is in the enviable position of being a leader in the liberal arts college landscape, with significant human and other resources, to move forward in this space. Working together, with faculty, staff, the student body, parents and alumni, we can think together about how to ensure that Williams is proactively addressing these challenges and helping to lead the national conversation on the power of the liberal arts in today’s world.”

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She comes from a tight-knit family. As the only child of an only child (her mother), Mandel says her family—her parents, her husband, their children Lev and Ava, and the people she has connected with through marriage and children—“is one of the most important parts of my life.” “I’m a very active professional person, obviously,” she says. “But that success has gone hand in hand with the value I place on my family and friends as my top priority.”

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Mandel and her family in Chapin Hall.
DECONSTRUCT
Williams faculty explore how social media has moved from the personal to the political and now to the pedagogical—as both a teaching tool and a subject of critical study.
Social media has the potential to build community, create solidarity and spread ideas more quickly and broadly than ever. It can also deepen divisions, silence voices and skew perceptions of reality.

In a wide-ranging conversation led by sociology professor Christina Simko in May, professors María Elena Cepeda in Latina/o studies, VaNatta Ford in Africana studies, Bill Jannen ’09 in computer science and Saadia Yacoob in religion delved into these issues and more.

**CHRISTINA SIMKO:** Can you start by introducing yourselves and your relationship to social media?

**SAADIA YACOOB:** This is my fourth year here. I teach in the religion department on all issues related to Islam. Social media plays a big role in my teaching. That’s the only way I can connect students to living conversations, because there aren’t local communities they can visit.

**VANATTA FORD:** I’m an assistant professor in Africana studies. I’ve also been here four years. My background is in rhetoric and communication, encompassing media and social media. I teach a class specifically on social media, Trending Black. In my own research on colorism in music, conversations about color happen on social media. I’m concerned with how black folks curate digital spaces—not just African-Americans but global blacks. What does it mean to be Afro-Latino or continental African, and how are people having conversations about color and pop culture?

**BILL JANNEN ’09:** I joined the computer science department two years ago. I don’t use social media personally, but I talk about it in class and use it in labs and projects with students.

**MARÍA ELENA CEPEDA:** I’ve been here since 2005, in Latina/Latino studies. My training is in media, ethnic, gender and American studies. I use social media, and a lot of my classes are on media studies, popular culture and cultural studies. I think a lot about how our students use visual forms of communication more than traditional textual forms. I’m interested in how Latinos in the United States and globally use social media, often in ways they think of as being transgressive but actually are not. I also think about surveillance and data mining.

**JANNEN:** That was one of the things I focused on in my tutorial The Socio-Techno Web: “Let’s be skeptical about all technologies.” We looked at the implicit contract you make as a social media user.

**YACOOB:** Surveillance has definitely been one of the issues in the American Muslim community.

**FORD:** It’s interesting how it’s become part of social media, but surveilling people who push back has been the American way.

**SIMKO:** Can you all talk about the intersections between identity and social media?

**CEPEDA:** I can’t separate them. This has long been understood in media studies—your offline identity is not separate from your online identity. Sometimes students idealize social media as this democratic space where the categories you occupy offline don’t influence what’s going on online. That’s not the way it works.

**YACOOB:** What’s interesting is the footprint you leave. On social media, everybody can bring up an old screenshot. People cling to the idea that it’s impermanent. That shapes people’s behaviors online and sometimes leads them to articulate things they might not necessarily do in other spaces.
YACOOB: Earlier this year, Amena Khan, a British Muslim beauty blogger, was hired by L'Oreal as their first hijab-wearing model for their hair-care campaign. In less than a week she stepped down because of some tweets from four years ago when she criticized the Israeli occupation. She ended up apologizing for the tweets, but if you’re racialized as a Muslim, it doesn’t matter what you say. That one tweet that you had several years ago is seen as a marker of the real you.

FORD: Do you think it also depends on who the person is? Linda Sarsour [a political activist and former executive director of the Arab American Association of New York] has always gotten flack, but she’s been able to recover, at least in certain circles where people still view her as relevant. I wonder if some of it is about who it is and what job or status they’re taking.

YACOOB: Yes. But somebody like Linda Sarsour—there are certain circles in which she is able to recover, precisely because those circles are committed to fighting any attack on a prominent Arab American Muslim woman. Then there are other circles who keep bringing up tweets from when she wasn’t so prominent and thus spoke less guardedly. What she might say now doesn’t matter. What she said several years ago matters. Yet people who claim to be ex-Muslims have every right to shift their identity, because that plays into the narrative.

JANNEN: Surveillance is a big consumer of storage products and technologies. Storage media is so cheap that it’s always worth it to store everything. In my tutorial I asked: Are we against surveillance in principle, or are we against the use of data once it’s collected? We discussed how different countries have borders and laws, but the digital world spans all of that.

CEPEDA: It doesn’t respect borders.

SIMKO: In the E.U., there is the right to be forgotten. Students in my course on memory and forgetting are puzzled by how this works in a global community that increasingly doesn’t recognize borders in how we communicate with others.

YACOOB: It becomes a challenge when you live in a part of the world where you are socialized into thinking you can speak more freely, because surveillance happens in ways that are not overt. But what if you also have connections in parts of the world where surveillance is much more obvious? Your sense of self has to keep changing based on the geographical locations you’re attached to.

SIMKO: Sociologist Erving Goffman, whose “social life” is analogous to the theater, says we’re all essentially actors performing various social roles. He calls this “impression management.” How has social media influenced the performance of identity?

FORD: We all perform in different ways on social media, but normative performativity worries me. I try to help my students understand that they can perform as they’re navigating social media spaces and still be themselves but at the same time not try to curate something unreal.

