Inside
What guppies reveal about the natural world
The evolution of Arabic studies
Nurturing strengths, new commitments
A Time of Renewal

Looking out my office window in Hopkins Hall, the mountains have shifted into the reds, oranges, yellows and umbers of fall. A New England autumn has a rooted, calm beauty that welcomes each viewer on equal terms. Williams is in its element at this time of year.

Fall often symbolizes the end of a season. However, I see it as a renewal—a time when the world slows down in order to muster its resources for the beginning of a new, vital season.

In the fall Williams published a Strategic Plan that lays the groundwork for the college’s flourishing over the next 10 to 15 years. You’ll find it at bit.ly/wmsstrategicplan. It describes how we’ll nurture our academic strengths and tap the full educational potential of residential life and our co-curriculum. How we’ll branch out into new commitments in sustainability and diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. And how we’ll deepen the roots and reinforce the structures of a great college: the people, programs and facilities that give Williams substance.

These processes are already underway. For example, at its October meeting our Board of Trustees voted to begin the design phase of a new Williams College Museum of Art and launch our planned expansion and renovation of the Davis Center, enhancing intellectual, creative and social life on campus. Faculty members are exploring exciting new curricular possibilities. We’re growing our commitments to financial access and affordability for all families, finding new ways to engage alumni in our educational mission, and setting focused sustainability goals for the future. We’re also celebrating 50 years of Williams co-education, shining light on our women leaders.

I’m seeing renewed enthusiasm supplanting the sense of loss we felt during the early months of the pandemic. My colleagues and I have repeatedly been inspired to hear students, faculty and staff express their fresh appreciation for the joys of in-person learning.

There are still plenty of challenges, including a tough labor market, supply-chain disruptions and evolving employee expectations for remote work. Our student body has been profoundly affected by the events of the last several years, and the board devoted time in October to what I expect will be a continuing discussion about mental health on campus.

We should not be daunted by such challenges, given the extraordinary resources that we can bring to bear on our mission; people with great minds and real heart; students hungry for learning; an enviable tradition of alumni partnership; and a commitment to the long-term stewardship of our financial assets in support of our liberal arts mission.

As a time of transition, fall can feel bittersweet. But, to me, it is a harbinger of the many springs to come. A time to nourish the soil, prune a twig or two, deepen the roots and prepare for a new season of growth—for the world, and for Williams.
Inside the Issue

2
From the President
Musterings Williams’ resources for a new, vital season.

4
Contributors

ON CAMPUS

5
News from the College
Connecting students to careers, plans for the museum, a Bicentennial Medalist and more.

10
Together at Williams
The fall semester in photos.

LIFE OF THE MIND

34
Mentored Minds
Psychology professor Shivon Robinson ‘11 explores the many dimensions of opioid addiction.

36
Living Laboratories
Biologist Ron Bassar and his students study what Trinidadian guppies reveal about the natural world.

38
Poetry and Politics
Artist-in-Residence Franny Choi shares why poetry is “a counterpoint to the horror show” that is our times.

FEATURES

16
Strategic Plan
An outline for Williams’ future.

18
Arabic, Studied
How the college’s longstanding but diffuse connection to the Arab world has flourished into one of Williams’ newest programs.
By Adam Baron ‘10

24
Good Timing
Taking time off from college can be a vital and beneficial aspect of students’ education.
By Regina Velázquez

30
The Leadership of Art
Williams alumnae museum leaders on their experiences, their influences and the future of their organizations.
Interview by Pamela Franks

Cover photograph by Mirko Rosenau, istockphoto.com
“We didn’t realize it then, but we were making history in some sense. Four years later, a group of us would be the first Williams students to graduate with an Arabic degree.”

Read more from Adam Baron ’10 on page 18.

Adam Baron ’10 is a writer and political analyst focusing on West Asia and North Africa with an emphasis on Yemen and the Persian Gulf. His writing has appeared in outlets including The Guardian, The Atlantic and Sports Illustrated. He has a B.A. in Arab studies and religion from Williams College and an M.A. in international peace and security from the Department of War Studies at Kings College London.

Kim Catley is a freelance writer based in Richmond, Va. She previously worked for the University of Richmond and Virginia Commonwealth University and is now a contributor to a number of university magazines.

Pamela Franks is the Class of 1956 Director of the Williams College Museum of Art. A specialist in modern and contemporary art, she has devoted her career to unlocking the potential of college and university art museums and imagining the future of museum experiences.

Max-o-matic is a designer, illustrator and collage artist who lives and works in Barcelona, Spain, creating imaginary worlds from torn pieces of the real one. His work has been exhibited in more than 40 galleries and has been seen in publications such as New York Magazine, The New York Times and Wired Magazine.

Kris Qua is a photographer based in Albany, N.Y., who has more than 20 years’ experience working with clients in education, health care, sports and beyond. When not on a shoot, he loves skateboarding, biking, devouring vegan food and going on adventures with his kids and friends.

Bradley Wakoff is a photographer based in Williamstown, Mass. His work has been published by national and international media outlets and nonprofits including USA Today, Oxfam America and The Wilderness Society.

Editor’s Note

“A More Peculiar Kinship” (spring 2021) incorrectly stated that none of the 12 African American U.S. House members from Georgia has ever served more than one term. It also failed to mention that U.S. Rep. Elliot H. Levitas, who served from 1975 to 1985, was the first known Jewish politician representing Georgia elected to the House or Senate.

Molly Magnell is a freelance illustrator and designer currently living in Brooklyn. She’s probably watching cartoon reruns with her cat right now.
Let the Games Begin

The return of varsity sports is a welcome sight this fall after the pandemic sidelined last year’s competition. Women’s volleyball set a triumphant tone, opening its season with a three-game winning streak. The team had a 13-6 record in early November. For the latest on varsity teams, visit ephsports.williams.edu.

“I couldn’t be more thrilled for all of our student athletes,” says Director of Athletics Lisa Melendy. “The vibrancy that athletic contests have brought back to the campus and to Williamstown is palpable.”

Photograph by Kristian Dufour
During the past year, when the need for jobs, internships and short-term projects was at its greatest, Williams alumni, parents and friends provided support to students by offering opportunities through the ’68 Center for Career Exploration’s Alumni Sponsored Internship Program (ASIP) and EphLink.

All 195 students who participated in the internship program in 2021 reached out to alumni through EphLink, the college’s student-alumni career networking platform. They had access to internships in fields including health care, medical and scientific research, racial justice, government and the arts. In January, when Winter Study courses were canceled due to the pandemic, students participated in short-term projects called Winternships hosted by alumni via the ’68 Center.

“The recent alumni-fueled growth of both the ASIP program and EphLink has been nothing short of remarkable,” says Don Kjelleren, executive director of the ’68 Center. “When Ephs support Ephs, the effect is exponentially more efficient than students exploring and connecting with opportunities on their own.”

To learn more about EphLink and the Alumni Sponsored Internship Program, visit careers.williams.edu/alumni or contact recruiting@williams.edu.
Building Belonging

The Davis Center Initiative—a $20 million fundraising effort to support the people, programs and significant physical revitalization of the Davis Center—received a boost following a recent vote by Williams’ Board of Trustees to approve a plan to expand and renovate the center.

The college has secured three major gifts totaling $7 million toward the project. Two are anonymous, among them a $5 million matching grant for gifts designated to the full renovation of Jenness House, the reconstruction and expansion of Rice House, and the creation of an outdoor greenspace.

