“At birth, a narrative for my life was prescribed for me without my consent.”

—SEAN SAIFA WALL ’01
A quiet moment reveals a hint of fog and a hint of fall as the sun sets over the campus in late September.
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Front cover photo: Harold Daniels
Back cover illustration: Keith Negley
Profound Questions

Every week this semester, six brave students venture in pairs to my office or my home. They’re coming to participate in a tutorial I’m teaching: Memoirs, Memory and the Modern Jewish Experience.

While a president’s time is usually filled with meetings, travel and events, and students’ schedules rarely lead them to my office or my living room, on tutorial days everything changes. The students and I become kindred spirits, fellow learners poised on the ends of a figurative log. I look forward to this time more than any other in my work week.

I was drawn to Williams first and foremost by my desire to help enhance the school’s superb reputation in undergraduate education. During my first year, I focused on understanding every aspect of campus life. Coming into my second year, I wanted to contribute directly to our mission by teaching undergraduates myself. I was particularly excited to teach a tutorial, a small class in which pairs of students work closely with a faculty member on a subject of joint interest: reading deeply, discussing avidly, stretching our minds while refining crucial liberal arts skills, including writing, analysis and problem solving.

Our particular course explores Jewish history by considering individual voices of Jewish memoirists. Every week we read and compare works written by Jews in the early modern period through contemporary times who lived in places across Europe, the United States and the Middle East. We ask what their memoirs can teach us about how people in different contexts have understood their Jewishness and their relationship to their past as well as the historian’s role in that relationship. Meanwhile, we’re also looking for answers to questions that transcend Jewish studies: about whether memoirs can be historical sources, if (and how) one can derive general insights from individual accounts and—if we can—how to reconcile the contradictions that inevitably arise among multiple voices.

These profound questions have occupied historians, philosophers and scholars of all kinds for centuries. I have been deeply impressed with our students’ ability to wrestle with such challenging material, which is also being studied by my colleagues at the leading edge of our discipline. Each week, these pairs of brave students write essays and respond to each other’s analyses, in writing and verbally, questioning arguments and assumptions while expanding their own views of the study of history, the evolution of concepts of the self and the workings of identity in diverse historical contexts.

The time goes by too quickly, and as the students leave my office or my living room, I turn back to the daily affairs of the college. As important and absorbing as those tasks are—and I truly enjoy every aspect of my job—I find myself already looking forward to our next class. I believe the students are, too.

The students and I become … fellow learners poised on the ends of a figurative log.
Support for Steel
Your picture and comment on U.S. Steel's Braddock plant is not just ("Justice for All," summer 2019). A few clarifications: The plant has 900 well-paying jobs. USS is in full compliance with all current environmental standards. USS is investing over $1.3 billion to modernize this complex, making it globally competitive. This investment will include a large cogeneration plant, which will further reduce emissions by over 50%, setting a new standard for industrial facilities. This is the best form of "climate justice." Steel is a backbone of our economy and should be supported.

—Joe Turner ’59, Senior Advisor for Primary Energy, Oak Brook, Ill.

A Dual Mission
A letter in the last issue of Williams Magazine ("Other Missions?" summer 2019) wondered why our society should spend resources on space exploration instead of on solving problems on Earth. In my career working on our nation’s commercial and science spacecraft, I helped design observation satellites that monitor agriculture, land use and human trafficking; climate science spacecraft to help track global changes in storm intensity; and, yes, the NASA planetary probes that are the only means for scientists to compare how different geological and climatic processes might affect a planet. I am happy to provide these capabilities to everyone solving problems on Earth, and, indeed, I wonder if we can afford not to explore space if we want to improve our situation here. Fortunately, it’s a false choice: We can do both.

—Joseph Shoer ’06, Denver, Colo.
NOTICE

DISAPPEARANCE, REAPPEARANCE

The modern-day dismantling of the 9th century BCE palace of King Ashurnasirpal II began in the mid-19th century, with its excavation by British archeologists. In 2015, the palace was demolished by ISIS. Among the thousands of objects lost, removed or destroyed were 13 limestone reliefs. Two more reliefs from the palace are among the oldest objects in the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) collection—gifts from an alumnus in 1851.

Now WCMA's reliefs are in conversation with full-size recreations of seven others as part of the exhibition The invisible enemy should not exist [Room 2, Northwest Palace of Nimrud], on view through April 2020 in the 1935 Gallery. Part of a long-term project by the artist Michael Rakowitz, the new reliefs are constructed from contemporary Iraqi food packaging available to diasporic populations in the U.S.

As Rakowitz told The New York Review of Books in July: “I’ve dedicated my life to making works that are about disappearance and reappearance but also through means that are so vulnerable that it will disappear again.”
View of the exhibition The invisible enemy should not exist [Room 2, Northwest Palace of Nimrud], Williams College Museum of Art.
NOTICE

In her carefully researched memoir My City of Dreams (TidePool Press), Lisa Gruenberg ’76 provides a 21st-century testimony of the Holocaust, interweaving her own life story with those of relatives dead or “lost to darkness.”

Anthony Kronman ’68 argues in The Assault on American Excellence (Simon & Schuster) that, in order to graduate as good citizens, students need to succeed in a higher education system that he says “isn’t wholly focused on being good to them.”

In The Long Public Life of a Short Private Poem (Stanford University Press), Peter Murphy, the John Hawley Roberts Professor of English, explains how Thomas Wyatt’s unpublished but widely read poem “They Flee from Me” survived for more than 500 years.

Through a series of amusing and poignant vignettes that sometimes give voice to art works themselves, longtime Metropolitan Museum of Art staff member Christine Coulson MA ’93 offers readers a tour of the private side of the museum in her novel Metropolitan Stories (Other Press).

W. Anthony Sheppard, the Marylin & Arthur Levitt Professor of Music, investigates Japanese representation in virtually every genre of American music in Extreme Exoticism: Japan in the American Musical Imagination (Oxford University Press).

See more works and submit updates on new publications at ephbookshelf.williams.edu.

ON FRIDAY, OCT. 11, THE WILLIAMS COMMUNITY AWOKE TO AN EMAIL FROM President Maud S. Mandel, who wrote: “On a colorful Friday in fall / Nixing classes still takes some gall / But I woke up today / And said to myself: Hey / Let’s get out and go have a ball.” So began Mountain Day, with myriad opportunities to get outside, including a trek up Stone Hill behind The Clark (pictured), yoga on Chapin Lawn, dancing and an all-campus picnic. See photos and video from the day at bit.ly/2019mtnday.

Two science professors have received more than $740,000 in combined grants to support their ongoing research in physics and chemistry.

With a grant from the National Science Foundation, Protik Majumder, the Barclay Jermain Professor of Natural Philosophy, continues his research using semiconductor diode lasers to measure with high precision the properties of heavy-metal atoms such as indium, thallium, lead and tin.

Assistant Professor of Chemistry Katie Hart’s grant from the National Institutes of Health supports her research on proteins known as beta-lactamases to better understand how drug resistance evolves at the molecular level and how to leverage these insights to inform the design and implementation of new drug treatments.

RECENTLY PUBLISHED
A PLACE OF PEACE

AT THE START OF HIS CONVOCATION ADDRESS, renowned neurologist Martin A. Samuels ’67 told the Class of 2020 that he decided to set aside his prepared remarks, having spent the previous night thinking about all that had happened since his own Williams graduation and that very moment.

Reflecting on the campus, he remarked: “And there is Chapin Hall, just the same as it always was. Williams is one of these places that can change and be the same. I can tell you it will always be a place where you can come and have peace.”

Prior to his address, Samuels, who is founding chair, emeritus, of the Department of Neurology at Brigham & Women’s Hospital and a distinguished professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School, received a Williams Bicentennial Medal for achievement in any field of endeavor. Also receiving medals that day were Kiat W. Tan ’65, a globally recognized horticulturalist; Danielle Deane-Ryan ’97, director of the Inclusive Clean Economy Program at the Nathan Cummings Foundation; and Carina Vance Mafla ’99, who served as health minister of Ecuador (and is featured on p. 16 of this magazine). For more on convocation, visit bit.ly/wmsconvo2019.
GARFIELD, REIMAGINED

Garfield House opened in the fall as the second new residence hall to be built on campus in 40-plus years—and only the second building in Massachusetts to meet “Passive House” criteria for energy performance, considered the most stringent in the industry. Passive houses feature a well-insulated building envelope, high performance windows and passive solar heating.