CEPEDA: Performance, per se, is part of being a human being. But social media spaces strike me as being both mundane and spectacular, in that people tend to post, articulate and speak about both the most banal and the most compelling moments in their lives, and there’s not a lot in between. It’s a different way of understanding the world. Take selfies, which can strike people of an older generation as narcissistic.

YACOOB: I’m definitely of that generation. I see selfies and I’m like, “You didn’t need a selfie in that post. You just want people to say you look good.”

FORD: It’s human to want to be affirmed. But I wonder if social media has interfered on what’s positive or healthy affirmation. There’s something to be said about why we’re only looking for affirmation this way.

SIMKO: I’m wondering if you think social media has collapsed our identities in some significant way. Actors were once able to segregate their roles—teacher, student, parent, activist—because they play them all in physically distinct spheres. But you can’t tailor your performance to specific audiences when you only have one Twitter feed.

CEPEDA: This is something I notice because I’m from an immigrant family. I have one foot in Colombia, one foot in the United States. I have the audience I write to in Spanish, the audience I write to in Spanglish and the audience I write to in English, and then there are different kinds of English, different rhetorical strategies. But there are some uses of language and concepts where it’s like the borders have dissolved.

YACOOB: I post a lot on feminist engagements with the Islamic tradition. I know people on Facebook who, when I meet them in person, say, “Oh, you’re Saadia Yacoob? But you’re so nice!” Because they read my critiques in a certain tone. They have their own assumption about how someone posting about these things sounds.

CEPEDA: That has everything to do with the interior voices with which they’re reading: “OK, Muslim feminist.”

FORD: I get this, too. There has not been a lot of research yet on how language, especially African-American...
vernacular English, has been used throughout not just Black Twitter, but Twitter.

CEPEDA: It’s like memes.

FORD: The ways in which people post a meme is in the tradition of black humor, specifically African-American humor and language. It has shaped and created a cultural tradition via a platform that wasn’t meant to be “black.”

CEPEDA: I see that as different from using African-American vernacular language in a meme. Reposting or retweeting it is different than the tradition of Black Twitter, which I think of as like what bell hooks would call “talking back.” I don’t think people have that fine-grained awareness. I want to stop and ask them, “Do you know what you’re doing?”

FORD: Most of the time, I have no problem unless people make it seem like they created it. There’s always going to be cultural exchange. I don’t think people realize they’re posting in a way that came out of something very black.

SIMKO: I’m interested in the tension between community building and social fragmentation in digital spaces. To borrow a phrase from one of VaNatta’s course descriptions, people of color have created their own spaces to curate, articulate and produce culture through social media. That evokes the potential of social media to underwrite solidarity and connectivity. As we continue to work through the ramifications of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, help us think about the ways that platforms like Facebook have also been harnessed to deepen existing political divides.

JANNEN: I had a tutorial unit on this: Defend or reject influence bubbles as having a positive impact. Responses were split. Students were saying, “Social media is a place where, if I can’t connect to my physical community, I can speak to like-minded people on Facebook.” But at the same time, people with views that we might disagree with can also amplify anger and hate in ways they couldn’t if they had to find people to talk to in person. The platforms themselves guard against or promote this type of behavior.

FORD: In terms of solidarity, I’m thinking about activists—Afro-Latino activists in Colombia, Brazil, other parts of the world, who have been killed—I found out about on social media. Even if I don’t know people, online spaces have helped me to be in solidarity with things going on around the world.

YACOOB: Social media is powerful in terms of solidarity but also ways in which certain people get silenced. Within the American Muslim community, debates are raging around gender, sexuality and race. We’re such a small community relative to other communities in the U.S., and we’re spread out. Social media becomes the one platform where all of us are. It has facilitated allowing people who usually don’t have voices in institutional spaces to have a voice, particularly black Muslims. I have a very different sense of where I think the American Muslim community is in terms of thinking about these issues because I follow it on social media and I don’t have a local community. Then I go into institutional spaces, and these conversations are not traveling there, precisely because the solidarity is happening on social media. My hope is that social media allows us to build solidarities that can translate into how people are physically forming communities.

CEPEDA: I started a Facebook group for a really small subset of Latina/o studies. We’ve been growing, and out of that group we organized a conference at Williams. But when I go into the community and start talking to people, I see that my conversations over Facebook are not connecting with what’s going on on the ground.

YACOOB: I feel, being in rural New England, isolated from the communities where I have a sense of belonging. Social media is the place where I can still engage in conversations that, five years ago, I used to engage in face to face with people I knew.

CEPEDA: I just posted an article about how leaving social media is a privilege or luxury for some people. But for people that are in marginalized communities that are looking for a sense of belonging, it’s not quite so easy.

SIMKO: Social media moves so much more rapidly than our ordinary pace of scholarly production. I’m curious how you deal with this gap between scholarly and media temporalities in your work.

CEPEDA: I’m writing an article about a viral video from 2016, and it’s probably going to be published in 2019. You accept that, if you work in popular-culture media, you’re always going to be lagging behind.

FORD: Citations are behind social media at all times. In my own research, I come up with my own ways to document it. And I try to get permission from the person who posted it. Some students write papers using memes. I tell them, “Even if you don’t find the person who created it, find the earliest recollection of the earliest usage of this meme.” Because sometimes people use a meme or language and don’t give credit, and then it gets used by Perez Hilton or the Kardashians, and it’s like, “Oh, they created that.” No, they didn’t. It was probably a black girl like Kayla, aka “Peaches Monroee,” that...
created the phrase “On Fleek” that many celebs have used, and she’s received no royalties for her creation of pop-culture lingo.

CEPEDA: We are doing this work on the assumption that everybody sees these as legitimate pieces of knowledge. That’s a fight I’ve had, articulating for people, “No, actually, this is legitimate data. This is why, and this is how I’m using it, and there’s a methodology to it.”