Ray Whiteman ’81 committed $1 million to the project. Having experienced racism as a student in the late 1970s, he says he hopes his gift will support community building and inspire activism among the next generation of students. A living room in the renovated Rice House will be named for him.

An additional $1 million has been raised through the Alumni Fund and Parents Fund, new endowment and spendable funds. Each gift supports student, academic and co-curricular opportunities such as racial and social justice internships, the Summer Science and the Summer Humanities and Social Sciences Programs, and Allison Davis Research Fellowships.

“The Davis Center is central to the college’s mission to help students, faculty and staff of all identities thrive and find the spaces, communities and resources to help them do so,” says Leticia S.E. Haynes ’99, Williams’ vice president for institutional diversity, equity and inclusion. “Investing in these new spaces for our students, particularly those from groups historically underrepresented or often marginalized, is a significant step toward ensuring that our campus is fully inclusive.”

A Great Day of Service

Williams students took the opportunity to learn about—and give back to—the Berkshires community during the Fall Great Day of Service, organized by Lehman Community Engagement in October.

Among the many activities throughout the day, students scrubbed baseboards and washed windows at Williamstown’s senior center, picnicked and played games with adults with disabilities at The Spruces, did cleanup work at the 35-acre Caretaker Farm and volunteered at the Berkshire Humane Society in Pittsfield.

The student-run Lehman Community Engagement, part of Williams’ Center for Learning in Action, connects students with organizations throughout the region and is planning another service day in the spring.

Students plant bulbs at Louison House, a transitional living shelter in Adams and North Adams, Mass.
IN MEMORIAM

The Williams community said farewell to Bill Wagner, the Brown Professor of History, emeritus, and former interim president and dean of the faculty, in September 2021. He was 71. As interim president in 2009-10, Wagner steered Williams through an economically challenging time in the country. Says Greg Avis ’80, chair of the Board of Trustees at the time, “Bill’s leadership as interim president was characterized by his steady hand, strong intellect and the goodwill he engendered. He led Williams expertly during this period.”

Williams also said goodbye to Ben Labaree, professor of history and environmental studies, emeritus, and founder of the Williams-Mystic Coastal and Ocean Studies Program, who died on Aug. 30 at age 94; Chester “Chet” Lasell ’58, director of alumni relations from 1992 to 1998, who died on Sept. 12 at age 84; Bob Peck, who as athletic director for 29 years led the integration of women into Williams’ athletics and physical education programs in the early 1970s, who died on Oct. 15 at age 92; and Paula Moore Tabor ’76, a pioneer of coeducation at Williams and associate director of alumni relations and director of lifelong learning from 1992 to 2013, who died on Oct. 23 at the age of 67. Read more about them at president.williams.edu/in-memoriam.

THE WORLD AND WILLIAMS

Each summer from 1921 to 1932, a who’s who of influential scholars and politicians gathered at Williams for a monthlong symposium on the issues of the day. The Williamstown Institute of Politics and its founder, Williams President Harry A. Garfield, Class of 1885, are the subject of a new book by James McAllister, the Fred Greene Third Century Professor of Political Science.

In Wilsonian Visions: The Williamstown Institute of Politics and American Internationalism after the First World War (Cornell University Press), McAllister examines the institute’s global reach and its roots in the intellectual and political relationship between Garfield and U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. The institute became a model for similar programs such as the University of Virginia’s Institute of Public Affairs and the Geneva Institute of International Relations.

McAllister began researching the book in 1998, combing through previously unprocessed records from Williams’ archives. Reviewers call the book “eminently readable and deeply researched” and “an overdue and necessary exploration.” Says Katherine A.S. Sibley of Saint Joseph’s University, “The questions that animated the discussions at the Williamstown Institute of Politics continue to shape our public life today.”

ALSO IN PRINT

The Master: The Long Run and Beautiful Game of Roger Federer, by Christopher Clarey ’86 (Twelve)

The Intellectual Lives of Children, by Susan Engel, Williams’ Senior Lecturer in Psychology and Class of 1959 Director of Program in Teaching (Harvard University Press)

The Arbornaut: A Life Discovering the Eighth Continent in the Trees Above Us, by Meg Lowman ’76 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)


See more books from our community on the Williams Bookshelf (today.williams.edu/books).
The artworks featured in the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) exhibition *Sweaty Concepts* explore “a range of experiences across gender identity, sexual orientation, race and ability that involve making a place for oneself where it does not already exist,” according to the museum’s website. Named for the term used by feminist writer and scholar Sara Ahmed to describe “one that comes out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world,” *Sweaty Concepts* consists of works from WCMA’s collection across all media. The exhibition, organized in conjunction with the Feminist Art Coalition and in dialogue with the 50th anniversary of women joining Williams’ student body, is on view through Dec. 19.

At its October meeting, Williams’ Board of Trustees voted to move forward with the design phase of a new art museum on the former site of the Williams Inn. The building project is expected to be completed in 2026-27, the centennial year of the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA). Focused on teaching and learning with art, the new space will be “designed with students in mind, fostering a sense of belonging for campus members and the wider community, and an inclusive experience for all visitors,” according to a WCMA statement announcing the plan. Said Williams President Maud S. Mandel, “The new museum grows out of Williams’ commitment to the arts—a commitment that has defined us for over a century... This is far more than a building. It’s the next step in Williams' commitment to the vibrancy, relevance and educational importance of the arts.”

*Sweaty Concepts is on view at WCMA through Dec. 19.*

Photograph by Bradley Wakoff
Together at Williams

Scenes from a vibrant fall 2021 semester.

Photographs by Bradley Wakoff
What Outing Club Director Scott Lewis called “the largest gathering for Mountain Day in my 30 years” took place on Oct. 1.

Williams Bicentennial Medalist Val DiFebo ‘84, CEO of Deutsch Inc.’s New York office, delivers the Convocation Address to the senior class, marking the start of the academic year.

Move-in Day for first-year students.
The first day of classes.

Mechanical trades technician Adam Bethoney works in the Center for Development Economics.

Outdoor classes are a common sight during the fall semester.

Students prepare a vegetarian meal for the Log Lunch, hosted each Friday during the school year by the Center for Environmental Studies.
Students hike to Stone Hill on Mountain Day.

President Maud S. Mandel hosts trick or treating at the President’s House on Halloween.

Williams football remains undefeated after a 25-0 shutout against Wesleyan for Homecoming on Nov. 6.

Alumni return to campus for Homecoming, their first in-person visit since the start of the pandemic.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A GREAT LEARNING INSTITUTION is made up of a few special elements.
Excellent teachers and scholars.
Committed students. Skilled and devoted staff. Sufficient and well-managed resources. A sense of community and place.
And ambitions that keep pace with the times while holding true to enduring values.

One of Williams’ great qualities is our ability to maintain this BALANCE between INNOVATION and fidelity to our CORE VALUES.
It is a type of excellence that has to be continually re-earned, and we take joy in that work.

Woven into the plan are two crosscutting commitments that are expressions of our mission and values. They must be a part of everything we do.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility
• Faculty and staff recruitment
• Accessibility
• Racial justice
• Engaging with institutional history
• The Davis Center

Sustainability
• Education and research
• Climate action
• Buildings, landscaping and land use
• Responsible consumption
• Community, diversity, equity and inclusion
• Accountability and transparency

2021

STRATEGIC
The 2021 Strategic Plan, developed from extensive community input, will help us extend our excellence by:

**Defining a new academic excellence:** Redoubling our commitment to the liberal arts while tapping new opportunities to match emerging academic strengths with global challenges.