Details of the original Garfield House, which was built in 1850, were incorporated into the new building, including the bricks lining the fireplace and a wooden founders’ plaque placed near the kitchen. The sunlit, 40-bed dorm offers study nooks, laundry rooms on the first and second floors, a kitchen and dining area, and several communal spaces.

OUTSTANDING EDUCATORS

A mathematician and an astronomer have been honored by their respective professional associations for their teaching, research and overall excellence.

Pamela Harris, assistant professor of mathematics, received the 2019 Henry L. Alder Award from the Mathematical Association of America (MAA). The award recognizes distinguished teaching by a beginning college or university mathematics professor. The organization cited a student who wrote that Harris “always pushed us toward the deeper questions ... and pushed us to think and learn in ways that were not always within our comfort zone.” The MAA also called Harris “a fierce advocate for a diverse and inclusive mathematics community ... internationally known for her impact on future generations through her efforts to highlight Latinx/Hispanic heritage in mathematics.”

Jay Pasachoff, the Field Memorial Professor of Astronomy and department chair, received the Astronomical Society of the Pacific’s 2019 Klumpke-Roberts Award for what the society calls his “lifelong endeavor as a popular and scholarly commentator” whose dedication to the field has touched people across generations. As one nominator wrote, Pasachoff “has devoted his entire career to fathoming the universe while bringing all of us along with him in the endeavor. For more than a half century, he has investigated, communicated and educated—and done so with success, humility and humor.”
IN MEMORIAM

In September, the Williams community said goodbye to Marsha Altschuler, professor of biology, emerita, and former chair of the biology department, who died at the age of 69. Altschuler taught at Williams from 1985 until her retirement in 2014. She was active in the college community, teaching in Williams’ summer program for teachers and in a Howard Hughes Medical Institute-funded program for high school students. Even after a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, she maintained her energy and was known for zipping around campus on her red Segway. “It was a privilege to have known her as a colleague and a friend,” says Hank Art, director of the Environmental Studies Program and Rosenberg Professor of Environmental Studies and Biology, emeritus.

LIKE MINDS

BROOKLYN NATIVE NATHAN THIMOTHE ’22 IS THE FIRST RECIPIENT OF THE NEWLY created E. Wayne Wilkins Jr. ’41 Community Outreach Fellowship, whose namesake, known as “Wilk,” has spent a lifetime building community. Thimothe, who over the summer worked with nonprofits in Pittsfield and North Adams, spoke with Williams Magazine about his service.

What calls you to help others?
Since high school, I’ve had a passion for attending to the needs of communities that I feel a connection to. From teaching basic Java programming to bright, underprivileged youth in New York to privately tutoring students after school when it would have been easier not to, I’ve always had my communities in mind.

You’re also interested in videography?
Yes. As part of my fellowship, my team and I created a video celebrating the past, present and future of Louison House, which supports our neighbors in North Adams who are facing homelessness or housing insecurity. I know that some of the most important education I’ll ever receive takes place outside the classroom, learning directly from the communities I intend to serve.

What’s next?
I plan on moving forward in life with the legacy of Wayne Wilkins in mind and the ideology that my education must be a tool for positive change. This means getting involved in my communities whenever possible.

STRATEGIC PLANNING UNDERWAY

WHAT IS OUR SHARED VISION FOR the future of Williams? Eight working groups held about 120 strategic planning conversations with members of the college community in the fall to begin answering that question—one that President Maud S. Mandel says “every responsible educational institution should ask itself once a decade or so.”

In September and October, faculty, staff and students shared their ideas at formal events—including Tuesday forums at the Log and meetings with individual departments, programs and offices—and informal gatherings such as weekly sessions at the Tunnel City coffee shop. The working groups, which are examining the built environment, diversity/equity/inclusion, faculty and staff development, governance, life beyond the classroom, student learning, and sustainability, also held a full-day, campus-wide planning session on Oct. 15.

In the coming months, the working groups will synthesize what they have learned from all of these conversations into a set of visions and strategies that will form the basis of a strategic plan. Once it’s approved by the Board of Trustees, the plan will inform an operational plan to be developed in 2020-21.

Learn more, and share your ideas, at williams.edu/strategic-planning/.

THIMOTHE PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED
Here is how community grows: someone sees an empty space and imagines it full.

Mike Dively ’61 grew up in an era when being gay wasn’t discussed openly—not with family, not with school friends in Cleveland and not at Williams, then an all-male college. The impact of so much silence was stifling. Dively didn’t come out until he was 42 years old.

“The world was terribly small compared to today’s world,” he says.

Indeed, much has changed around LGBTQIA awareness in America. And Dively has had a hand in inspiring that change at Williams. In 1991, he funded an endowment intended to promote access to and understanding of LGBTQIA culture on campus. The fund helped enable the college to become a place where Gina Muñoz ’94, now chair of the Trevor Project, a youth suicide prevention organization, felt supported enough to come out. Where Sean Saifa Wall ’01, now an activist championing the rights of intersex people, developed a passion for social justice as co-chair of Williams’ Bisexual, Gay and Lesbian Union. And where Carina Vance Mafla ’99, who went on to fight for health rights and protections for the gay and lesbian community as Ecuador’s minister of health, flew her first rainbow flag from a dorm room window.

Influenced by their time at Williams, these alumni and countless others are reshaping the landscape for the next generation. Dively says he’s proud of that legacy: “I have a lot of joy about it.”
“WHEN AM I GOING TO ACCEPT THAT I AM GAY?”

Growing up in Cleveland in the 1940s and ’50s, Mike Dively ’61 says he knew he was “different.” But he didn’t know what that meant.

“It’s perhaps sometimes hard to relate to or be able to understand,” he says. “But I basically don’t remember ever talking to anybody about, quote, being gay, probably until I was in my early 40s.”

By the time he came out, he’d already attended law school at the University of Michigan, won a seat in the Michigan State House of Representatives and served three terms. He worked in the Michigan Commerce Department and the Energy Administration, taught government at Albion College and, despite uncertainty about his sexuality, married a woman.

But, eventually, Dively reframed the question he’d long struggled with.

“The question wasn’t ‘Am I gay or not?’” he says. “The question was, ‘When am I going to accept that I’m gay?’”

In 1989, at the age of 50, he moved to Key West, where he helped found a community center for gay residents and established the Key West AIDS Memorial. Then came the fund at Williams, and, to oversee it, a group of students, faculty and staff known as the Dively Committee for Human Sexuality and Diversity. He later created a Summer Opportunity Grant to help fund internships, summer courses, research and other projects for Williams students to gain understanding of LGBTQIA life experiences, issues and expressions.

“I have a deep love of Williams,” Dively says. “My four years there shaped a lot of me.”

Dively’s gifts came with no strings attached, just the guiding principle that they fund programs and projects that help spread an inclusive message about human sexuality and create a vibrant and visible community on campus. The more people that message reaches, he says, the better.

He named the programs for himself to make the point that gay benefactors need not be anonymous—to show “that people are proud of being gay and proud of funding an endowment,” he says, adding, “and maybe to serve as a role model for others.”

The committee hosted its first event on Oct. 3, 1992, with a performance by Pomo Afro Homos, a gay African American theater troupe from San Francisco, that drew hundreds of people to Adams Memorial Theatre. Since then, the fund has sponsored queer film festivals and a summit for college students from across New England. Students and faculty have commissioned lectures on subjects ranging from how economics intersects with sexual identity to the themes found in British condom ads, with speakers including graphic novelist Alison Bechdel, scholar and Against Equality founder Ryan Conrad, author and cultural critic Roxane Gay and transgender actress and activist Laverne Cox.

The Dively Committee hosts Halloween balls, lunches and, each May, a Rainbow Graduation ceremony honoring LGBTQIA seniors and their loved ones.

This past June, the fund helped send 19 students to New York City for World Pride, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising. It was the largest known Williams contingent to take part in the Pride March yet, with 120 alumni, faculty, staff and students registered.