YACOOB: Scholarly conversations take so long to come out, and then you have to have a certain amount of privilege in order to be able to access the conversations, whether it’s buying those books or being able to read those books and understand the conversations. I’ve been thinking about how to create ways in which scholarship can be in conversation with a more public audience.

SIMKO: Bill, you might have a different angle on temporality and the gap between transformations in social media and our ability to regulate them.

JANNEN: We all rely on social media platforms as a way of communicating, but we don’t have any control over how they’re administered or what happens when we use them. We create digital footprints that get collected and analyzed and sold and anonymized, but you can de-anonymize anything. We put a lot of trust in companies that do not have our best interests in mind.

SIMKO: Is it fair to say that we forget, or we’re not aware, that we’re the product?

JANNEN: That realization is coming now to a lot of people. What if Twitter charged us? I would gladly pay money to have privacy back or a sense of ownership of the things I’m putting out there. But a lot of the students in my tutorial say, “I just want this free thing. I get all these benefits, so I’m willing to overlook the negatives.”

FORD: And some people can’t afford it. According to Pew, people of color use social media more than any other group. In different countries, the phone is the way in which you communicate with family. I would pay for privacy, but the character of some of the innovation that comes out—the language and ideas—would change.

YACOOB: There’s a way in which we have transcended the nation-state model, in the sense that the nation-state doesn’t entirely determine who we are and how we’re formed, because social media allows you to engage with conversations that are happening around the world. But at the same time, companies are working with nation-states to surveil people. The national conversation in the U.S. about “Islamic extremism” has shifted from, “What are the mosques where these people are being radicalized?” to now saying, “Well, most of these people don’t go to mosques. They get radicalized online.” That’s criminalizing people’s online presence—who they’re following, who they’re “liking,” who they’re reposting, what they’re posting. So, we have not transcended, because the nation-state still has the ability and the power.

Saadia Yacoob Religion

“Social media is powerful in terms of solidarity but also ways in which certain people get silenced.”

SIMKO: I wonder if we all might reflect on the role of social media in pedagogy. I have no doubt that your students spend time analyzing what happens on social media. I’m also curious about the ways you have students using social media in classroom settings.

CEPEDA: I teach a media studies methods class, and the final project is to go into a community online. They observe and participate at the same time. They interview people within the community and write a paper about it. I want them to see this as a legitimate area of inquiry—and that there is a method to studying it. These are cultural texts just like any other text.

FORD: I’m trying to help students understand how to critically analyze these texts. There was a video after the Cleveland Cavaliers won the NBA championship in 2016, where LeBron James is talking about the win, and he’s super passionate about it, and somebody put a Hammond organ soundtrack under it. How LeBron articulated this win in his excitement reminded us of the black Protestant tradition. So we use thematic analysis to answer a research question: How and why do videos utilize black Protestant Christianity characteristics?

YACOOB: Globally, we’re moving toward a visual medium. You have AJ+ videos, Vice and Now This. So, I can give you an article to read—or you can go and watch the video. One of my pedagogical goals is to help students learn how to communicate the research they’re doing in a visual format by producing a three- to four-minute video on something they’ve researched throughout the semester.

FORD: My students have done podcasts. I’ve had them do documentary projects, mini-docs, video essays. They end up doing a paper where they have to pick some text or group of texts from various social media platforms and pick a method to analyze it. I’m always still grounding them in scholarly work.
NOW IN ITS SECOND SUMMER, THE MASTHEADS—a literary and architectural project cofounded by Tessa Kelly ’07—brings five writers to private, one-room studios scattered throughout Pittsfield, Mass., for month-long residencies. Each writer is assigned a studio designed as an architectural interpretation of the original structures in which five American authors produced work in the mid-19th century.

“I see architecture as a narrative process, much like writing,” says Kelly, who majored in art history and English at Williams and went on to study architecture at Harvard. “With The Mastheads, we are finding new meaning in the concept of historical preservation, asking how we interpret the past through the present.”

Kelly and her husband, Chris Parkinson, who is The Mastheads’ cofounder, took inspiration from the local writing haunts of American Renaissance writers Nathaniel Hawthorne, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Herman Melville and Henry David Thoreau.

“Our mission is to use the city’s rich history as a platform to support the imagination and production of new creative work,” says Kelly, who returned to her hometown of Pittsfield to open an architectural firm and bring The Mastheads—part of her graduate thesis—to life.

The five writers-in-residence share a home for the month of July and spend their days in the open-air, rustic studios. The Mastheads also runs a summer lecture series that each year focuses on a new combination of writers with ties to the area. The 2018 series includes William Cullen Bryant, W.E.B. Du Bois, Fanny Kemble and Catharine Maria Sedgwick. During the school year, The Mastheads leads a creative writing program in local schools.

“The Mastheads is both outreach and upreach,” says Peter Murphy, Williams’ John Hawley Roberts Professor of English, who taught Kelly as an undergraduate and now serves as an advisor for The Mastheads. “It is not just a writers’ program but a broad cultural initiative that, with its focus on our community, is intensely local.”
IN 225 YEARS, WILLIAMS HAS AMASSED A FORMIDABLE collection of stories. They have been passed down by generations of Ephs to be shared during campus tours, in first-year common rooms, in classrooms and even around the world. But are they true? We asked students, faculty, staff and alumni to tell us their favorite tales, and then we set out to prove—or disprove—those stories using archives, interviews, contemporary newspaper accounts and clues gleaned from rare old books. Here’s what we found.

Special thanks to student assistant Sarah Stone ’18 in communications and to Williams Archives and Special Collections for their research assistance.
Stories of the dead—and undead—abound at Williams. Among the tales, Susie Hopkins allegedly haunts her former home, now a senior-year co-op that bears her name. And college founder Ephraim Williams’ final resting place in the college chapel may be neither final nor resting.

