Letter from the Chair

VCU and the Department of English have been changing rapidly, and sometimes change means a return to something old—so for the first time in a long while we would like to share with you a newsletter about the department. During the past few decades we have gone from being primarily a department that served all undergraduates in required Freshman English and Sophomore literature courses, to one that focuses on 400 English majors and the graduate students in our three programs (MA in English, MFA in Creative Writing, and an interdisciplinary PhD in Media, Art, and Text).

A cadre of new faculty have joined—we’ll introduce some here—but there are quite a few familiar faces, some of whom began teaching at VCU in the 1970s. (I began in 1984 myself.) We have here some reflections by Professors Bryant Mangum, whose courses in modern American literature and writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald cross generations of students, and Richard Fine, former chair and specialist in American Studies. We’ll hope that this newsletter can bring together faculty and alums from all facets of the department, and from all the eras of VCU English, and also invite you to join us at upcoming events. You are also always welcome to drop by our main office in Hibbs Hall, room 306.

Sincerely,

David E. Latané

Contact

900 Park Avenue
Hibbs Hall, Room 306
Richmond, VA 23284

Phone: 804-828-1331
englishweb@vcu.edu
english.vcu.edu
The English Department has recently been the beneficiary of generous gifts to aid students in our programs.

**Dr. Craig Sirles** (BA 1975) has endowed the Craig Sirles Masters in English Scholarship. This scholarship, begun in 2016, confers a one-time payment of $2,500 to an outstanding first-year graduate student enrolled in the Masters Program in English and studying literature. All applicants for full-time fall admission are automatically considered for the Sirles Scholarship.

Funded by friends, family, and colleagues, the **L. Terry Oggel** Scholarship honors his long-standing commitment to the department and to the MA Program. Beginning in the fall of 2017, this scholarship will be awarded to a student in good standing pursuing a Master of Arts in English.

Friends of Blackbird provides financial support for MFA graduate students to participate in and attend writers conferences, associated writing programs, and annual conferences.

**Blackbird**

In 2002 the English department, in collaboration with New Virginia Review, Inc., launched the multimedia journal *Blackbird: an online journal of literature and the arts*. In a 2009 article about the evolution of electronic journals, *Poets & Writers* magazine praised *Blackbird* as a “leader” among online journals. *Blackbird* continues its mission to cultivate new readers of literature by providing a free-to-read journal for anyone with access to the web. Since its formal startup in 2001 and the first issue in 2002, many individuals—undergraduates, MA, MFA and PhD students, alumni and community volunteers—have worked to make *Blackbird* a success.

Read the current issue (Volume 16.2) [here](#)

And follow on [Facebook](#)

**English Numbers**

- 41 full-time faculty and staff
- 2 post-doctoral fellows
- 400 undergraduate majors
- 79 active graduate students
- 33 undergraduate internships

**Got News?**

Send your news to us! We’ll share in our newsletters and homepage. Email our collector of news, **Thom Didato**, at tndidato@vcu.edu

Find us at [english.vcu.edu](http://english.vcu.edu/)

**Support VCU English with a Gift**

To make a gift to the department, visit support.vcu.edu/give/humanitiesandsciences and select “English.”

For additional information on how you can support other initiatives in the departments, contact **Bethanie Constant**, Senior Director of Development at (804) 828-4543 or constantb@vcu.edu

**Update your Info**

Have you shared your new email? Have you started a new job? It’s easier than ever to stay informed and connected with what’s happening at VCU.

Update your information at [vcualumni.org/update](http://vcualumni.org/update)
1968  Richmond Professional Institute merged with Medical College of Virginia to form Virginia Commonwealth University. Department of English has its origins in this merger.

1975  Master of Arts in English initiated as a degree program with roots in a joint MA/MEd program.

1983  The Creative Writing Program became a full-fledged MFA program.

1990s  Enrollment reached 400 majors, making it the fourth largest undergraduate department in the university.

1994  In collaboration with VCU’s School of the Arts and the Glasgow, Scotland School of Art, the first sustained study abroad program, the Glasgow Artists & Writers Workshop, came into being.