Students spent two nights in the city, visiting the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art and attending an event with queer alumni. Alejandro Flores Monge ’21, who took part in the weekend, praises the Dively Committee for helping to build community and raise awareness at Williams.

“The more you’re able to build a sense of positive, inclusive presence, the more you’re able to build a foundation for community, and the Pride weekend did that really well,” he says. “It was the 50th anniversary of Stonewall, and we all went and had that experience together. It’s a story we can tell, and it’s a part of the Williams archive.”

That archive is ever-deepening, fueled by the experiences and opportunities provided by the Dively Fund.

“The whole purpose back then was to provide acknowledgement on campus for gay and lesbian students that they were important and to expose non-queer students to what queers were all about,” Dively says. “And I think it’s done that.”
For her 44th birthday, Gina Muñoz ’94 invited one hundred friends to a Hell’s Kitchen theater in New York City. There were cheesecake cups and balloons, but this birthday bash had a larger purpose.

During a night of musical performances about love and survival, friends celebrated Muñoz by donating roughly $13,000 to the Trevor Project, the largest organization in the world focused on suicide prevention and crisis intervention for LGBTQIA youth.

Muñoz, who juggles two full-time jobs—overseeing provider information services at New York’s Montefiore Medical Center and running a real estate law practice—joined the Trevor Project’s board in 2015. She says the organization is the center of her life.

As chair, Muñoz works to increase Trevor’s visibility, leading fundraising efforts and initiatives to promote the organization across the country. The goal, she says, is to make sure kids who feel dangerously alone know that Trevor’s toll-free, confidential hotline is just a phone call away, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the second leading cause of death among people ages 10 to 24. Among this group, gay, lesbian and bisexual youth seriously consider suicide at three times the rate of their non-LGBTQIA peers.

Roughly 5,300 people call the Trevor hotline every month. Another 1,000 connect online through chats and 2,000 by text messages.

“That’s a lot of kids reaching out,” Muñoz says, adding that she can understand the pain they’re experiencing. Muñoz grew up in Laredo, Texas, a small, closely knit border town. As a young girl, she knew that the local hairdresser was beat up because he was gay. As she got older, Muñoz recognized she was different from her peers, too.

“I started to realize this isn’t just ‘I don’t like dresses,’” she says. “It was deeper. And I also felt extreme pressure to not have that come out in any way.”

At Williams, she says she found a “very liberal, very open” atmosphere that provided her with the support to figure out her sexuality without shame. When she came out her sophomore year, “No one even blinked,” she says.

“Without Williams, I don’t know that I would’ve become who I am,” she says. “Williams basically opened the literal and figurative doors to my life.”

Muñoz began paying attention to LGBTQIA health issues she encountered in her work at Montefiore and started supporting local nonprofits that served the community. She got involved with Trevor after attending a fundraiser where transcripts of hotline calls, altered to be anonymous, were read aloud. Hearing those stories evoked memories of her childhood. She says she was never suicidal or depressed, but she understood the isolation.

“I was one of the lucky ones,” she says. “And I feel like these kids should be lucky, too, and if we can give them that, I’ll take it.”

That Muñoz ended up on Trevor’s board makes perfect sense, says Erin Law, a friend and chair of the Ali Forney Center, which provides housing and support services for New York City’s homeless LGBTQIA youth.

“Gina is someone with so much empathy, it makes sense for her to be affiliated with this organization, because that’s what it taps into,” Law says.

In the future, Muñoz hopes to expand Trevor’s hotline to receive international calls. But for now the group continues working to support LGBTQIA youth in the U.S., from advocating for training for school nurses to providing life-saving messages of hope and love to the thousands of young people who call, chat or text each year.

At this year’s Pride March in New York City, the Trevor Project was selected as one of the grand marshals. Riding along the parade route, Muñoz was overwhelmed hearing the cries of gratitude as Trevor’s car passed.

“People know this is important,” she says, adding, “It was just an incredible, beautiful experience.”
the syndrome is an intersex variation caused by the body’s complete or partial inability to synthesize male hormones, sometimes resulting in ambiguous genitalia.

Wall, who gained facial hair and a deepening voice during puberty, and whose genitals were not like other girls’, immediately recognized the characteristics.

“I thought, ‘That’s me,’” Wall says of the information found online. “That’s my body.”

The surgery Wall believed was to treat an underdeveloped uterus, as a therapist later explained, had instead removed undescended testes. “I felt betrayed,” Wall says.

But the discovery provided a clarity that would change everything. Over the next decade, Wall embraced a new gender identity as male, chose a new name—Sean Saifa Wall—that felt truer to the self that was emerging and became a prominent advocate for the rights and dignity of intersex people.

According to the U.N. Human Rights Office, experts estimate that between 0.05% and 1.70% of the population are believed to be born with variations of genitalia, reproductive organs or chromosomal patterns that do not fit binary ideas of male or female bodies.

Today, Wall, an Atlanta-based public health researcher and co-founder of the Intersex Justice Project, is on a mission to erase any stigma associated with being intersex. He has led trainings for health and government officials, including the DeKalb County solicitor’s office; addressed queer conferences, medical students and news programs.
like *Nightline* and outlets such as BuzzFeed about the reality of having a surgery he didn’t agree to; and given a TEDx talk encouraging people not to be afraid to simply ask him questions.

“It’s about establishing that intersex people are real, not mythical, and that intersex variations are normal,” he says. “I am a normal person. My intersex variation is a normal part of human anatomy. And what happened to me was wrong.”

At the heart of Wall’s advocacy—and the goal of the Intersex Justice Project—is ending medically unnecessary genital surgeries on infants and children.

These surgeries, undertaken with the intent to avoid possible future medical issues and to “normalize” and assign gender identity to intersex children, have been practiced since the 1960s. But attitudes are changing. The World Health Organization, the United Nations and Human Rights Watch now oppose such surgeries for children who are too young to give their consent.

This shift has occurred because of activists like Wall, who urgently tell their stories in hopes that a new generation of children will be given the choice about their bodies that Wall and others were denied.

“This is an issue of body autonomy,” Wall says. “We have to acknowledge the harm of what’s been done, and what happened to me and so many other people I know has been harm. We have a responsibility to address that.”

Wall advocates in every venue he can, from Twitter to public demonstrations targeting medical conferences and hospitals where surgeries are performed. In 2013, he was invited to a global intersex forum in Malta and was part of a group that met with the prime minister to share their stories. Later, the small country became the first in the world to ban medically unnecessary genital surgeries on infants.

Hida Viloria, a human rights activist and the author of *Born Both: An Intersex Life*, said when s/he first encountered Wall, s/he was struck that Wall highlighted both the struggles and the celebration found in intersex lives.

“His energy wasn’t just focused on trauma, and I feel that is so important for emerging communities, because it’s really difficult to stay focused on trauma,” Viloria says. “It’s much better to have something to gravitate toward, and I felt Saifa had such positive energy speaking as an intersex person.”

In June, Wall carried the Intersex Justice Project banner at the Pride March in New York City. It was a sort of homecoming. The sun was shining, and Wall was eager to celebrate life as a queer man who was out, proud and, most of all, happy. After nearly 20 years, he was also ready to reconnect with Williams alumni at events that weekend.

“I’m solid in who I am,” he says. “And who I am, and who I was at Williams, are the same person with a very complicated story. I’m here to reconcile both parts of my life. I want there to be continuity. I want the full story to be out there.”
a lesbian. Her announcement left an indelible mark on a country still struggling to reconcile a conservative society with new, more progressive laws.

In addition to making health services more accessible and inclusive, Vance is known especially for her fight against “conversion” clinics that spread, hydra-like, throughout the country. Ostensibly drug treatment programs, the unregulated clinics held people against their will, implementing “treatments” that often amounted to torture, including cold showers, shaved heads, electric shock and, according to some reports, rape.

Within a month of her appointment as minister, Vance wrote regulations banning treatment for issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Her crackdown ultimately led to the closing of 100 clinics.

“Every time we closed down a clinic, we would make a public announcement,” she says. “We tried to make them socially unacceptable. But part of the problem is the fact that families think a lesbian daughter or gay son can be subjected to treatment in order to change their sexual orientation or gender identity.”