UNKNOWN: Susan S. Hopkins died in her Denison Park home in 1944 at the age of 89, writes Ernest Imhoff ’59 in a 2016 essay about Hopkins Gate and the “Climb High, Climb Far” poem that adorns it. Imhoff notes that Susie, the last surviving child of Williams President Mark Hopkins, Class of 1824, discovered the poem on a scrap among the papers of her uncle Albert Hopkins, Class of 1826. Susie was the once-anonymous donor of the gate and stairs and a founder of the college infirmary. Her former home is now a senior co-op. Her paranormal status is unknown, but her good works live on.

The circumstances of the death of Col. Ephraim Williams Jr. are well known; what happened to his remains, less so. On Sept. 8, 1755, during the French and Indian War, he and Mohawk leader Theyanoguin (and most of their command) were ambushed and killed outside the village of Lake George. Professor of history and political economy Arthur Latham Perry, Class of 1852, recounts in the 1900 edition of his book Origins of Williamstown that Williams was hastily buried under a tall pine tree on the battlefield.

In 1920, a college committee seeking to honor Williams traveled north to exhume his remains and found “nothing. No bones, no traces of a uniform, just dust,” wrote Steve Lawson ’71 in the summer 2000 Williams Alumni Review. The committee carefully collected the dust in an urn, which was paraded through campus during commencement and interred in the basement of Thompson Memorial Chapel. A marble door with the initials “EW” and the date 1755 marks the location of the crypt. What lies behind that sealed door in the wall is anyone’s guess.

Mission Park was designed by a prison architect to be riot proof—or at least to thwart student protests. Hence the lack of long, straight hallways and the existence of few right angles in the building.

FALSE: In his 2001 book Reflections on the Architecture of Williams College, Whitney Stoddard ’35, the legendary art history professor and one-time director of the Williams College Museum of Art, called Mission Park “the most photogenic Williams building.” While some might quibble with this description, Mission’s architectural distinction is undeniable.

With coeducation on the horizon, the college conceived of a residence hall that would accommodate an increase in the number of students and respond to the physical environment. Williams hired the Philadelphia firm Mitchell-Giurgola Architects, which had no prison experience but did design buildings for the University of Pennsylvania and University of Kentucky. The proposal initially called for four separate but connected residential houses, each with its own living, dining and recreational space. When four dining halls proved too expensive, the plans were scaled back to one.

The design for the 12,000-square-foot residence hall was completed in early 1969 and received a Progressive Architecture award. According to Stoddard, the structure’s “curving forms with cylindrical stairwells that play against flat surfaces” are reminiscent of the work of Le Corbusier. Mission Park was named for the 1806 “haystack meeting” that took place nearby, in which five students, sheltering beneath a haystack during a thunderstorm, “were inspired with the idea that led to the beginning of the American foreign missionary movement,” according to the Sept. 19, 1968, Times Record of Troy, N.Y. It would be 40 years before Williams would construct another new residence hall.
The Perry House “goat room” is named for the unsavory hazing rituals that took place there.

FALSE: Nearly half a century after Alpha Delta Phi closed its doors and the fraternity’s stately yellow brick house on Main Street re-opened as Perry House dormitory, students continue to call the dark, windowless, first-floor room at its center the “goat room.” Rumors still circulate about what used to happen in the room, which is now used for the occasional performance or dance party.

It’s true that, for some fraternal orders (though none at Williams, as far as we know), an article of initiation was riding blindfolded upon a mechanical “goat.” (Picture a wheelbarrow with a seat and horns to grab onto, operated with much tilting and shaking by senior members.) A 1910 New York Times brief advertised “a mechanical goat, which can be put in the closet when not needed,” suggesting that the devices enjoyed some popularity. Likely they were stored with other fraternity paraphernalia in the goat room.

In 2003 the Williams Record published an article debunking historical speculation about outlandish hazing practices on campus. As the article stated, there is no evidence that the former goat rooms still in use—in Perry, Mears House and the Center for Development Economics—ever harbored a goat of any kind.

An extensive network of tunnels beneath campus was originally designed for pedestrian use—possibly to allow clandestine movement during wartime or to protect people from the elements.

FALSE: There’s no evidence that the tunnels, which deliver high-pressure steam and electrical power from the co-generation heating plant on Latham Street to college buildings, were ever meant to be used by students, faculty or staff to move around campus.

That’s not to say people don’t go underground. Facilities staff often walk the tunnels to make sure nothing is leaking and the lights are working. And Ian Nesbitt ’13 made an authorized trip—accompanied by facilities staff and only after receiving confined-space safety training—to map the tunnels and direct-burial steam pipes for a sophomore-year research project.

Motion sensors and silent alarms make it much more difficult these days, but “tunneling” was a rite of passage for generations of students. One 1984 alumna remembers tunneling to the pool with friends one cold spring night to swim and paddle around in kayaks. And in the 1950s, a student facing expulsion for missing too many classes used the tunnels to sneak into Hopkins Hall to steal, and later burn, the “cut book”—the binder where such infractions were recorded. Only a handful of fellow fraternity brothers knew his identity, but this hero to the student body went on to work for the CIA.
The person responsible for Williams’ school colors is Winston Churchill’s mother.

**TRUE:** A passion for baseball not only earned Williams the distinction of fielding one of the first two collegiate teams in that sport (see p. 29), it also brought the college its color.

In a letter to the Williams Alumni Review of April 1910, Eugene M. Jerome, Class of 1867, recounts how the Williams baseball team was about to set off for a game against Harvard in the summer of 1865. When Jerome’s sister and cousin learned that the Crimson side would be resplendent in its newly adopted “magenta,” the young women rushed to buy a length of purple ribbon, made rosettes of it and pinned one on each member of the Williams team, saying, “Let this royal purple be the Williams color, and may it bring you the victory over Harvard.”