**Providing a complete education:** Expanding on what we do best through a four-year, 12-month model that supports intellectual, personal and professional development.

**Expanding access and affordability:** Further investing in our capacity to attract exceptional students and ensuring their access to all elements of a Williams education.

**Engaging alumni:** Honoring our graduates as partners by creating new opportunities to engage with Williams, our students and each other.

**Substantially increasing our commitments to Sustainability and to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility as fundamental societal challenges:** Transforming our values into shared commitments by weaving them throughout all aspects of the college's program and operations.

**Caring for the resources we depend on:** Fully leveraging our most important assets—people, facilities and financial resources—and stewarding them for the long run.

We are enacting this plan in a very different world from the one we knew even a few years ago. Our lives are being transformed by many forces, including a global pandemic; sweeping movements against racism and for equality and justice; new phases of globalization and of resistance thereto; emerging redefinitions of knowledge, expertise and authority; and the sharp effects of climate change, technological innovation and economic realignment.

These and many other forces interact and contribute to a complex and continually shifting societal mix. Our shared duty is to prepare future graduates—that is, Williams alumni-to-be—to thrive and lead in circumstances that none of us can foresee.

By translating our goals into practical programs over the coming years, we will be equipping Williams to excel in new times: preparing students to thrive and contribute to a changing world while holding true to the principles that make us proud to say, "WE ARE WILLIAMS."

*View the full Strategic Plan at bit.ly/wmsstrategicplan.*
Few students get to see their program of study grow and evolve in real time—and against the backdrop of world events. Adam Baron ’10 and his classmates, Williams’ very first students to graduate with majors in Arabic studies, were able to do just that. Baron examines how the college’s long-standing but diffuse connection to the Arab world has flourished into one of Williams’ newest programs.

By
Adam Baron ’10

Opening Illustration by
Max-o-matic
I still can’t fully remember what landed me in a 9 a.m. Arabic 101 class that first Monday in September of my freshman year. Slamming the details of a notoriously difficult language into my head every single day of the week, at an hour when most 18-year-olds would rather be sleeping, just doesn’t seem like a choice I would have made with much forethought.

There were roughly 20 of us spread out in Griffin Hall that day. For some of us, that singular event of our coming of age loomed large: 9/11, Al Qaeda’s 2001 attack on the twin towers and the Pentagon. Arabic 101 was that first step toward the goal of eventually joining the State Department or a three-letter agency, a kind of type-A career path. Others of us were seeking to deconstruct narratives espoused by media, to learn more about cultures and nations that were drawn in broad brush strokes, to engage critically in the simultaneously forward-thinking and idealistic way that 18-year-olds are wont to do. And for some students like me, enrolling in Arabic 101 was a sudden impulse that would shape the rest of our lives—or at least the rest of our year.

We didn’t realize it then, but we were making history in some sense. Four years later, a group of us would be the first Williams students to graduate with an Arabic degree. What was once a fledgling course of study has since emerged as one of the college’s most popular language programs—a testament to the hard work of many in the department as well as to the intersection of the Purple Valley and the wider world.

Formal Arabic classes didn’t enter the Williams course catalog until 2005, but the college and the region have a surprisingly long history. Strong faculty connections and alumni networks in fields like the foreign service, journalism and even archeology have seen Ephs pop up in the Middle East since the time of the Ottomans. John Henry Haynes, Class of 1876, found himself playing a key role in early digs in Assyrian sites in northern Iraq. The Williams-educated troika of Ken Dilanian ’91 with The Philadelphia Inquirer and Eric Schmitt ’82 and Scott Shane ’76 of The New York Times has played an outsized role in post-9/11 reporting on Al Qaeda and the war on terrorism.

Institutional memory effectively places the birth of Williams’ Middle Eastern studies program at 2003, coinciding with the hiring of Icelandic Iraq scholar Magnús Bernhardsson as the college’s first tenure-track history professor focused on that region. Consciously or not, the appointment was seen as a reaction to the 9/11 attacks—both with regard to rising student interest and a collective consciousness of a need to facilitate a greater space for conversation on the region.

Due to curiosity in the topic—and, speaking from experience, Bernhardsson’s excellent teaching skills—interest immediately boomed. Another professor, Armando Vargas, joined the faculty in 2004 to offer language classes building off of the previous work of visiting comparative literature professor Christopher Stone, who taught Arabic under the critical languages program.

“There was a real thirst for a greater understanding of Arabic culture,” says Katarzyna Pieprzak, a comparative literature professor who currently serves as the chair of the Arabic studies department. “And I think that it’s significant that it wasn’t just coming from political science.”

By the time I entered Arabic 101 in the fall of 2006, a small flock of professors had been brought together loosely under the Arabic studies umbrella. It was hard to shake the feeling that we were pioneers—or, less dramatically, guinea pigs. I lean toward the former just in terms of the weird bond a lot of us ended up feeling, fueled by some combination of those early professors, Williams’ deep commitment to faculty-student mentorship and the sheer difficulty of the Arabic language. We cracked jokes about the case endings (a grammatical quirk of the Arabic language), traded YouTube clips of Arabic singers, debated regional politics (increasingly, in both languages) and, when appropriate, did what we could to apply pressure to the Williams administration to build on the program. As time went on, the pressure took an intersectional nature, pulling in a wide array of students, many of whom weren’t even in the department per se. Activism on preserving Arabic became imbued into those early years.

“I believe that there was a strong contingency of POC students that really pushed for the Arabic program, and a lot of Muslim or Arab students themselves,” says Jennifer Monge ’12, who is now a lawyer. “I think that these students, lots of them immigrants or children of immigrants, recognized the importance
of multilingualism. It felt like there was a real comradeship between many students to get this program afloat."

While there were only a handful of classes at that point, both the pioneering spirit and Williams’ general culture allowed for a flexibility that simply wouldn’t have existed in most schools with more established programs. My classmate Chloe Brown ’10, for example, spent a Winter Study in Sanaa, Yemen, on an independent study project that she largely designed herself in coordination with a local Arabic language institute. There she developed a fondness for the Yemeni capital’s signature potato-and-egg sandwiches that came up as we reminisced during my research for this piece.

I, meanwhile, used a Class of 1945 World Fellowship from the college to spend the summer after my junior year doing blessedly amorphous research on expressions of identity as I schlepped from Cairo through Amman, Damascus, Aleppo and Beirut to Istanbul. Those two seemingly dreamlike months effectively consummated my attachment to the region and culminated in a wide-ranging paper that prefigured a lot of the writing I’d do just a few years later.

Perhaps the most significant element of Arabic at Williams was the once-burgeoning study-abroad pipeline between the college and the University of Damascus. Between 2008 and 2010, right up until the outbreak of the civil war, about a dozen Ephs made their way to the Syrian capital to study. At the time, Williams was the only American college or university funneling undergraduates to the city, fueling experiences that continue to stick with many students to this day.

The informal program was the brainchild of former Associate Dean Laura McKeon, who oversaw study abroad and whose photographer husband, Kevin Bubriski, spent a significant time north of Aleppo capturing Syria’s ever-evocative dead cities. It’s hard to overstate the impact of how much time and effort Dean McKeon put into helping us sort the logistics for study abroad and fellowships.