Lía Burbano, an Ecuadorian gay rights activist, praised Vance’s achievements as health minister and her “visibility as a lesbian.”

“Simply, what is not named does not exist,” Burbano wrote in an email. “That’s why, every time I saw Carina on the news, I knew that other lesbians like me had our hopes placed on her. We expected her to make us feel proud of her work, her words, her struggle. We were not disappointed.”

In 2016, Vance became executive director of the South American Institute of Government in Health, a think tank focused on challenges to regional health systems. This past summer, she began a Ph.D. in public health at Tulane University and, in September, returned to Williams to receive a Bicentennial Medal for distinguished achievement.

“Williams was such an important part of my life,” Vance says. “For Williams to recognize the work I’ve done is a tremendous honor.”

Vance plans to return to Ecuador eventually and continue working on behalf of marginalized communities.

“There are so many issues to be resolved,” she says. “There’s so much to be done in achieving a just and inclusive society.”

Liz Leyden is a writer living in New Jersey. The people interviewed for this article have self-identified their names, pronouns and gender identities (as is Williams Magazine’s practice).
President Maud S. Mandel discusses her first year on campus—and what’s to come—with Tom Gardner ’79, president of the Society of Alumni.
It was easily one of the busiest times of the semester. First-year students were barely settled into their dorm rooms. Classes had just begun. Key alumni leaders were in town. And the campus was abuzz with preparations for Convocation and Bicentennial Medals weekend. Still, when *Williams Magazine* asked President Maud S. Mandel and Society of Alumni President Tom Gardner ’79 to participate in an interview for the fall issue, their response was a resounding “Absolutely!”

On Sept. 5, the two, who began their presidencies within weeks of each other in the summer of 2018, engaged in a thoughtful conversation, discussing everything from free speech on campus to planning for Williams’ future to a new course Mandel is teaching this fall. An excerpt of their conversation follows.

**GARDNER:** We’re having this conversation in early September, at the beginning of a new academic year. How are things going so far?

**MANDEL:** I’ve always loved the beginning of the academic year, meeting the new first-year students, hearing about people’s hopes and dreams, fears and concerns. Personally, I’m excited because I’m teaching a course this fall—my first tutorial. I’ve never taken or taught one, but they’re one of the great opportunities Williams students have to work closely with each other and with faculty.

**GARDNER:** What’s the course?

**MANDEL:** Memoirs, Memory and the Modern Jewish Experience, a course in modern Jewish history, which is my field. It’s both about learning Jewish history through the voices of individuals and also about how we as readers can or cannot make use of memoirs of single people as historical sources. The larger theoretical questions as we read human stories across time, place and context are: What does that open up, and what does it render much less visible? In addition to being back in the classroom, which I like, teaching the course will give me a different window on the lives of students than I had last year.

**GARDNER:** Last year was an interesting time, with a lot of activism on the part of students and faculty, as well as some controversy on campus. What was that like?

**MANDEL:** Those controversies didn’t define Williams for me last year, though I know, from off campus, it might seem like they did. Much of my first year was engaged with getting to know the community. And so much of that engagement has been really rich and rewarding. Still, there’s no question that our college campuses, and particularly private, elite institutions, have been more agitated in the last few years than was the case prior. This isn’t just a Williams story. Activism in general on campuses tends to wax and wane. I have many colleagues who say, during times when students are more quiescent, that they actually wish students were more active, because it means they’re engaging with the world. Students have things they want to change. They’re vested—not just in themselves but in their communities and in the world around them.

**GARDNER:** I say this to alumni all the time when they ask about student activism.

**MANDEL:** The fact that students care is really important. They look at the world they’ve inherited and feel frustrated with inequities they see that are still around them, with large-scale problems like climate issues that they now have to figure out. It’s not surprising that they quickly turn to demanding immediate accountability and change.

**GARDNER:** What does that mean for the campus climate?

**MANDEL:** The more we discuss, debate and even at times argue vociferously about issues, the better. It can get quite heated—dissent makes people uncomfortable. But if activism doesn’t make you uncomfortable, it isn’t working. Debate on a college campus is a healthy sign, and Williams
does it pretty well. Having said that, in an environment where the country is agitated and our campus is agitated, it’s important to have some rules of engagement so that we understand as a community how to do this in a way that is productive and not destructive.

GARDNER: One of the first things you had to contend with when you came here was the issue of free speech on campus. This isn’t unique to Williams, but it put us in the national headlines. How did it play out here on campus?

MANDEL: That was one of the first meaty, community-wide conversations I was a part of last fall. More than 100 faculty members signed a petition recommending that Williams adopt the Chicago Principles, which is a broad endorsement of unhindered free expression on college campuses. Although more than 50 educational institutions have adopted it, the document is not without controversy, primarily from those who see unfettered free expression as a way for hate speech to function freely in American society. Williams students, in the face of the faculty petition, and exercising their own freedom of expression, argued that we should not sign on to the Chicago Principles. The debate was charged, and it centered around whether or not to craft a policy statement or principle statement around freedom of expression. I wanted to take a step back and think about what our policies should be around speaker invitations. Because, really, the issue boils down to who should or should not have a platform at Williams. So, I convened a relatively large committee and gave them a very ambitious timeline to study the issue on campus. They did a tremendous amount of outreach in many sectors of the Williams community.

GARDNER: You’re referring to the Ad-Hoc Committee on Inquiry and Inclusion. What did the committee conclude?

MANDEL: Their report, which they submitted in June, had a number of recommendations, including that Williams should articulate a series of its own principles, something several other schools have done. The thesis of the report was that free expression and a commitment to an inclusive community can at times be in tension with one another, but that tension can be productive in an educational setting. We can encourage people to speak. And we can empower people who believe that speech is challenging to engage with it and know they are also supported by the institution. I worked over the summer with the Faculty Steering Committee to write a draft series of principles, and we are spending the first part of the semester sharing the draft with faculty and students. I hope by mid-fall we will have a set of principles that encompass free expression, inquiry and inclusion as the Williams way—a reflection of our principles that’s aspirational and indicative of the commitments of this campus.

GARDNER: It sounds like a very collaborative process. Is that how you characterize your leadership style?

“Free expression and a commitment to an inclusive community can at times be in tension with one another, but that tension can be productive in an educational setting.”

—MAUD S. MANDEL
MANDEL: To me, listening is first and foremost. That doesn’t mean I’m going to listen to you and then do what you say. Listening is a way to learn. Williams is filled with really smart people. A good leader in this context is not going to be the person who says, “I have all the answers,” or “Follow me into battle,” but rather the one who knows when to turn to people with expertise in certain areas and provide them with the opportunities to help solve problems collectively. It’s collaboration precisely because we have an important resource here—the brain power of the people who make up this community.

GARDNER: Early in your tenure, you announced that Williams was embarking on a strategic planning process.

MANDEL: It’s true—I barely set foot on campus when we started to talk about the future of Williams! I should emphasize that the goal of strategic planning is not to fix something that’s broken or to make a radical change of direction—not even remotely. We’re asking: “How do you take something as strong as Williams and build on that legacy for the 10- to 15-year horizon?” Every responsible educational institution should ask itself once a decade or so how it can best serve its mission in the current context. Because, while the institution traverses the centuries, the context around it shifts. What students need in order to reach their highest ambitions, what the expectations are of an education, what constitutes faculty expertise, what we consider to be knowledge—all of that shifts over time. Think about what Williams students studied in 1920 versus what they are studying today. It’s the same institution with some of the same educational values and the same mission, and yet it has changed so dramatically in so many ways.

GARDNER: Who is involved in strategic planning?

MANDEL: Eight working groups are looking at every aspect of the college—student learning; life beyond the classroom; faculty and staff development; diversity, equity and inclusion; the built environment; sustainability; governance; and Williams’ engagement with the world. Everything about the process, and there’s a lot of really useful information, is on the college website (williams.edu/strategic-planning). There has been and will continue to be a lot of outreach—to faculty, staff, students, alumni—and many opportunities to be involved in the process. As I said, this college is made up of really smart people. Strategic planning harnesses their power to ask, collectively, “How can we move together in a shared vision?” and, “Where do we want to be in 10 to 15 years?” and then create a strategic plan out of that.