1997  Larry Levis Prize for Poetry established in the name of the late faculty member and poet Larry Levis.

2001  National First Novelist competition began, awarding the best first novel published each year. In 2008, Cabell Associates of the University Libraries became a co-sponsor of the First Novelist award, renaming this competition the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award.

2002  Launch of the multimedia journal *Blackbird: an online journal of literature and the arts.*

2006  Initiated an innovative interdisciplinary PhD in Media, Art, and Text (MATX) that builds on strengths in our department, VCU’s School of Mass Communications, and VCU’s nationally-ranked School of the Arts.

2006  System of centralized advising for undergraduate majors established.

2006  Junior faculty mentoring program established.

2007  Beginning of transition of required writing courses from English to University College.

2007  Rebooting of departmental symposia as the First Friday series.

2009  Completion of restructuring of the MA in English.

2011  Completion of comprehensive revision of courses for the undergraduate English major.

2014  MFA Program celebrated its 30th year; Rebecca Mitchell Tarumoto Short Fiction prize launched.

2015  MA Program celebrated its 40th year.

2016  BA Program celebrated its 50th year.
The department’s MFA program has long sponsored a Visiting Writers Series in which six to eight distinguished authors are brought to campus each academic year for free public readings and exchanges with students.

Past notable authors include Jimmy Santiago Baca, Linda Bierds, Natasha Tretheway, Mark Doty, Yusef Komunyaka, Philip Levine and many others.

Events are open to the public.

**February 1, 2018**

MFA Alumni Spotlight Event. VCU Cabell Library, 7pm. Poetry by Roselyn Elliott and Emilia Phillips, and fiction by Nathan Long and Michele Young-Stone. These talented graduates of the program are together authors of eleven books and chapbooks. *(pictured left)*

**March 29, 2018**

Levis Reading Prize. VCU Cabell Library, 7pm. Solmaz Sharif is the winner of the 2017 Levis Reading Prize, for her poetry collection *Look* (Graywolf Press). Born in Istanbul to Iranian parents, Sharif holds degrees from UC Berkeley and New York University. Her work has appeared in *The New Republic*, *The Kenyon Review*, and other magazines; she is currently a lecturer at Stanford University.

**April 5, 2018**

Rebecca Mitchell Tarumoto Short Fiction Prize. VCU Cabell Library, 7pm. A $2,000 prize sponsored by the family of Rebecca Mitchell Tarumoto for the best short story published in *Blackbird*. In a joint reading with David Jauss, 2017 winner Adam Latham will read from his story, *Lizard Man*.

**Fall 2018**

Cabell First Novelist Award. Each year the MFA Program in Creative Writing, the English Department, and the Cabell Library sponsor an award for an outstanding debut novel published in the preceding calendar year. The award in 2017 went to *The Wangs vs. The World* by Jade Chang. Check out the website for the next winner and dates for the event: [firstnovelist.vcu.edu](http://firstnovelist.vcu.edu/)
Welcome New Faculty & Staff

In the last few years, we have been fortunate to bring on board outstanding new faculty. A warm welcome to our new faculty and staff who arrived at VCU in the Department of English.

**Fall 2015**

**Michael Hall**  
Assistant Professor  
Michael Hall joined us on tenure-track, after spending the previous year at VCU on a post-doctoral fellowship. He specializes in 20th Century and Contemporary American and African American literature, and taught a senior seminar in “Speculative Fiction.”

**Shermaine Jones**  
Assistant Professor  
Shermaine Jones teaches African-American, African, and Afro-Caribbean Literatures, and is offering a senior seminar in Black Feelings.

**Fall 2016**

**Hanna Pylväinen**  
Assistant Professor  
Hanna Pylväinen, author of the novel *We Sinners* (Henry Holt), came to VCU from a position at Princeton; she received her MFA from the University of Michigan and teaches graduate and undergraduate classes in fiction writing.