Today, royal purple—PMS 267 for print, #330066 for the web—is often joined with gold, its opposite or complement on the color wheel.

One of the young women responsible for Williams purple, Eugene’s cousin Jennie Jerome, became Lady Randolph Spencer Churchill, mother to Winston Churchill. She also raised money to outfit a hospital ship during the Boer War, authored The Reminiscences of Lady Randolph Churchill and several plays, and founded the Primrose League, a conservative association for discussion and political action that, radical for the time, admitted women.

The man whose name adorns Thompson Memorial Chapel was the designer of the Ferris wheel.

**FALSE:** The only connections between the two structures are the name “Ferris” and an accident of regional geography.

Bridge builder George Washington Gale Ferris, a graduate of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., engineered the first Ferris wheel for the World’s Columbian Exhibition in 1893. At 264 feet and with gondolas that could hold 60 passengers, it was truly a sight to behold. Ferris died three years later of tuberculosis.

Meanwhile, the chapel, which opened in 1904, was commissioned by Mary Clark Thompson to honor her late husband, Frederick Ferris Thompson, Class of 1856 (and no relation to George). Although Frederick spent only two years at Williams, he and his wife were generous benefactors to the college. The infirmary and the biology, physics and chemistry labs also bear the family name. Frederick, who served as a college trustee until his death, also gifted the clock in the Lasell Gym tower, was a major contributor to Hopkins Hall’s construction and was instrumental in the construction of the Delta Psi lodge (now home to the Center for Development Economics), having founded the fraternity’s Williams chapter.
The college is home to pianos that once belonged to Cole Porter and Bing Crosby.

TRUE: Students and alumni have been greeting the mountains with a song “till hill and valley gaily, gaily ring” ever since Washington Gladden, Class of 1859, penned the school’s alma mater tune. And many of them have done so accompanied by a grand piano that once belonged to Williams honorary degree recipient Cole Porter.

Porter and his wife, Linda Lee Thomas, bought a home in Williamstown in 1940. When he died in 1964, he left to the college his 40-acre estate, Buxton Hill, and all its contents. Among them was a German Bechstein piano, the preferred mark of Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner and Claude Debussy. Porter used it to write most of Kiss Me, Kate, his best-known musical. The instrument now resides in Thompson Memorial Chapel, where it’s employed for services and events and occasionally charmed to life in quieter hours by students.

Bing Crosby sang Porter’s songs in Anything Goes and on other recordings. His piano—a flashy white upright with “Bing” splashed across the upper panel in retro script—came to Williams by way of the legendary bandleader and international showman Paul Whiteman, who hired Crosby in the 1920s.

Whiteman donated the instrument and more than 600 linear feet of scores, letters, scrapbooks and other ephemera to the college in the 1930s. Though the college archives displayed the piano for years, it went into storage a decade ago when construction of Sawyer Library commenced.

As a condition of their graduation, students attending Williams during construction of the Hopkins Observatory were required to help build it.

FALSE: In 1836, the same year that Mark Hopkins, Class of 1824, was named president of Williams, The Evening Post of New York reported, “The alumni have resolved to build an Astrominical [sic] Observatory, in which will be placed the splendid transit instrument, purchased in Europe by Prof. [Albert] Hopkins, which is said to be superior to any other in the country.”

Albert, Class of 1826, a professor of mathematics and philosophy who also taught astronomy and French, was Mark’s younger brother. He took an active role in the construction of the observatory he had designed and funded. In the book History of Astronomy in Williams College, Field Memorial Professor of Astronomy Willis I. Milham—who taught at Williams for 47 years and retired in 1942—wrote, “It is said the professor himself worked at stone-cutting with his own hands.”

The passion that made Albert a popular teacher also kindled the enthusiasm of his students, who weren’t required to but turned out “almost in a body to help build the observatory,” Milham writes. The building, completed in 1837 and moved twice before landing on the north side of the Berkshire Quad, is now the oldest existing observatory in the U.S. that has been in constant use.

FALSE: Few episodes in the chronicles of human infamy have sparked such high-minded, mock-bitter condemnation as the tale of alleged “bibliolarceny” by Williams President Zephaniah Swift Moore and his acolytes as they fled the rugged mountains for the comforts of town. But, gratifying as such a theory might be to loyalists of a scorned alma mater, it simply isn’t true.

In a 2010 article for Amherst Magazine, “The Great Book Theft That Wasn’t,” Williams’ own Dustin Griffin ’65 notes that contemporary witnesses to the 1821 schism attest that some Williams students, preparing to join President Moore’s migration, “voted at a meeting to carry the library [of the two student literary societies] with them to Amherst.” However, the vote was understood to be taken in a joking manner, and subsequent audits of Williams’ library inventories in the relevant years show few discrepancies.

The myth has nevertheless afforded generations of students and alumni on both sides of the Hoosac Range ample opportunity for spirited ribbing. In 1996, Williams’ Mucho Macho Moocow Marching Band presented Amherst with a bill for $1.6 billion in library fines for overdue books. And President Moore’s departure—he took some students with him and later hired away a few faculty—had the happy effect of inspiring the formation of the Williams College Society of Alumni, the oldest continually running alumni society in the U.S.
Williams' purple cow mascot is a mash-up of the purple mountains and the cows that roam nearby fields.

FALSE: In 1907, Purple Cow magazine made its debut on campus. That venerable publication (former Williams President John Edward Sawyer ’39 is among its editorial alumni) took its name from the now-familiar verse by Gelett Burgess in which the poet expresses his distaste for an elusive, imaginary creature of his own invention.