GARDNER: Where does the process stand now?

MANDEL: September and October are heavily focused on community outreach. People are formally and informally engaging with the working groups, offering their thoughts. In November, December and January, each working group will write a report that brings together what they’ve learned into a set of visions and strategies. Their reports will feed into a larger plan in spring 2020 that will go before the Board of Trustees for approval. Presuming we come to a strategic plan that all constituents have weighed in on and feel good about, we will create an operational plan next year, in 2020-21. There will be drafts at every stage for people on campus and off to respond to, and we’ll revise in the spirit of collaboratively trying to get to a final product.

GARDNER: Sometimes plans like this end up in a big binder on a shelf, collecting dust. What do you envision the end product looking like?

MANDEL: In June 2020, when this work is done, my expectation is a strategic plan that, yes, will be a physical document, something you can hold. But I don’t anticipate a 150-page document. I expect something tighter and briefer, at a high level. It’s important to separate the strategic from the operational, because you can lock yourself in too tightly to the strategic plan, and contexts change. Economies crumble. Key faculty decide to go elsewhere. You need to be nimble. So, in June, my hope is it’ll be done, we’ll put it online, produce a printed version and celebrate the end of the strategic planning process. But then we’ll quickly roll up our sleeves and move to the tactics.

GARDNER: At the same time Williams is engaged with a strategic planning process, we are celebrating the end of a wildly successful campaign. You were here for the last year of Teach It Forward, and the goals were to raise $650 million and to engage 85% of the alumni body with the college. What constitutes engagement?

GARDNER: Staggering. And I want to express my profound gratitude to the Williams community. What a legacy for me to walk into! Teach It Forward never would have been as successful as it was if it weren’t for my predecessor, President Adam Falk, Campaign Chair Greg Avis ’80, Principal Gifts Chair Andreas Halvorsen ’86 and the many other people involved in the process. We raised money for science education, initiatives beyond the classroom like experiential education and mental health, the Alumni Fund and Parents Fund, financial aid, and faculty research and teaching—all of which, even after the campaign’s close, remain core commitments of Williams.

“We’re asking: ‘How do you take something as strong as Williams and build on that legacy?’ … While the institution traverses the centuries, the context around it shifts.”

—MAUD S. MANDEL
GARDNER: What questions and conversations do you see for Williams in the long term?

MANDEL: I’ve been thinking a lot about financial aid. Our commitment remains high. And as we go through strategic planning and build upon the strength of the campaign, I want to continue thinking about how we broadly support not only our highest-need students but also our middle-income students, a sector that right now is struggling mightily in higher education. Also, I personally have a deep interest in opening a pipeline to transfer students, whether from community colleges or the military, who often have high need and are quite deserving, strong students. Those are just two areas I’m interested in. But the things we’re committed to gesture to what might be in our future. Like diversity, equity and inclusion, which also includes a refresh of the Davis Center now underway, and the role of arts at Williams, which probably will be built into the strategic plan and includes a new home for the museum.

GARDNER: Meanwhile, we in the Society of Alumni are doing some strategic planning of our own, as we prepare for our bicentennial in 2021. In addition to looking at how far we’ve come, we’re looking at where we’re headed.

MANDEL: I’m excited to be part of those conversations with alumni and with you, Tom, about what the society wants to be as we arrive at this major milestone and others, including the 50th anniversary of coeducation. Thinking about Williams’ future and the Society of Alumni’s future goes hand in hand, because the society is obviously such a huge part of Williams’ history and one of the things that makes this college distinctive.
WHAT DO WE REMEMBER, WHAT DO WE FORGET AND WHY?
It’s a complicated question, one that defies easy answers. It becomes even more challenging as we consider that remembering can be both a profoundly personal act as well as something taken on collectively—and that even those memories widely considered tangible or true are remarkably malleable, vulnerable to both internal factors, like emotion, and external ones, like time.

It’s precisely the complexity of memory that has drawn so many at Williams to study it deeply. At the start of the semester, *Williams Magazine* convened a conversation among a handful of people who have focused on memory in their work. Their scholarship represents a variety of disciplines—among them Arabic studies, cognitive and developmental psychology, comparative literature, English and sociology—coming together in a lively and multifaceted discussion. Together the participants considered how we use memory to try to make meaning and sense of ourselves and the world around us—and what happens when the work of remembering, or forgetting, fails.

The Shape of Memory
SUSAN ENGEL: What questions are you trying to answer with your work on memory?

SAFA ZAKI: I think of memory as the scaffolding for other cognitive processes. In my work, I try to figure out how we parse the world into categories. How do we know that one thing is a glass and something else is a book? It seems like a simple process, but what we do is incredible. When you try to get a computer to do it, you realize it’s highly complicated. Try doing a Google image search with “dog or food?” as the search term. You’ll get pictures of muffins that look just like puppies, and we can tell the difference, but computers can’t. To understand how we are able to make the distinction between images of different categories, I have to understand memory.

CHRISTINA SIMKO: For me, memory was the answer rather than the question. My first book focused on collective representations of Sept. 11, 2001, in the U.S., especially political speeches. After 9/11, people turned immediately to the past to find orientation in the present. Major news outlets in the U.S. and abroad used the headline “Infamy,” a reference to FDR’s speech after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. 9/11 was framed as the first “battle” in a so-called “war on terrorism,” yet we could just as easily have called it a heinous international crime. In my course Memory and Forgetting, I try to get students to see that when we jam 9/11 into a war framework, we forget all the aspects that don’t fit. Political figures compared the people aboard United Airlines Flight 93 to the citizen soldiers of Lexington and Concord, yet the people who got on board that plane were not soldiers entering a field of battle but rather people just trying to get across the country. Some of them would have identified as patriotic American citizens, and some were not American citizens at all.

KAREN SHEPARD: I wrote a short story inspired by the “Portraits of Grief”—mini-profiles published in The New York Times of all the victims of 9/11 with their photos. As often happens when somebody dies in a traumatic way, they were all portraits of saints. I kept thinking, “Certainly there may be someone, somewhere, happy that this person is gone.” So, I wrote a story about what we want to remember and what we want to forget. I often think about the way in which memory supports a version of the characters that is wholly innocent, and I try to work against that.

BRAHIM EL GUABLI: I grew up in Morocco, and when I became conscious of politics, I started talking to my parents about what I read in newspapers. They would say, “Shh, don’t talk about that. Walls have ears.” Then, in 1999, the king died, and a deluge of narratives and memoirs emerged about secret imprisonment in Morocco. When I went to graduate school, the question for me was: How could those survivors’ narratives transform the state? In my understanding, memory became a way for the people who suffered to create a space for democratization and advocacy for citizenship based on their suffering.

ENGEL: The way you discuss it, memory comes across as a fairly deliberative process: “I’m going to choose this to focus on. I’m going to ignore this.” As a psychologist, I have a hard time with that, because so much of our thinking goes on outside of our control and conscious awareness.

SHEPARD: I’m not suggesting that it’s in our control. If, as a writing exercise, I asked you to write down the most shameful thing you’ve ever done, William Gass (the late writer, critic and philosophy professor) would say you’re going to “confess to the lesser sin”—write the second-most shameful thing, not the most shameful, because that’s too fraught. He’s not suggesting, nor am I, that you’re in control of making that choice.

ENGEL: As a writer, do you poke at that? Do you eventually remember the most shameful thing?

SHEPARD: You try. You fail. You keep trying. Any memoir writer is saying both, “I want to try to remember,” and, “I’m not going to be able to fully do that,” which creates an interesting narrative conflict that plays out on the page. That’s where we get great literature. The bad literature is where the writer just says, “Look at all the things I’ve suffered.”

EL GUABLI: It depends on the genre of writing. In testimonial literature, the idea of truth—even when it’s inconvenient—permeates the work. Political prisoners are victims of the state and have an ethical agency to share everything. They say, “We remember because we don’t want other victims to be forgotten,” or, “We are witnessing for the victims and those others who are not able to remember or share their stories.” They remember both the heroic and the shameful aspects of the experience, and truth becomes central to memory. There is a deliberate act of remembering, from the minutiae of torture to suffering in isolation to seeing friends die. And the degree of detail that goes into that is phenomenal.