Simultaneously, Williams’ brand of student-faculty interaction undoubtedly helped to nurture nascent academic interests and encourage us all to push through the less enjoyable aspects of language acquisition. And there was the interdisciplinary nature of the program. In contrast to many colleagues from other universities taking Arabic, my classmates and I weren’t particularly boxed in to a department, which fueled the kind of free-spirited explorations that small liberal arts colleges are noted for.

“It kind of felt like the Wild West in the best way,” says Brown. “There were no standard requirements or set of

"I schlepped from Cairo through Amman, Damascus, Aleppo and Beirut to Istanbul. Those two seemingly dreamlike months effectively consummated my attachment to the region."

—ADAM BARON ’10
In an odd coincidence, the first class of Arabic majors graduated on the eve of the various anti-establishment, pro-democracy protests that would come to be referred to as the Arab Spring. It’s telling that a few of us found ourselves—more or less by chance—on the front lines. The winter of 2011 saw my life transformed from a quiet one of doing an admittedly uneven job of teaching English to Yemeni college students and professionals to hopping between protests as I freelanced for papers ranging from *Foreign Policy* to *The Economist*.

Elsewhere on the Arabian Peninsula, my former Cairo flatmate, Cortni (Kerr) Desir ‘10, was on a similar trajectory in Bahrain, where the uprising invigorated her preexisting aims of pairing a teaching job with work on protest movements in the Persian Gulf island nation.

Ephs’ engagement in the region had grown deeper—and multifaceted. In addition to classic paths toward journalism, policy and academia, Williams alumni networks expanded in aid and education, among other areas. Swaths of graduates continued to find themselves in key hubs across the region, quite often bumping elbows with each other.

Back at Williams, the pipeline to Syria and other study-abroad options in the Middle East was halted as the situation grew more thorny. At the same time, Williams professors were incorporating more and more about ongoing events into their curricula—something the students noticed.

“My formative memory from the Arab Spring was walking into the first day of class with Magnús for his course called Nation Building: The Making of the Modern Middle East, probably on Feb. 2, days after protests started in Tahrir Square,” recalls Hill Hamrick ’13, who after graduation joined the Marine Corps, went on to receive an MBA and moved into the private sector. “It was fascinating that semester to assess the formation of nation states over the past 100 years while watching them seemingly unravel in real time.”

Arabic studies continued to flourish and evolve. In the spring of 2018, the faculty overwhelmingly voted to establish Arabic as an independent department, allowing it to formally split off from comparative literature as of the 2018-19 academic year. The program has since expanded to three tenure-track professors and a teaching fellow in residence. And the curriculum has
formalized and grown, now including a 400-level course in intensive Arabic that has seen enrollment levels rare in institutions many times Williams’ size.

In 2020, the department gained its own fund to support undergraduate study abroad. Named for the late Abdul W. Wohabe, a Riyadh-born member of the Class of 1959 who went on to practice law in New York City, the fund is paving the way for future students to travel to the region to study Arabic language and culture. Six did so as the inaugural class of Wohabe scholars in Jordan this past summer.

Amidst the growth, much of what initially made the program special has remained.

“As we’ve continued to hire in, we’ve aimed to maintain this diversity of perspectives,” Pieprzak says. “In some respects we’ve seen this widening of what Arabic studies itself means.”

Since the program’s inception, Arabic professors have offered both language and non-language courses, and their varied academic interests have only enriched the course catalog. Spanning both North Africa and West Asia, these linguistics and comparative literature professors cover everything from the history of Jewish communities in the Arab world to synergies between Arab, Caribbean and Latin American post-colonial literature.

“Even on a national level, it’s a very unique setup when it comes to the diversity of Arabic studies,” says Brahim El Guabli, an assistant professor of Arabic studies and comparative literature who joined the faculty in 2018. For faculty, “there’s a real opportunity to experiment and go out of the box and offer new courses.”

All the while, the rather special collaborative culture of the department has continued. Speaking with Guabli and other current professors, it was notable how much of what they appreciated about the department echoed my own experiences more than a decade ago.

Lama Nassif, an associate professor of Arabic studies who came to Williams in 2016, for example, noted that the focus on community building extends even into the hiring process.

“It’s a small community,” Nassif says. “When they’re hiring, it’s not just about the competence. It’s about how they’ll fit into the community. In a small department like Arabic, when we thrive—not just as professors but as people—it’s good for everyone. There’s a shared investment in and mutual reliance on each other.”

Over the course of conversations for this article, it wasn’t hard for me to feel quite a bit of nostalgia—in addition to jealousy—over students who were just beginning to learn Arabic, with all its joys and frustrations.

Even my classmates who moved away from Arabic continue to feel the consequence and impact of this moment in our educations. Desir, my former Cairo flatmate, says her experiences living and studying in Bahrain and Palestine birthed an interest in the roles of built environment and space. She returned to school to study urban planning at MIT and now works in urban planning for the City of Somerville, Mass.

Says Brown, reflecting on how Arabic counterintuitively prepared her for work in technology, “This sounds incredibly corny, but I feel like the absolute nightmare of getting your fus7a”—formal Arabic—“homework corrected is a really great prep for getting error messages in code.”

Arabic may have taught us a language, but it also taught us a lot about endurance, intellectual curiosity and friendship.

---

*It's weirdly appropriate—or an odd coincidence—that I found myself back at Williams on the eve of the coronavirus outbreak, a trip intended to be a reflective break. What I jokingly referred to as my “independent study 10-year reunion” ended up giving me an additional angle at the seeming end of the world, as the world effectively shut down around us.*

A day after my guest lecture on Yemen and a few hours before the announcement that campus was closing, I found myself at the Log having lunch with a collection of current students. Covid-19 may have loomed like an elephant in the corner of the room, but we chatted as if oblivious to the pandemic slowly making its way to strike.

I hashed out career advice and shared my email address. But more than anything I just wanted to see what the kids were up to—to see how things had progressed. I can’t remember the details; they were likely fogged out by the drama of the disaster year that came after.

What I can remember is that the students made me feel old and they made me feel dumb; they left me proud to be even tangentially associated with the work that paved the way for their educations and fearful of the time coming that they would edge me out of a job.

Overall, there’s no greater credit to Williams, and no greater credit to those who built—and continue to build—the department, than that.
Taking time off from college, or postponing one’s enrollment, isn’t usually the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of a Williams education. But so-called gap years (for first-year students) and leaves of absence are a vital and beneficial aspect of many students’ trajectories.

In a typical year, some 15 to 25 incoming students request permission to defer their enrollment, while another 35 to 50 already on campus might take a leave for one or more semesters. Time off can give students the opportunity to travel, rest, work, help family members, mentally prepare for college or reflect on life goals.

Last year, as a result of the pandemic, the number of students postponing their first year of college jumped to 103. Students taking a leave numbered 231 for the fall semester and 90 for the spring.

“For many students, taking a leave from college turns out to be the best decision they could possibly make,” says Marlene Sandstrom, dean of the college and the Hales Professor of Psychology. “The experiences students have during that time often allow them to return to Williams with new perspective, motivation and excitement about how they want to spend the remainder of their time at Williams.”

As students settled back into a more typical fall semester, we asked six of them to share how they spent their time away and what they learned from it.
Originally accepted as a member of the Class of 2023, Brianna Dechet ‘25 says she was “kind of desperate to run away into the wilderness” after high school. She delayed the start of her freshman year in 2019 when she was accepted to the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) in Patagonia, a semester-long course that combines wilderness skills with leadership training, immersing participants in the language and culture of the South American region.