We don’t know exactly how that beloved mythical beast—dubbed “Ephelia” in a 1952 WMS Radio naming contest—found her way from the masthead to the athletic fields. Some sources suggest she was elected by a vote of the student body in 1907, but no account is definitive. We do know she starred in a 2010 television commercial for ESPN’s College GameDay alongside the Florida Gator, the Oregon Duck and the Georgia Bulldog. And she earned praise from Reader’s Digest as America’s “most lovable mascot” in 2011.

As a story written by retired archives assistant Linda Hall for the Williams College Special Collections website states: “Though we lack hard facts of the mascot’s origins and any published official mascot designation, there is no denying that the purple genus of ’bos’ now holds a firm place in the lore and legend of Williams.”

The first-ever intercollegiate baseball game was played at Williams.

TRUE: In the mid-1800s, the game we know as baseball was played using at least two sets of rules. There was the “Massachusetts” game, also known as “town ball,” in which batters could hit the ball in any direction, as in cricket, and outs could be obtained by “soaking” or striking the runner with a thrown ball. And there was the “New York” game—probably safer, certainly more orderly and much closer to the modern game—reflected in the Knickerbocker Rules of 1845.

Williams played the first Massachusetts game against Amherst on Friday, July 1, 1859, on the grounds of the Base-Ball Club in Pittsfield. The match lasted nearly four hours and ended disappointingly for Williams in a score of 73-32.

According to historian Michael Beschloss ’77, who described the game in a 2014 New York Times article, “Williams took an early lead, but so strong was the Amherst pitcher, Henry Hyde, that some spectators whispered that he must actually be a professional blacksmith whose services had been rented for the day.” The Amherst Express broadsheet debunked this rumor and reported that, when news of the win reached Amherst, students streamed from their living quarters, a bonfire was kindled, rockets were set off, and the chapel bell “sent forth its merriest peals.”

Back in Pittsfield, Williams and Amherst players set aside their rivalry and retired to the nearby United States Hotel for toasts, speeches and dinner. Enthusiasm sparked by the contest led to the creation of class and intramural teams at Williams. The game also caught on at other schools: Harvard and Yale established their first baseball clubs in 1862 and 1865, respectively.

Abe Loomis is a writer living in Western Massachusetts.
STUDY

William Chen ’19 (left) and economics professor Greg Phelan.
Assistant professor of economics Greg Phelan and economics and math major William Chen ‘19 have spent nearly two years developing a model that predicts how countries respond to the economic policies of other countries. Now Chen, who has a summer research and statistics internship with the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, is using those methods to understand how the financial sector affects fluctuations in the economy.

Their model, which uses methods Phelan first applied to understanding the financial crisis of 2008, is distinctive because it predicts how different policies affect the stability of the global economy. “Many macroeconomic models only describe how the economy behaves when fluctuations are not so extreme,” Phelan says. “This model shows how the global economy behaves in normal times and also during crises—which matters for how countries choose policies—and allows us to assess the risks a country might take and how that affects the stability of the international economy.”

He and Chen got to know each other in Phelan’s course Macroeconomic Instability and Financial Markets. Chen, a sophomore at the time, wanted to better understand his instructor’s methods. For that to happen, he needed to become familiar with mathematical tools more commonly used by graduate students. So Chen spent that Winter Study learning the necessary math as part of an independent study project.

Soon a research partnership between Phelan and Chen was born. And in November 2017, they presented to the Banque de France a paper they co-authored. In it, they showed that when countries are allowed to work together on economic policies, each one chooses regulations that benefit them both—for example, limiting how much the financial sector can borrow or trade in financial markets. But when the same countries develop policies without consulting one another, each country “over-regulates,” disadvantaging them both.

The researchers continued to refine their model, which, Chen says, “compared two essentially identical countries—blocs such as the U.S. and Europe. While that was a good starting point, it’s not true to life. We must consider policy interactions between, for example, developed and developing countries.”

So Phelan and Chen removed what they call “the symmetry assumption,” changed some of the details and functionality of the model and came away with something they believe is more accurate—which, interestingly, produces the same outcome. “We still find that if countries don’t coordinate, they’re going to overtighten,” says Phelan, who was to travel to Hong Kong in June to present the latest draft of the paper at the Bank for International Settlements’ Asian office.

Many macroeconomic models assume that a shock to the financial sector, like unexpected losses on banks’ investments, will be followed by a corresponding change in the level of overall activity. But Phelan and Chen are using their methods to develop a new model that allows for the possibility that such responses to shocks aren’t linear.

“The question becomes: If our model makes different predictions than models that assume linearity, how can that information contribute to predictions we make about economic outcomes?” says Chen, adding that he is excited to be using these methods with the New York Fed.

Phelan, meanwhile, is eager to get back to work with Chen in the fall. “After almost two years of collaborating, I don’t consider William a research assistant,” he says. “We’re co-authors.” —Julia Munemo
Research on apologies by social psychologist Cindy Frantz ’91 has garnered attention in recent months as public apologies have dominated news cycles. A member of the psychology department at Oberlin for the last 15 years, Frantz also studies environmental psychology. Her current scholarship considers how to make climate change a more concrete problem for people—thus eliciting an emotional response to it—using media coverage, electronic tools indicating resource use and systemic reminders such as labels on waste and recycling containers. Frantz is the first to point out that apologies and sustainability might seem unrelated. But her study of each topic stems from the same place—the notion of being able to adopt another’s perspective. Both interests were born at Williams.

WILLIAMS MAGAZINE: How did you start studying apologies?

CINDY FRANTZ ’91: A student in a class I was adjuncting at Williams in 1999 did a research project asking if there is such a thing as a “too-early apology.” After she collected some data suggesting that there is, I ran some follow-up studies and found the same pattern. A late apology is better, but only if the reason it’s later is because there’s been a conversation that makes the victim feel understood. A too-early apology can make the victim feel like the perpetrator did not take the time to understand their perspective and therefore doesn’t understand what they did wrong.