SHEPARD: But are they in control of what they remember and what they don’t?

ZAKI: Psychologist Beth Loftus at the University of California Irvine suggests that people in difficult situations can be led to misremember details. She did a study with people going through military training in which they are interrogated by someone abusive and asked to recall the experience. After the exercise, the soldiers—who were taking part in survival-school training, which simulates being captured as a prisoner of war—were shown photos of someone who wasn’t their interrogator and asked questions about their capture, as if the person in the photo had been the one who interrogated them. Loftus could get the soldiers to misremember who their interrogator was. So even in those traumatic moments, when the intent is there to remember every detail, sometimes memory can’t be trusted.

SIMKO: I don’t think the processes of remembering and encoding the past are deliberative, even when they take
place at a collective level. There are substantial constraints, the most significant being the narratives we inherit from the past. At the level of the nation, the image we have of ourselves is as a unit moving through time and as "the kind of people we are."

**ENGEL:** Of good people versus bad people? Or brave people versus timid people?

**SIMKO:** Or innocent people versus fallible people. One of the most powerful things the sociology of memory can do is give us the capacity to step back from some of these implicit or intuitive processes and interrupt them to act back on them.

**ENGEL:** Cognitive psychologist Dick Neisser talked about the five different selves—one of which is the remembered self, formed from a complicated combination of the memories you collect and rework. So, we use memory processes to make sense of ourselves and our history but also to make ourselves feel good about who we are.

**ZAKI:** There’s good evidence that memory is the basis for reasoning. Psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have shown that something called “availability” is extremely important in reasoning. People are more likely to believe that violent crimes are more prevalent than, say, diabetes and therefore more of a problem for society, because crimes are reported more often in the news and so become a part of our available memory.

**SIMKO:** This returns me to my question about how we construct collective narratives in the face of deeply disruptive events that threaten the core of our identities. The Pentagon is struck by a plane on 9/11, and that’s a real threat to the United States’ canonical narrative of its...
military might. How does the nation recover from that? The answer is memory. Turning to Pearl Harbor, this moment of suffering that was followed by victory at war. Memory is precisely the place we turn to when we have to make sense of something that doesn’t fit our existing heuristics.

**EL GUABLI:** For me and the work I do, 9/11 was a transformative moment in terms of the remapping of the Middle East and how a traumatic event that took place in the U.S. changed an entire region.

**ENGEL:** So, with emotionally or politically loaded memories you might uncover several different perspectives on that same event. One person might have several different versions of the same memory, many people might remember the same event in completely different ways. Over time, people often revise a memory or give up one version for another. You can say of 9/11, “Actually, it wasn’t the destruction of the American people, it was the beginning of the destruction of so many people in the Middle East.” Can you hold on to several memories of the same event at the same time?

**SHEPARD:** That’s my definition of good literature and, probably, our definition of good teaching. And it would be my definition of the kind of people we should aspire to be: nuanced and complicated. We have so many pressures, both internal and external, at this moment in American history to say things are not complicated or nuanced. It’s this or that—both things cannot be true. But in a classroom or on the page, I’m trying to access and articulate that part of myself that believes all of these things can be true at the same time. It’s not a linear progression from “I felt this way, and now I feel this other way.” It is, simultaneously, “I feel multiple ways.”

**ZAKI:** I would answer differently. I would say, no, in the moment of the first experience, you have potentially different interpretations that are bubbling up. But as the memory solidifies, as you rehearse it over time, how long does it take before you have a single narrative? You might lose that nuance over time. I would imagine that, over time, our memories feel much more real. People have the wrong intuition about their own memories—that they’re tangible—and that leads us to believe so strongly that our memories are real. As time goes by, they become more real.

**SHEPARD:** I totally agree with that, but I’m trying to hang on to the ambiguity that gets cemented away as time passes. It’s scary to feel complicated. It feels destabilizing, disorienting. And we haven’t taught people how to experience that complication.
People have the wrong intuition about their own memories—that they’re tangible—and that leads us to believe so strongly that our memories are real. —SAFA ZAKI, PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

ENGEL: We haven’t taught people how to dive into it and hold two things in their head at once. But in everyday life, isn’t the impulse toward clarity a good thing? It’s why we can function.

SIMKO: Well, we don’t and we do hold on to two things at once. In Memory and Forgetting, we talk about Maurice Halbwachs, who is the figure most associated with coining the term “collective memory.” He makes the argument that memory is always a social phenomenon—that even our most private individual memories are filtered through social frameworks and elicited in specific social environments and contexts, even if we’re just remembering them privately. But there is always a multiplicity of frameworks in any collectivity. And what makes our memories seem unique is not that we are unique individuals but that we participate in a unique configuration of social groups. So, our identities, our affiliations are all bearing down upon the particular memories that we construct and the memories that are elicited situationally. I imagine your memories of 9/11 would take different shape if you were sitting around a dinner table with your family instead of sitting in this context talking about your work on memory. I argue that our memories are always already multiple and that the idea that they become unique is the fiction.

ENGEL: You’ve just put your finger on a helpful distinction between memories as something you construct and the act of remembering. Memories and remembering are not exactly the same thing. Remembering is a mental process that may include others, at every level. I don’t think psychologists agree on the best metaphor for memory. A file cabinet of photographs? A series of stories? Are you making a new video every single day?

ZAKI: Yet we all understand memory through these metaphors. I was recently trying to teach students an idea about one particular system in memory which has to do with a loop you can play back, and that comes from understanding tape recorder technology. Without that technology, they had no idea why it was called a loop, and that comes from understanding tape recorder technology. Without that technology, they had no idea why it was called a loop, and I got so many questions about auditory loops.

EL GUABLI: Consider how states officially remember and what they officially repress. France repressed the Algerian War (1954-1962) and the looting of African villages, creating convenient memories of its own. Anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler talks about aphasia among French scholars—how they don’t even have the words to talk about what happened in the 1960s, when 3 million French men served in Algeria, or how, on Oct. 17, 1961, almost 400 Algerians were drowned in the Seine in Paris. These events were repressed, just forgotten, until historical scholarship brought them back. This tension between history and memory is important to think about. In Morocco, memory is central to citizenship today—being Moroccan means being able to remember your story or writing it, making it available to other people. Trauma studies are emerging in North Africa and the Middle East. It used to be that if you wanted to study trauma and memory, you would go to Berlin or Paris or come here to the U.S., but now there are communities based in Lebanon, Cairo and Rabat that are using their local resources to investigate these types of questions.

ENGEL: This all has given me a new insight. Social psychologist Tony Greenwald talks about the totalitarian ego, the way your individual mind is always dictating and directing things inside so that you make yourself feel consistent, sensible and understandable. We’ve talked about the terrible version of that on the political level—the state that dictates memories—and I’m thinking it’s good to dismantle that type of ego as well. What you’ve all brought to light is that once you’ve established your totalitarian ego at around age 4, you have to learn to stray from it. I wonder, as a way to conclude, if you could say what has surprised you as you study memory?

EL GUABLI: For me, it’s about language and memory. In the case of the Algerian War, people assume that if France does not remember, the Algerians don’t, either. But it’s a question of language. Because people who are writing from the States or France don’t read Arabic or local languages, they don’t have access to the literature that’s produced about that memory or about that past, which creates the assumption that there is a generalized repression of colonial memories.

SHEPARD: I’m constantly surprised, maybe paradoxically, that the better you get at holding the possibility that multiple things are true, the more reparative and orienting it feels.

SIMKO: I continue to be surprised at the pervasive goodness of memory, its orienting power. Even when we think we’re talking about the future, we’re intuitively reaching back for guidance from the past.

ZAKI: The surprise for me comes from working with students at Williams and the insights they force me to have. It’s not so hard for them to see connections between big open questions because they are not entangled in the details. My students push me to understand the big questions.
Shortly after the 2016 presidential election, “pizzagate” went viral on social media. The story—that Hillary Clinton and several others were running a child sex-trafficking ring out of the basement of a D.C. pizzeria—had no basis in reality. Yet an Economist/YouGov poll that December showed that 46% of Trump voters and 17% of Clinton voters believed it to be true.