Dechet picked up mountaineering, sea kayaking and backpacking skills and learned about problem-solving and working with a team. She attended NOLS lectures focused on the relationship between humans and the environment that were specific to Patagonia but globally relatable.

A five-year student of American Sign Language, she planned to take an internship in the spring of 2020, working in Nicaragua and Peru to study the emerging Nicaraguan Sign Language. Plans fell through when she lost contact with a professor there, so she stayed with an aunt in Portland, Ore., to help homeschool her children. During the summer and fall of 2020, Dechet participated in a virtual global health internship with the Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI), working with an epidemiologist who had several hepatitis-related projects in Rwanda. Though Dechet had no prior background in health care, she performed clerical tasks and compiled data that would be used to inform CHAI’s efforts to help build a sustainable health care system in Rwanda.

After completing her internship, Dechet spent the early months of 2021 earning cash in a bagel shop, followed by more outdoor expeditions that summer—putting her NOLS skills to work by leading youth backpacking and multisport camping trips in the Pacific Northwest.

Now at Williams, Dechet says she is enjoying an art history course and intramural soccer, and she’s a member of the climbing club. She says the two years she spent “outside and in the real world” before coming to Williams opened her eyes to possibilities she had not yet considered: “I’m looking forward to finding a balance here, where I can re-animate myself to expand my learning in this setting as well as bring in pieces from my gap years that I grew to strongly value.”
Good Timing

Working with kids has always been important to Max Litvak ’25. As a high schooler, he volunteered in an elementary after-school program. So when it became clear that the pandemic would radically alter his first year at Williams, he applied at the last minute to City Year AmeriCorps, which provides young adults with teacher training and lessons on racial and economic inequality and then sends them into urban classrooms.

Litvak spent the 2020-21 school year working as an assistant teacher in a virtual classroom at the Mildred Avenue K-8 School in Mattapan, Mass., where the majority of students are Black and Hispanic. Many had fallen behind in math, having spent the previous spring learning remotely. So Litvak and the lead teacher focused on the basics: addition, subtraction, multiplication, division and fractions. “The learning was slow,” Litvak says. “Doing math on a computer is hard, especially for 10-year-olds.”

Litvak often worked one-on-one with students, which also gave him a chance to assess how they were faring at home. The students began opening up to him. He learned about their and their families’ struggles balancing school, work and life. “More than being a teacher, I tried to be a friend to my students,” he says.

At the end of the school year, he got to meet with his students in person twice. He says it felt like he learned more about them in those two days than in the entire time he’d spent with them virtually. And the connections were deep. “The thing I valued most about the year was that I could be there for these kids every day,” he says.

Now settled in on campus, Litvak plans to volunteer with students at Williamstown Elementary School. He’s interested in STEM courses and wants to take classes that extend his City Year learning. “I don’t yet know what I want to do, but I do know that I want to continue contributing to my community and helping those with fewer opportunities than myself.”

Abby Vieira ’25 spent what would have been her first year at Williams at home in Winchester, Mass., but she managed to travel the world. For three months, she taught English to children in Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic via video-conference, meeting seven students ages 7 to 13 each week through Outreach 360, a nonprofit that connects students in Latin America with volunteer teachers. “It was a really great experience answering their questions and seeing them become more confident in English,” she says.

She then worked with the New York City-based marketing firm JUV Consulting to help the company reach her demographic—Gen-Z, people born between 1997 and 2012—and pick up some marketing skills. She found fulfillment in watching her team’s plans get put into action, such as when they brainstormed strategies to promote a new movie, Voyagers, across platforms for Lionsgate and wrote press questions for the cast.

Vieira says two online courses helped her to focus on the future. For one, Boost, through Kaplan University, she worked on a team to solve real-world problems for businesses—an experience she says helped sparked her interest in fields including economics and political science. The other course, Global Citizen Academy, fostered discussions about current global issues, such as environmental policies and equal access to education, with peers from around the world. “It was so inspiring to see people from places like India, Chile and Uganda with the same passion to make a change,” she says.

Vieira plans to teach English to students again this summer. “The new experiences and connections I made helped me think critically about the things I value,” she says.
Experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic and watching several family members become ill with cancer, Nicolle Mac Williams ’22 had a growing sense that life was too short— and that she wanted to spend more time with the people she loved. So the rising Williams senior finished her fall classes, “took all of my savings, took the spring 2021 semester off and went to Argentina,” she says. While the semester away was intended to be a break, she couldn’t help noticing connections to the Global Theatre Histories course she had just completed in the fall. The students studied the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, a group of Argentine women who in the 1970s began weekly marches in front of the presidential palace to protest kidnappings and killings carried out against more than 30,000 people who opposed the ruling military dictatorship.

Mac Williams’ parents are Argentine, which sparked her initial interest in the Madres. But walking around Buenos Aires in 2021, she could still see reminders of how the dictatorship affected the society for generations. That’s when she knew she wanted to deepen her academic understanding of the Madres.

She applied for a Williams Class of 1945 Student World Fellowship, which allowed her to remain in Argentina and work as a teaching assistant with the Universidad Nacional de La Plata through the summer. She TA’d for two classes in the popular music certificate program, which blends musical training with a study of human rights and political movements in Latin America. The program was also developed to preserve the history of the Madres, giving Mac Williams direct access to studying their legacy as she continued her own research on the relationship between the Madres and the country’s military dictatorship.

“I was trying to understand the context that the Madres were working within, and what frameworks they used to be successful in their endeavors,” Mac Williams says. “Beyond that, I was attempting to understand their legacy in the long term and how the political movements that followed continue to move progress forward.”

As part of her fellowship, she produced a creative work that reflected her research. Mac Williams is a theater major interested in how performance intersects with social issues, and she initially thought about writing a play or a poem. She pivoted to painting, however, after taking classes in Argentina. The Madres often used paint as a form of expression, and her classmates were similar in age to the protesters.

“I wanted to use those skills and have an end product that reflected my experience there,” she says of the artwork in her final fellowship report. “No professor assigned this to me. I got to explore, to see where the path took me, to find what was interesting to me.” –Kim Catley

Nicole Mac Williams '22
KNOXVILLE, TENN.
Carl May ’25 spent his senior year of high school learning online, an experience he didn’t want to repeat at Williams. So he deferred his enrollment to spend a year “doing work that was worth taking the time off my studies for,” he says.

As the grandson of the founder of Andersen Sterilizers, and as a way to contribute to society, May trained to become a sterile processing technician in the company’s lab in Morrisville, N.C. With skills in high demand, he went to work right away in the fall of 2020, sterilizing cotton swabs in an hours-long process for use in Covid testing.

The demand was so great that May usually had to prepare swabs the day shipments were received, turning them around to ship out the next day—“pallet loads,” he says, with more than 28,000 swabs to be sterilized, averaging three pallets per week. One mistake could mean reprocessing an entire load.

May felt a sense of responsibility as he acknowledged the importance of the company’s work. “The time urgency of these shipments can make the work difficult,” he says. “However, it was great knowing that the swabs were badly needed by hospitals around the country. I learned a lot this year. My previous science classes have all been theoretical. It was really interesting to learn the science behind the sterile processing of swabs and gain hands-on experience during this critical time for the world.”