WILLIAMS: How does this research inform your understanding of some recent public apologies?

FRANTZ: Public apologies are complicated, because they serve multiple purposes. When Congressman Greg Gianforte in Montana first apologized for punching a reporter, he wasn’t apologizing to the victim. He was apologizing to his supporters. On the other hand, I thought comedian Louis C.K. did a great job apologizing for his sexual misconduct because he reflected on the perspective of the victims and the wider cultural situation. By acknowledging that he was in a position of power over these women, he could better acknowledge the harm he’d done. A lot of people in positions of power don’t want to acknowledge that imbalance—and this applies to any apology where there’s a difference in power. For an apology to be effective, the perpetrator has to understand the victim’s worldview and experience. That’s where my work on too-early apologies informs my understanding of public apologies—the central theme here is the perpetrator’s ability (or inability) to take the victim’s perspective.

WILLIAMS: How is your work about apologies connected to your current research?

FRANTZ: All of my work is about perspective-taking. My current work is about taking the perspective of the environment. I’ve always been an environmentalist, and I can remember being in college and feeling stressed out. But when I’d look up and see the mountains and take a deep breath, it would put everything in perspective. Environmental psychology is about understanding how the physical environment impacts us psychologically, and I have worked on a scale to measure people’s connection to the natural world. We’ve found that people’s connection to nature is associated with well-being in many different ways, but, interestingly, it’s also associated with perspective-taking. Meaning, a connection to nature impacts one’s ability to take the perspective of another person. The benefits of a connection to nature are well documented, but the piece we’ve added is that nature gives us the feeling of being part of something larger than ourselves. That’s what I was experiencing when I would look up at the mountains in college.

—J. M.
in the spring of 2016, a group of Williams students invited writer and political commentator John Derbyshire to speak at the college about national identity and immigration. Williams’ president at the time, Adam Falk, canceled the event, calling Derbyshire’s provocative, often inflammatory, views “hate speech.” As Falk wrote in a letter to the campus announcing the decision, “We will not promote such speech on this campus or in our community.”

The college drew criticism—both for inviting Derbyshire and then for canceling the event. The incident and its aftermath prompted philosophy professor Steve Gerrard to develop a new course, Free Speech and Its Enemies, taught this past spring. In it, students examined a fundamental question about liberal arts education: Can the ideal of free and open inquiry coexist with a commitment to maintaining a welcoming community?

“I believe that free speech is in service of civil rights,” Gerrard says. “Because of my age, when I think of free speech, I think primarily of the civil rights movement and people being hosed down and thrown in jail for their speech, whereas many students and younger faculty consider free speech as a dog whistle of the right.”

In Gerrard’s course, students delved into issues including hate speech, press censorship, controversial art and campus controversies, including the Derbyshire incident. They read traditional philosophical texts and newsy political commentaries. Guest speakers included Will Dudley ’89, president of Washington & Lee University, who addressed the challenges of Civil War-era monuments and buildings named for confederate leaders. Fred Lawrence ’77, Phi Beta Kappa Society CEO and secretary, discussed bias crimes. And Sharifa Wright ’03, director for alumni diversity and inclusion for Williams’ Office of Alumni Relations, talked about the impact of demographic changes on college campuses.

For many students, the experience helped break down barriers and change opinions.

“People split off into political silos at Williams, and even when our differences of opinion are only a matter of degree, we rarely discuss topics we disagree about,” says Prince Hunt ’20, who plans to major in philosophy. “That wasn’t the case in this class, where we had the opportunity to hear ideas we disagreed with and find ways to respond.”

Chrisleine Temple ’19, a philosophy and political science major, began the semester certain that Falk was right to cancel a talk by a man who has described himself publicly as a “mild and tolerant racist.” Says Temple, “As an African-American, a lot of Derbyshire’s work was in direct contradiction to who I am, and I felt his words could have a terrible impact on me and other members of the community.”

By the end of the course, however, Temple’s views had shifted. “I came to recognize that I was silencing a view I didn’t agree with,” she says, quickly adding that controversial speakers should not exist in a vacuum. “We need to create a transparent and safe environment in which there can be discourse before and after such a speaker comes, when everyone has the opportunity to discuss their impact.”

Gerrard says these are just the kinds of perspectives he hoped students would get from the course. “The purpose of a Williams education is to help students acquire skills to be thriving citizens in a pluralistic democracy,” he says. “That involves learning how to confront views they find abhorrent and how to deal with that in rational ways.”

“Tensions between free speech and community can’t be made to disappear,” he adds. “But I hope the students came away with a more nuanced appreciation of how to negotiate the pressures.”

—J.M.
THE MATHEMATICS OF LOCUST (AND OTHER) SWARMS

TO PROFESSOR OF MATHEMATICS CHAD TOPAZ, THE world is full of patterns. From the stripes on a zebra to the V-shaped flight formation of migratory birds, patterns seem to arise easily in nature, and Topaz has long sought to understand them. In graduate school, he studied the mathematical properties of pattern formation in earnest, with a dissertation on the highly symmetric patterns of waves on the surface of fluids. Then, during his postdoctoral years, he became interested in biological aggregations, sometimes called swarms.

"Why do some fish swim in patterns that look like a tornado?" he asks, before explaining that each fish follows a set of behaviors that developed over millions of years of evolution to help each individual use less energy and reproduce at higher rates. "I use mathematical tools to try to understand why, when 20,000 fish all follow these simple rules at the same time, the result is a fish tornado."

Topaz, who taught at Macalaster College for 10 years before coming to Williams in 2017, structures his work on biological aggregations with three overarching questions: How does each individual in the group behave, what is the large-scale pattern-forming behavior of the group, and how are these two levels of behavior linked?