To Williams psychology professor Jeremy Cone, the Pizzagate story raises important questions about whether the gut-level, split-second evaluations we make about another person can be changed with new information. The answer is yes, based on studies he conducted with Melissa J. Ferguson of Cornell University and Kathryn Flaharty ‘18, a psychology lab manager at Georgetown University who was Cone’s research assistant and honors thesis student at Williams.

Moreover, the researchers say, the credibility of the new information we receive about another person plays an important role in the process. The results of their study, published recently in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, refute the long-held belief that these so-called implicit impressions are difficult to change.

“In a digital environment polluted by misinformation, the question is whether we’re damaging our ability to form accurate impressions of other people,” says Cone. “When you hear that Hillary Clinton is operating a pedophilia ring out of a pizzeria, even if you don’t consciously endorse that idea, has your implicit opinion of her changed simply by being exposed to it?”

To find out, Cone and his colleagues asked participants to look at an image of an unfamiliar face on a computer screen. To establish a very strong, positive reaction toward this fictional person named “Kevin,” they bombarded participants with positive information: “We told them Kevin rescues kittens from trees and does wonderful things for his parents,” Cone says.

The researchers then used a computer task to gauge what implicit beliefs participants had formed about Kevin. Says Cone, “Invariably, they now had a gut-level positive response to him.”

Cone and his colleagues next provided extremely negative details about Kevin. “We told them that it turns out he was convicted of domestic abuse,” Cone says. Some of the participants were told this information came from a reliable source, while others were told it was gossip—that it could be true, but the person spreading the news had ulterior motives.

“For participants who received this negative information from sources they deemed unimpeachable, such as police records, we saw immediate changes in their gut-level responses,” Cone says. “But for those who deemed the source unreliable, much smaller changes were recorded.”

That’s good news, says Cone, who came to Williams in 2015 and teaches courses including Social Psychology and Social Judgment. “The believability of the information and how much you subjectively think the information is credible is enough to cause a large revision in your gut-level impression of a person,” he says. “This means that we are not nearly as susceptible to misinformation at the subconscious level as previously thought.”

Connecting the research to the upcoming election cycle, Cone says people shouldn’t worry so much that false information could taint the digital space to such a degree that it changes their impressions about candidates. “Being influenced by misinformation requires that we trust the source it comes from,” he says. “If a friend of a friend who you don’t really trust shares a negative political ad, it won’t have nearly as large an effect on your gut-level response to that candidate, because you don’t see the information as credible.”

While there are still questions about what causes changes in believability—and about the relationship between believability and credibility—Cone says the best tool to fight misinformation is already at our disposal. “We can’t rid the Internet of false news stories,” he says. “But our findings suggest that fact-checking can be very effective.”

—julia munemo
ABOLITIONISM IN CONTEXT

Williams College was an early proponent of the movement to end slavery. But as Darin Li ’21 discovered when doing research for the history course Slavery in the American South, the seemingly good intention prevalent at the college depended on deeply racist ideas.

“The Williams College Anti-Slavery Society, founded in the 1820s, did not envision giving freed slaves a place in white American society,” says Li. “Rather, it supported colonization, which was the movement to send them to Africa to form settlements in their supposed homelands.”

Li, who researched the society (known as WASS) in the college archives, wrote a paper for the class, which is taught by Charles Dew ’58, the Ephraim Williams Professor of American History. In the paper, Li argues that “Williams, unlike many of its peer institutions at the time, was something of a colonization incubator. It was, by one scholar’s estimation, the earliest such organization in Massachusetts.”

Li says that’s something the college should take pride in—but within the proper context.

“Members of WASS and other American colonization societies understood that slavery was morally unjust,” he says. “But they could not imagine a mixed-race society, so colonization seemed like the only solution.”

The idea received widespread support for a time, including from Williams President Edward Dorr Griffin and Trustee Henry W. Dwight, who was also a Massachusetts Congressional representative. One of the documents Li discovered in the archives was a letter dated August 1826 from WASS to a national anti-slavery newspaper, arguing that the only solution was to free enslaved people and “send them back” to Africa.

By then, the African continent was no longer home, says Dew, who has taught Slavery in the American South for more than 15 years. “As early as 1740, the majority of black slaves were American-born,” he says. “By the 1820s, they had known no other place, their families were here, so the concept was deeply flawed.”

Li says he wishes there were documents in the archives to support the college’s eventual shift to radical abolitionism, which was the movement to free enslaved people by any means necessary, without reference to “repatriation” or colonization. “For reasons I can’t trace, there is nothing in our archives about WASS or the college’s abolitionist movement dated later than 1829,” he says. “But we have to assume that as the mood shifted toward radical abolitionism at some of our peer institutions, so, too, did the mood shift at Williams.”

Dew, who has written extensively on the history of slavery, including the memoir The Making of a Racist: A Southerner Reflects on Family, History and the Slave Trade, says conclusions like these are exactly what he hopes his students will arrive at in his classes. As he writes in the course syllabus, “The best way to learn how historians practice their craft is to do what they do: background reading in key secondary sources, research in appropriate primary source materials and conclusions drawn through the medium of the written word.”

“Teaching this course makes me feel like I’m giving to Williams what it gave to me as a student—a place to question the notions I was raised with,” Dew says. “Faculty here take students very seriously, and we work with them to find out what’s true and accurate rather than telling them what they need to know.

“Darin’s research and writing skills are outstanding and will serve him well in whatever career he follows,” Dew adds. “Obviously, he would make a first-rate historian.” —J.M.
Anne Skinner came to Williams in 1966, when her husband Jim was hired to teach chemistry. At the time, there were two full-time female professors at the college, and coeducation was still several years away. But Skinner, armed with a doctorate in chemistry, was determined not to be what she calls a “trailing spouse.” She started teaching lab sections part time and went on to build a career that spanned 44 years—retiring in 2011 as Williams’ Senior Lecturer in Chemistry, emerita. A self-proclaimed “archeological chemist,” she continues to conduct research and publish on fundamental questions about the origins of humankind. In short, she says, “I determine the ages of fossils associated with human evolution.”

After a sabbatical in 1970 with her husband, in which they both taught secondary school chemistry in Nigeria for two years, Skinner was invited by a Williams colleague to attend a conference in Brookhaven, N.Y., to discuss applications of physical science to the study of archeology. That connection and another sabbatical in the early 1980s led Skinner to Oxford University, where she spent a year learning more about archeology. Around this time, the scientific community was beginning to use electron spin resonance (ESR) dating, a technique that measures the amount of natural radiation an object, such as a tooth, has been exposed to. “The longer something has been buried, the more radiation damage it will receive from the soil and rocks around it,” she says.

Williams had equipment for ESR dating, and Skinner jumped at the chance to use it in her work. “Technically what I do is called paleoanthropology, looking at issues in the tempo and mode of human evolution,” she says. “While most archeology studies the last 50,000 years, I tend to work in time frames that go back at least 100,000 years and sometimes up to a million years.”

After her husband died in 1988, Skinner continued to teach at Williams, focusing on general chemistry and the application of the scientific method to archeology and paleoanthropology. She ran a lab in which students experienced ESR dating firsthand, took groups of students to dig sites during Winter Study and served as the campus radiation safety officer from 1990 until 2010, overseeing the removal of plutonium and uranium oxide that had been on campus since World War II.

In addition to using ESR to date samples sent to her by researchers, Skinner has traveled the world to take part in digs at early hominid sites. “I was at a site in India when some of the archeologists noticed I didn’t really know what I was doing, and they took it upon themselves to teach me better techniques,” she says. Skinner has used those techniques in places including Tanzania, Egypt and Brazil, which she recently visited on a Fulbright fellowship.

In 2014, she used ESR dating to show that a Homo sapiens tooth found in Brazil was 20,000 years old—work that challenges the common understanding that humans migrated to the Americas only 13,000 years ago. For her next project, in Serbia, she plans to examine whether the timelines of Neanderthals and Homo sapiens overlap.

Back on campus, Skinner has three lab students for the fall semester, “working on all the interesting questions we still haven’t answered.”