May now plans to major in music and computer science, which he says surprises some people who know about his experience last year. Music filled in much of his free time while working for Andersen: He did some vocal training, performed in online vocal competitions and taught himself a music production software program in addition to practicing cooking, helping to care for a new family puppy and making a point of staying in touch with high school friends. “The experience I gained this past year is an excellent jumping-off point for my future work,” he says, though he doesn’t anticipate returning to the job. “I’ve gained an incredible appreciation for the time that I have here at Williams—dedicated time to broaden my perspectives, improve my knowledge and skill set and, in the broadest sense, actualize my vision of the person that I want to become.”
The more I thought about it, the more I saw how Covid restrictions impacted not only my relationship with academics and social activities but also with myself,” says Beam Maskati ‘25. So before enrolling at Williams, she used the 2020-21 academic year “as a period of exploration and discovery.” Based in Bangkok, Thailand, she set out to gain a deeper understanding of her home country.

Maskati says she has always found solace in nature, so she spent a week on an organic rice farm in Sisaket and describes the experience as amazing but exhausting. While working full days in near-100-degree heat tending livestock and rice fields, building straw huts and collecting butterfly pea flowers, she learned from the workers there and enjoyed hearing their stories. “The whole experience allowed me to be both grateful and appreciative of nature and the environment but also critical of the systems of power that dictate social structure, job placement and money distribution,” she says.

She then went to the Lopburi province to teach English at the Sathya Sai School of Thailand. With a curriculum built on the Education in Human Values Program founded by the late Indian guru and philanthropist Sathya Sai Baba, the boarding school, which is funded entirely by donations, focuses on character building. The children “truly radiate love and joy and just pure happiness,” Maskati says, adding that the experience was “remarkably refreshing and hopeful.”

Maskati also took an online course in integrative medicine and holistic health. Pushing the boundaries of traditional medicine and wellness ignited in her a new passion, she says: “This was definitely both a personal and professional transformation for me.”

She hopes to become a certified health coach this fall. She also started seeing a therapist—in part because she was interested in the field of mental health and helping people to heal. “This was probably one of the best choices I have made, ever,” she says, citing her personal growth through self-analysis.

Like many students between high school and college, Maskati also took time to be with her family at home, cooking, watching TV and “giving myself space and time to just be.” Now that she’s at Williams, she’s excited to be working in small-group settings where she can connect with others and hear their ideas. She says her experiences in Thailand made her feel like a new person and allowed her to “hone my interest for psychology/neuroscience, environmental studies, public health and sociology. But I am perhaps even more open to taking fun courses that spark my curiosity.”
The Leadership of Art

Williams women who run museums and galleries discuss their experiences, their influences and the future of their organizations.

“How can museums be spaces for healing, for re-examining some of our prejudices, and also be sites for celebration and inspiration for new generations?”

Leaders of arts institutions and organizations are thinking deeply about that question, posed by Victoria Sancho Lobis MA ’02 of the Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College during a recent online conversation hosted by Williams. The event marked 50 years since Williams opened its doors to women as well as the 50th anniversary of the Graduate Program in the History of Art—two important channels that have fed Williams graduates into arts leadership roles and, over time, have helped grow the share of women working in museums to about 60%, according to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The Benton Museum, having been shuttered due to the pandemic, opened to the public the same day as the Williams event. Lobis joined six colleagues for the discussion, led by Pamela Franks, the Class of 1956 Director of the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA). Also participating were Lucinda Barnes MA ’78 of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Laura Hoptman ’83 of The Drawing Center in Manhattan, Shamim M. Momin ’95 of the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington, Sarah Needham ’08 of the Hill Art Foundation and Sasha Suda MA ’05 of the National Gallery of Canada.

During their wide-ranging conversation, a few excerpts of which follow, the women reflected on how Williams influenced them and the ways they are addressing the challenges of our times.

Noting the number of art history professors and museum staff from campus and the broader Williams community in attendance, Lobis called the event “a great space to remind each other how critical mutual support and mutual aid is, particularly as we women look to take on greater roles of leadership in the arts and elsewhere.”

“This past 15 months have really been a reset button for our field. We cannot go back to where we were before.”

LAURA HOPTMAN ’83
“One can have the best vision out there and the most equitable one, but until it’s really enacted in every single decision, it’s not true accessibility or true diversity.”

SHAMIM M. MOMIN ’95

“There are so many ways you can work in the arts. It’s important to work for someone who you really respect and whose career you look up to.”

SARAH NEEDHAM ’08

Pamela Franks, Class of 1956 Director of WCMA: Were there specific experiences that might have been transformative in your education—moments during your time at Williams when you clarified your goals, hopes and dreams?

Shamim M. Momin ’95, Henry Art Gallery director of curatorial affairs: I spent a year abroad in Paris and came back early to figure out what to do for the summer. I went to WCMA and asked for a meeting with [then director] Linda Shearer, and we just talked about ideas. That’s how I discovered curatorial work. I was involved with the museum already but hadn’t thought about the translation of my education—all the amazing experience with ideas I was having—into making things happen in real life. That was my “eureka” moment around what curatorial work could be and how that could lead to opportunity to help shape and lead a vision within an institution.

Laura Hoptman ’83, The Drawing Center executive director: I think of two trajectories at Williams: the art history trajectory and living artists. It may have been an alumna or someone involved with WCMA who told me that once I got to New York City, where I was going, I could find a job not necessarily at a museum but at a place where living artists were. I stumbled my way to Franklin Furnace, a hotbed of performance artwork at the time. I began my life in the arts. But being at Williams in the early 1980s—especially in the art history department—was a moment of transition, with young, awake professors like Carol Ockman, who is enormously important, not only in classes on 19th-century French painting but also [during Winter Study], when I began my Italian studies, which I kept up. I spent my junior year abroad in Rome. All of it really has marked the rest of my life.

Sarah Needham ’08, Hill Art Foundation executive director: I was Laura’s intern in the summer of 2007. We were working with Elizabeth Peyton—all these artists I hadn’t heard of—and now any time I see their names, I think back to that summer. I also took a lot of education courses with Professor [Susan] Engel [senior lecturer in psychology and the Class of 1959 Director of Program in Teaching], taught at the Williamstown Elementary School, and took a public art class my senior year, where we went to Dia Beacon and Storm King Art Center [in New York’s Hudson Valley]. I’m passionate about arts accessibility and arts education. The art history classes were amazing, but being able to take classes in all different areas and to shoot an email to the amazing alumni base has been hugely impactful in my career.
Sasha Suda MA ’05, National Gallery of Canada director and CEO: At Williams, museums can be a serious place for reflection and discourse, a place to go deep but also to invite a broader audience into that conversation. I haven’t quite experienced a place like it. The academy and the museum lived on a level playing field where visiting scholars and academics I’d only seen the names of in bibliographies became humans. They walked up and down the same street I did and were interested in what I had to say or questions I had to ask. It might just be the density of brains and art lovers in a single place in the world who come together on a regular basis. You develop a kind of comfort in sometimes really easy conversations but also in tough conversations that feel somehow more real because they’re in person.

“Let’s just try to be part of society, the part that brings joy, that builds bridges. Part of the challenge is to celebrate at the same time as we interrogate.”
SASHA SUDA MA ’05

Lucinda Barnes MA ’78, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive curator emerita and former chief curator and director of programs and collections: I was asked to introduce [art historian and critic] Dore Ashton when she came to speak [at Williams]. It was terrifying, but those kinds of introductions to professional life and to colleagues—to sit down at dinner afterward with Dore and talk to her about her writing, her experiences—were transformative. They built our confidence as emerging professionals in the field. In my time in the [Grad Art] program, I created an exhibition presented at WCMA with artist George Rickey, who lived in the area. I essentially did an internship with him, and there was a publication. Who does this as a graduate student? All of these things coming together—the scholars, the museum, the library, the community—and being able to go to any faculty member, audit any class. It was unlike any community I’ve ever been a part of but one that I hold as a model.