He’s currently applying these questions to locust swarms, which cause widespread devastation in North Africa, the Middle East and the South Asian subcontinent. As billions of locusts migrate over miles of farmland, they form into marching swarms that create river-like patterns across the ground. Topaz has made mathematical models to better understand the pattern of locust swarms—and to investigate strategies for easing their effects.

His models consider both the natural patterns in locust swarms and how the pattern of resources on the ground might contribute to their development. "We currently try to control locust swarms with pesticides," Topaz says. "But these cost hundreds of millions of dollars, kill non-target species, make humans sick and are only 50 percent effective."

"One of my models suggests a mathematical explanation for why locust swarms are hard to disperse once they’ve formed," he says, offering a possible explanation for the inefficacy of pesticides. "This result suggests that we need to think harder about how to prevent swarms in the first place rather than how to mitigate them once they have formed."

Locusts have two main modes of behavior. Their usual state is antisocial, but they also have an aggressive mode that is triggered when they come into close contact with one another. "In their gregarious state, locusts eat more, migrate more and are wired to want to stay inside the group," Topaz says. "So the challenge is to avoid triggering their gregarious state."

This is where another of Topaz’s ideas comes into play. "The model I’m working on now suggests that if crops are planted in a regular pattern on the ground, locust ‘hotspots’ might be suppressed, but when crops are more randomly distributed, locust populations have some pockets of high population density, which triggers the formation of gregarious swarms."

Topaz hopes his research—widely published and in collaboration with several partners outside of Williams—might eventually lead to strategies for stopping destructive locust swarms and reducing pesticide use. "One of my long-term goals is to address locust-inflicted humanitarian disasters," he says.

Chad Topaz teaches courses including Differential Equations and Computational Linear Algebra, and he conducts research on diversity and representation in various institutions and programs.

—J.M.
A REFLECTION ON MATH, ART AND MEANING

BY ALEX SEMENDINGER ’18

During his first semester at Williams, mathematics major Alex Semendinger ’18 borrowed a work of art from the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) to hang on his dorm room wall. He initially participated in the Williams Art Loan for Living Spaces (WALLS) program because he couldn’t believe the college would lend works of art to students, and he decided to participate every semester. As he explains in the following essay, Semendinger, who was also the music director of the a cappella group Tre Aristocrows, came to find the experience central to his education.

Countless things about me changed during my time at Williams, but throughout there was one constant—and it was like a soundtrack to my education. Each semester I was here, I borrowed a work of art from the WCMA WALLS program. Each semester, I got to engage with a piece of art that was there when I was studying for an exam, writing an essay or—most recently—learning how to juggle. These works have formed the background of my college experience. So, in a move of nostalgia, a desire for even more time with one piece, or a combination of both, I selected for the final semester of my senior year the same artwork I borrowed my very first semester. The experience has deepened my connection with the piece and with this place I’ve called home for the last four years.

That first fall, I pitched my tent and gathered with dozens of other students outside the museum on a warm September evening to secure a good place in line for WALLS pickup the next morning. I knew what I was there for—I had walked through the gallery several days before and was struck by Tool Box 3 by Jim Dine. Since I was sixth in line, I went straight to it when the museum doors opened at 9 a.m. I was drawn to the work’s stark simplicity and the eye-catching contrast of the red on black on off-white. As I stared at it, I searched for meaning but found the piece resistant. It felt almost empty, like its expansive, blank background. But it was an inviting emptiness, calling out to be filled with meaning. It seemed a perfect piece to accompany my first semester in this new place, at a time I was ready to reflect whatever meaning I might find for myself.

As I honed in on a mathematics major, always with a museum piece on my wall, I came to realize that math is fundamentally an artistic exercise. My courses came to focus less on real-world applications and more on abstract questions such as: What if we had a different kind of number system? What properties from everyday arithmetic might we want to preserve and why? What would happen if they worked differently?

Math such as this has much in common with the experience of looking at the same work of art over the course of an entire semester. Every so often I see something—a mathematical concept or the photograph Baia Delle Zagare by Ingrid Calame, are examples of this, as are countless theorems that once seemed incomprehensible to me and now appear obvious. (It’s a common joke in math that every problem is either impossible or trivial.) In a class on contemporary art my junior year, I gained a framework for thinking about abstract art. That class and those two pieces helped me make a connection between my own work in mathematics and my deepening appreciation of art: To get to the place where I can make the necessary leaps in logic to understand something new, I have to look at it—the problem or the work of art—for a long time.

Which brings me back to Dine’s Tool Box 3. I spent two full semesters with that lithograph hanging on my wall—that first semester, when I hardly knew myself or my surroundings, and now my last, as I embark on a future I can imagine unfolding in any number of ways. I still don’t really feel as though I understand the piece, but I understand it better than I did. Perhaps, on the eve of my college graduation, I can say that, just as the Jim Dine lithograph suggests something much deeper under the surface, so too has my Williams experience revealed my own depths.

More often, it’s the reverse. I see an equation or a work of art that at first seems convoluted and strange, even incomprehensible, and after long consideration I realize that it is actually quite simple. Both the abstract pieces I borrowed my junior year, No title [Grid Abstraction] by H. Lee Hirsche and Trace 3 by Ingrid Calame, are examples of this, as are countless theorems that once seemed incomprehensible to me and now appear obvious. (It’s a common joke in math that every problem is either impossible or trivial.)

To understand something new, I have to look at it … for a long time.

Williams Art Loan for Living Spaces, which begins its 10th semester in the fall, is a collection of 123 works available for students to borrow and hang in their dorm rooms. Students receive background on the art and artist as well as a journal in which to write their impressions about the work over the course of the semester.
Alex Semendinger ’18, who is reflected in Jim Dine’s Tool Box 3, in his senior-year dorm room.
TRUE OR FALSE?

Williams’ mascot is a mash-up of the purple mountains and the cows roaming nearby fields. p.24