—J.M.
MICHÉLLE APOTSOS JOINED THE ART HISTORY FACULTY IN 2014 AS WILLIAMS’ FIRST SCHOLAR FOCUSED ON THE ART OF THE AFRICAN CONTINENT. THOUGH HER WORK FILLED A GAP IN THE COLLEGE’S CURRICULUM, SHE SOON FOUND THAT THE MATERIALS AND COLLECTIONS ALREADY HERE, PARTICULARLY THOSE OF THE LIBRARIES AND THE WILLIAMS COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART (WCMA), WERE RICH IN RESOURCES THAT SUPPORTED HER TEACHING AND RESEARCH. AND THOSE COLLECTIONS HAVE ONLY BEEN GROWING.

“DESPITE ITS EARLIER FOCUS ON EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN ART, WILLIAMS HAD QUIETLY BEEN ACQUIRING MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF ART AND CULTURE FROM THE CONTINENT OVER MANY YEARS,” APOTSOS SAYS.

AS SOME OF THOSE SOURCES REVEAL, WORKS FROM THE AFRICAN CONTINENT WERE LONG CONSIDERED A FORM OF ETHNOGRAPHY. EXHIBITIONS POSITIONED THE WORKS AS “ART PRIMITIF,” APOTSOS SAYS, MEANING THEY INTENTIONALLY FETISHIZED THE OBJECTS TO DEEPEN PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE COLONIAL REGIME IN AFRICA.

“ON THE ONE HAND, SUCH EXHIBITIONS WERE MEANT TO DEMONSTRATE THE SUPPOSED NEED FOR ‘EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION,’” APOTSOS SAYS. “ON THE OTHER HAND, THEY TANTALIZED EUROPEAN ARMCHAIR ADVENTURERS WHO TOOK THE OBJECTS AS EVIDENCE OF WHAT THEY PERCEIVED TO BE ‘LOST WORLDS.’”

THE OBJECTS WEREN’T STUDIED IN AN ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT UNTIL WELL INTO THE 20TH CENTURY. THOUGH THE FIRST MAJOR EXHIBITION IN THE WEST TOOK PLACE IN 1914, APOTSOS SAYS, “IT WASN’T UNTIL THE 1980S, WHEN POST-COLONIAL THEORY WAS REALLY CATCHING HOLD, THAT A NUMBER OF MAJOR INSTITUTIONS PUT ON EXHIBITIONS POSITIONING ART WORKS FROM THE CONTINENT AS IMPORTANT IN AND OF THEMSELVES.”

THAT SHIFT IN THINKING ABOUT ART FROM THE AFRICAN CONTINENT IS EVIDENT IN A NEW COLLECTION THAT INCLUDES EXHIBITION CatalogS, A RECENT GIFT TO THE SAWYER LIBRARY AND CHAPIN LIBRARY OF RARE BOOKS. THE CatalogS COVER BOTH THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ExhibITIONS OF THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY AS WELL AS THOSE FROM MAJOR ART INSTITUTIONS EXHIBITING THE ART THROUGH A POST-COLONIAL LENS.

THE CatalogS ARE JUST ONE PART OF THE DONATION, WHICH CONSISTS OF MORE THAN 850 BOOKS, PAMPHLETS, MAGAZINES AND PIECES OF EPHEMERA FROM SUZANNE BACH, A RETIRED COLLECTOR AND DEALER IN AFRICAN ART WHO LIVED IN WILLIAMSTOWN FOR MANY YEARS. IN 1991, BACH LENT SOME OF HER VAST COLLECTION TO WCMA FOR AN EXHIBITION OF AFRICAN MASKS. WHEN IT CAME TIME TO DOWNSIZE HER PRIVATE COLLECTION OF RESEARCH MATERIALS GATHERED OVER MANY YEARS, SHE THOUGHT THE COLLEGE WOULD BE A PERFECT BENEFICIARY.

Apotsos says she is delighted by this new collection and what it means for her teaching. Her spring tutorial, African Art and the Western Museum, specifically looks at issues associated with the exhibition of African objects in Western institutions. With these exhibition catalogs, her students can get a firsthand look at how museum curators have created targeted experiences of these objects over the course of the 20th century.

“They create a wonderful illustration of the conversations, power hierarchies, negotiations, compromises, biases and anxieties the field has experienced over the last century,” she says.

Apotsos also plans to use these texts in her introductory course, Materials, Meanings and Messages in the Arts of Africa, which she teaches in the museum’s Object Lab. The catalogs, she says, create a timeline of African art history.

“These books are not only important for their historical value,” she says, “but they’re also a touchstone for understanding what was the standard—if deeply problematic—practice for so long, and how we can move forward from this moment.” —J.M.
Art history professor Michelle Apotsos teaches with these bellows, a recent gift to the college museum, and other objects in Williams’ collections in her course Materials, Meanings and Messages in the Arts of Africa.
"Parenting is just a slow process in preparing your child to leave you," says Jill Margaret Shulman '87, author of the recently published College Admissions Cracked, a month-by-month guide aimed at helping parents through what she promises doesn’t have to be the worst moment in a family’s history.

By one metric, Shulman’s career as a teacher, admission counselor and college-essay writing coach should have provided all the tools necessary when it came time for her own family to go through the process. "But when my kids went through it—even though I understood all the nuts and bolts—I needed emotional support and permission to grieve," she says.

So, Shulman, who has also worked as a freelance writer, decided to write a book giving parents both the nuts-and-bolts expertise as well as a good dose of emotional support. She shared both with Williams Magazine in the fall.

On taking risks...
My first job out of Williams was as a paralegal, which taught me that it’s important to jump in and try something, and be open to it not being a perfect fit. Some would perceive this “false start” as “failure,” but I see it as an important step that led me to graduate school in creative writing. After living and teaching in New York for a while, I moved to rural Iowa and ran a program for students at risk of dropping out or failing out of school. That’s where I learned to really listen in a deeper way to students’ fears, and I came to understand that those fears led to paralysis, which the students perceived as failure. Fear and lack of confidence block students, and once they have a safe space to express themselves, that fear fades away and ceases to impede their success. That was a hugely helpful lesson as I transitioned into working in college admission and as an essay-writing coach. Everyone has a great story to tell, and I love giving students the safe space in which to find theirs.

...Knowing your limits
It hit me in a different way when my daughter started the college search process. Here I am, an expert with the ability to help her, but I quickly realized that it’s hard to discern whether to step in or step back. She wanted my help with her college essay, but we soon realized I wasn’t the best person to help her. I was having an emotional reaction about letting my baby go off to college without me. At college visits, I watched her envision herself in these places and realized I was no part of this vision of her future. I had other awakenings, too, about things I’d done for my kids all along because it was habit or easier than coaxing a teenager to do it or because nobody had time for the lesson of how, for instance, to make a doctor’s appointment. Now was the time for me to complete the training, while my children were still at home. Then letting them go was brutal! My son just had his first birthday at college only two weeks into the semester, and I didn’t know if he’d tell anyone. I sent him cupcakes, and then I let it go. It’s painful. This is a transition for parents, too.

...And opening your heart and mind
In all of my work—with students and parents, and certainly in writing my book—I flip common narratives on their heads. Students tell me, for instance, that they can’t write about playing soccer because they heard sports are off-limits in college essays. I tell them: If you love soccer and have lived and breathed it all these years, don’t hide it. It’s never the topic that will make your essay flat and generic or sparkly—it’s always the approach. If you’re genuine and writing from your heart, the admission evaluator will be listening with theirs.

With parents—even the ones accused of helicoptering—it all comes from a place of love. They think they know what’s best and how to set their child up for success in life. But the overprotective parent who wraps their child in bubble wrap will literally suffocate him. This is about fear—fear of letting our children go and fear that they won’t be happy where they end up if the parent doesn’t step in to protect them. When parents can switch that around, take deep breaths and listen to their child’s view of success—which they will never know unless they ask them—all kinds of opportunities open up. That can set a child on their own path to a version of success the parent may not have envisioned. I always tell people: You can rewrite your version of success as you go along.

If you love soccer... don’t hide it.
If you’re genuine and writing from your heart, the admission evaluator will be listening with theirs.
THE SHAPE OF MEMORY
What we remember, what we forget and why. p.18