Franks: Could you share some of your thinking about what the future holds for the arts and what you’re trying to accomplish from where you sit to try to create a better future for all of us?

Lobis: At the Benton Museum of Art, we’re in a brand new building—and today is a milestone for us, the first day that members of the public can make an appointment to come into our galleries. So the pandemic has been remarkable in all the ways you would anticipate and then some extra ones that have to do with trying to open a new space, learn the space, doing a very slow-motion installation of our building and now just being able to share our beautiful building and exhibitions with the public. The pandemic has laid bare anew so many of the profound inequities in our society, and we’ve all been called on to consider how the work we do in our museums can make those injustices more just and to make our communities more equally able to access the resources that those of us who are fortunate to have relative comfort and security can also have. We had thought a lot about our exhibition program, about making museum work itself more transparent and accessible, and about designing new and more outreaching pipelines into the museum field so that we can recruit younger emerging professionals who can help us reflect the diversity that we want to represent in our collections, programs and certainly through our staff makeup.

Barnes: On a curatorial level, I’m thinking of how we investigate and bring voice to new ideas and how we bring to fruition ideas in ways that address the issues that are of concern to us today. One of the big issues for me, because I have been on the operational side of curatorial work for so much of my career, is: Are we improving how we

“For those of us who are fortunate enough to work in institutions nested in liberal arts colleges or universities, we have this built-in opportunity to meet students where they are.”
VICTORIA SANCHO LOBIS MA ’02
care for our museum communities? Many of our institutions have reduced staffs and resources. But the care for our collections doesn’t go away. We have to keep that balance in mind.

**Momin:** When I left the Whitney Museum [of American Art], where I was for 12 years following Williams, I moved to Los Angeles to start a public arts organization. It was key to think about how to take mission statements and vision statements, all of which were very admirable and thoughtful, and create structures that reflected them accurately, which is very hard to do at a large institution like the Whitney. Whether it’s the vendors you use, the way in which you pay, the way in which you hire—how those are built into those systems is nitty-gritty, nuts-and-bolts work. The Henry is already an extraordinarily progressive, thoughtful place. I was struck by how deeply a lot of the [diversity, equity, access and inclusion] work, the internal investigation, the self-reflection was already happening there. During the pandemic, we were closed. But we turned then toward the strategic plan priority of our deep relationships with the community and our audience—which we’ve always prioritized, but not to the degree we were able to do this past year—thinking carefully about what it means to build those relationships in an ongoing way, where they’re reciprocal and not, “Look, we’re doing this nice thing for you,” which can often be the notion of community and partnership.

**Needham:** The Hill Art Foundation is free and open to the public, and we want young people to come to our space. We have a program called Teen Curators that works with a small group of high school students here in the space every Tuesday, and they can come work on Saturdays if they want. They’re all paid positions. It’s a little bit of Art History 101 and also learning about all the different opportunities in the art world, from being a registrar to an art handler to working at a gallery or museum. In the past we’ve had an amazing array of speakers and gone on field trips. Now I’m working on relaunching the program [since we have reopened], finding a new cohort of teens. I’m really eager to get that back up and running.

**Hoptman:** Paying an intern a living wage is an issue of the greatest importance in terms of equity, as is paying our staff members living wages. This opens up the field to the possibility of people from all walks of life joining us in these endeavors. It excites me to think that our field will be forever more changed and different. Who would have thought in 1983 that there would be curators of inclusivity, that those kinds of positions would [be created] in these past few years? Our field, which is so exclusive, didn’t allow for the kinds of dreams that we’re dreaming now. These opportunities have happened in culture in the U.S. on every level, and it’s up to us to seize them, whether write large or small. I’d advocate for power in smallness, in depth as opposed to breadth in terms of growth.

**Suda:** The art world leadership needs to have a closer look at intersectionality, not just gender, and how we position ourselves as a community trying to interact with the outside world. The National Gallery of Canada has a team of extraordinary Indigenous curators doing some amazing programming. But that programming has had to shoehorn its way into our mandate, our budgets, our operational structure and the program calendar. When we really listen, the ideas are so expansive and have the potential to transform us. Reciprocity is everything. It’s about working with community to identify which objects belong as part of a narrative and then working [together] to recreate those objects—not take them out of the community but recreate them. We’re also going to support that community in revitalizing those traditional methods of making that we’ve abolished through colonial settler practice. Each project is different and requires us to build new relationships, relational ways of working and more expansive thinking, which starts to dismantle some of the old ways of working. And, frankly, it requires me to have a partner in thinking with me, because we have to stop assuming that we can speak on behalf of the communities that we exist to serve.

Watch a video of the full conversation at bit.ly/wwartsleadership.
Mentored Minds

By Greg Shook

Psychology professor Shivon Robinson '11 and her students delve into the clinical, societal and historical contexts of opioid addiction.

From an early age, Shivon Robinson '11 knew she wanted to help people. That natural inclination, combined with a deep curiosity about the mechanics of the human mind, eventually led her to Williams—and back again. “I've always been interested in neuropsychiatry, trying to understand what's happening in the brain,” says Robinson, who joined the faculty as an assistant professor of psychology in 2019.

As a neuroscientist, she is especially interested in the relationship between the brain, drugs and behavior—a topic of increased focus given the growing opioid epidemic in the U.S. In her course, Opioids and the Opioid Crisis: The Neuroscience Behind an Epidemic, she and her students explore how drugs such as oxycodone, hydrocodone and heroin hijack the brain's reward pathway, impair decision-making and cause people to develop a strong physical and psychological dependency. In addition to delving into the clinical side of neuroscience, the course also examines the historical and societal contexts surrounding the use and abuse of these particular drugs, with the intention to help shift public perception about those who suffer from addiction.

“Something missing in courses that I took that talked about drugs, abuse and neuropsychiatric diseases is what you as a layperson, as a friend, can do to address this problem,” says Robinson, who notes that most people, including her students, probably either know or know of someone who has been directly impacted by the opioid crisis. “There's so much misinformation online and in general conversations. I hope from this class that my students can make evidence-based arguments when talking with their families and friends. When you're able to inform other people, hopefully that's when we'll see some positive change.”

As an undergraduate, Robinson says she did not give much, if any, thought to teaching as a career. She figured she would go to medical school, “because that's what you do when you're interested in science,” she says. However, her introduction to lab work in her first year at Williams, doing research in close collaboration with faculty, turned out to be a life-changing experience.

Robinson worked with Betty Zimmerberg, now the Howard B. Schow '50 and Nan W. Schow Professor of Neuroscience, emerita, all four years at Williams. “Being able to design my own experiments...
“Something missing in courses that I took that talked about drugs, abuse and neuropsychiatric diseases is what you as a layperson, as a friend, can do to address this problem.”

and have that hands-on experience was such a big factor in the trajectory of my personal development but also my professional development,” she says. “I really wanted to come back and provide that for students.”

Robinson currently has eight undergraduates working in her lab, studying the effects of gestational exposure to opioids. In particular, they’re examining responses to environmental factors, stress and/or adversity. Several of her former students are now doing research at top universities, including Harvard, Dartmouth and Yale.

Robinson says that throughout her career in academia, she often has encountered people who think that important, high-impact research can only be done at large universities—people who do not fully realize the potential of young scientists. A fierce advocate for liberal arts education, she knows that the kind of personal mentorship that happens at small colleges can have a profound impact.

“Having a liberal arts experience is actually what made me really excited about coming back and doing research,” Robinson says. “Being back at Williams is my dream job.”
Six Williams students have traveled to the Caroni River in Trinidad since 2017 to conduct research with Associate Professor of Biology Ron Bassar, co-founder of The Guppy Project.
Living Laboratories

By Abe Loomis

Biologist Ron Bassar and his students study Trinidadian guppies and what they reveal about the natural world.

“What I really like about guppies,” Assistant Professor of Biology Ron Bassar says, “is that they allow us to measure natural selection fairly easily.”

In the rainforests of Trinidad’s northern mountains, where guppies thrive in highland pools, Bassar and his research teams use that fact to their advantage. Armed with nets and Nalgene bottles, they trek through steep terrain to the headwater streams of the Caroni River to capture, mark and release the small, orange-tinted fish. With the guppy populations indexed, scientists and students can examine changes across generations. Waterfalls that isolate fish communities, allowing them to evolve independently from each other, turn the jungle streams into natural laboratories.

This accident of topography forms the foundation of The Guppy Project, a collaboration that began in 2007 among Bassar and professors David Reznick of the University of California, Riverside, Joe Travis of Florida State University, and Tim Coulson of the University of Oxford. Participants study guppies to learn about the genetics of adaptation, the ways that evolution affects ecology and the evolution of coexistence, among other topics.

In July, the project won a three-year, $1.6 million grant from the National Science Foundation to explore the relationship between the guppies and a local rival: a distantly related fish known as Hart’s killifish. Any knowledge researchers can glean about the competitors’—and sometime predators’—effects on each other could have wider implications, Bassar says.

“Removal of top predators, for instance, is a huge problem in aquatic, terrestrial and oceanic ecosystems all over the world,” he says. “Getting rid of sharks in the ocean or sea otters off the coast of California or tigers in India or wolves in North America—what happens in those situations? As scientists, we’re trying to test general principles and rule some out and find evidence for others. And this work in Trinidad gives us the opportunity to do that.”

The Guppy Project also provides opportunities for collaboration with Williams students. Six have participated since Bassar’s arrival on campus in 2017, including Emma Rogowski ’19, who spent the Winter Study of her senior year working with Bassar in Trinidad. Her finding that a parasitic-worm invasion counterintuitively increased the population density of Trinidadian guppies was published last year in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Now studying vaccine-preventable diseases at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation in Seattle, Wash., Rogowski majored in biology with a concentration in public health. Her work on The Guppy Project, she says, perfectly balanced independent study and expert guidance. “I was looking for research that felt more immediately relevant than working in a wet lab, sitting at a bench doing molecular research,” Rogowski says. “I also got great mentorship throughout the process that was both hands-on when it needed to be and let me figure it out for myself when I needed to.”

Rogowski says she is especially appreciative of the understanding she gained by directly participating in data collection for The Guppy Project, which serves her well today.

“Going to the field site, helping catch the fish, hiking the fish back to the cars, driving back to the processing site and helping with the processing to see how, exactly, the data were collected gave me perspective behind the data.”

Bassar says those insights are invaluable to anyone pursuing a career involving research, conservation or the management of wild populations.

“Providing the opportunity to have these experiences for Williams College students, and students from the international community, is a central goal of the funded research,” he says.
Levitt Artist-in-Residence Franny Choi blurs the lines between poetry and politics—if there were ever any lines to be drawn. In 2016, she founded The Brew & Forge Book Fair, an artists’ fundraising collective working for political change. Three years later, as a Gaius Charles Bolin Fellow at Williams, she created a public lecture series to bring creative voices to campus. She’s currently wrapping up a fifth season of the podcast VS for the Poetry Foundation and working on a book to be published in the fall of 2022. *Williams Magazine* spoke with her earlier in the fall about the superpowers of poetry, including the “spooky science” of how words can create chemical and emotional reactions.

**How do you view the intersection of poetry and political activism?** My life as a poet has been rooted in community. When you enter into a relationship of deep mutual accountability with a community, questions of politics and power are inevitably going to arise, especially if your arts community is primarily folks of color, queer and trans folks, and other people who have been historically left out of the literary canon. My political responsibility as an artist is primarily a responsibility to my people, and that means writing at the highest point of my ability and imagination in order to do justice to our lives.

Poems can open us up to possibilities and make us feel them viscerally. To feel in your body what freedom is like—that’s an important part of the process of liberation. Toni Cade Bambara said that the job of the artist is to make revolution irresistible, and that seems to me like a wonderful job, as impossible as it can sometimes be.

**What are your students talking about in the classroom?** One thing I’m seeing is the attempt to bridge the personal and political. Over these past two years, we’ve seen the horrors of American capitalism magnified manifolds. There’s a lot of personal loss that has everything to do with larger, structural injustices. It’s hard to tackle all of that in a poem that you’re writing for a class, but I see students trying, and they’re having real conversations. I feel grateful to get to be part of that and to help them do the magic of making words on a page, creating a chemical and emotional response in another person’s body 500 miles away. That’s a spooky sort of science, but they’re doing it each week more efficiently and more spookily.

Last spring I taught a course called Apocalypse Now and Then: Poets Confronting Political Crisis, in which we studied poetry about the catastrophes of our time in relation to the poetry about catastrophes of other eras. The final project was to write a series of poems about a current crisis that was meaningful to them. They wrote beautiful, incredible stuff. Whether it’s the small, personal apocalypse or the pandemic or the uprisings following George Floyd’s murder—these things are felt on a human level. It was incredibly moving to read their work.

**Was there a poem you taught from another era that resonated with them?**

I was surprised at how many of my students were moved by Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Something in that poem traveled through the specificities of time and place to get to the heart of the thing, which is just that modernity is weird, and living among the consequences of colonialism can be horrifying. One of the superpowers of poetry is that it’s of a time, it’s of a place, it’s of a culture; but then the job of it is to get all the way down to the marrow of the thing and to operate there, to talk to people from that place. Writing is time travel.

**What’s the importance of poetry in 2021?**

The consumption and appreciation of poetry is at an all-time high, if you factor in poems in books and on subways and in TV scenes, in hip-hop and on Instagram. There’s so much of it right now. And thank goodness, because living in this time and place is so loud that if poetry can be in any way a counterpoint to the horror show, let’s have as much of it as we can get.

To learn more about Choi and her work, visit frannychoi.com.
We Used Our Words We Used What Words We Had

we used our words we used what words we had
to weld, what words we had we wielded, kneeled,
we knelt. & wept we wrung the wet the sweat
we wracked our lips we rang for words to ward
off sleep to warn to want ourselves. to want
the earth we mouthed it wound our vowels until
it fit, in fits the earth we mounted roused
& rocked we harped we yawned & tried to yawp
& tried to fix, affixed, we facted, felt.
we fattened fanfared anthemed hammered, felt
the words’ worth stagnate, snap in half in heat
the wane the melt what words we’d hoarded halved
& holey, porous. meanwhile tide still tide.
& we: still washed for sounds to mark. & marked.

FRANNY CHOI
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN POETRY MAGAZINE, DECEMBER 2019