**Sonja Livingston**  
Assistant Professor  
Sonja Livingston has authored three collections of creative nonfiction, most recently *Ladies’ Night at the Dreamland* (University of Georgia Press). Her prior work was in the MFA Program at University of Memphis.

**Fall 2017**

**Lina Maria Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas**  
Assistant Professor  
Lina Maria Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas holds two MFAs from the University of Iowa (in Creative Nonfiction and in Literary Translation). A native of Columbia, she has taught in the USA and China and came to VCU from a position at Ohio State. Her collection of lyrical and narrative essays, *Don’t Come Back*, was published this year by The Ohio State University Press.

**Mary Caton Lingold**  
Assistant Professor  
Mary Caton Lingold teaches early American literature, with wide-ranging interests in the Afro-Atlantic, sound studies, and digital humanities. She is founder and director of the *Sonic Dictionary* a project that VCU undergraduates are now working on.

**Matteo Pangallo**  
Assistant Professor  
Matteo Pangallo arrives after three years as a junior fellow of the Harvard Society of Fellows. His book, *Playwriting Playgoers in Shakespeare’s Theater*, was published in 2017 by University of Pennsylvania Press. In addition to teaching Shakespeare he has inaugurated our first class in the growing field of Book History, and launched a book-collecting contest for students sponsored by the Cabell Library and Black Swan Books.
Faculty and Staff News

Post-Doctoral Program

We named our first post-doctoral fellow in 2014-15. In 2017-18 the Department of English hosts two post-doctoral fellows, Adam Abraham (top picture) (PhD Oxford University) and Mimi Winick (bottom picture) (PhD Rutgers University). Both Adam and Mimi specialize in British literature, especially fiction, of the period 1830-1930.

Faculty Awards

Katherine Bassard was awarded the College of Humanities & Sciences’ 2016 Distinguished Scholar award. Dale Smith, Coordinator of Undergraduate Advising, was named 2016 Distinguished Advisor.

Susann Cokal was named one of Style Weekly’s 2017 Women in the Arts for her “dynamic and forward-thinking” commitment to the arts in the community.

Nicholas Frankel was awarded a Harry Ransom Center Research Fellowship in the Humanities. Frankel travelled to Austin, Texas to probe the archival resources for his new biography of Oscar Wilde. (2016)

Kathleen Graber was chosen to receive an Arts and Letters Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Only eight awards are given annually to honor writers of exceptional accomplishments. (2017)

Sonja Livingston’s book, Ladies’ Night at the Dreamland, was selected as a Best Book of 2016 (nonfiction) by Kirkus Reviews.

Sonja Livingston won the VanderMey Nonfiction Prize from Ruminant Magazine for “Like This, We Begin: An Essay in Two Photographs” (2017).

Matteo Pangallo’s essay “I will keep and character that name”: Dramatis Personae Lists in Early Modern Manuscript Plays”, in Early Theatre 18.2, has just won the journal’s “Best Essay on Theatre History” for 2015-2016.

Cristina Stanciu received a $6,000 summer stipend from the National Endowment of the Humanities in support of her second book, The Makings and Unmakings of Americans: Indians and Immigrants in American Literature and Culture, 1879-1924, which is under contract with Yale University Press (2016).


Retirements & Deaths

The department would like to recognize retirees Nicholas Sharp (2017) and Elizabeth Hodges (2016) for their contributions and unwavering support of the department, its students, and the VCU community. Between the two of them, Drs. Sharp and Hodges represent seventy-three years of combined teaching experience.

Our department is saddened to report that Professor Emeritus Richard Karl Priebe (pictured above) passed away on 6/9/17 after being hit by a car in the Fan district.

Upon graduation from UT Austin in 1973, Richard joined the Department of English where he taught freshman composition, American, African, Caribbean, Postcolonial and world literatures, poetry, and graduate courses in African literature. He served as Acting Coordinator of African American Studies from 1985 to 1986, as President of the African Literature Association from 1998 to 2001, and co-organizer of the 27th African Literature Association conference in Richmond in April 2001. He retired in Fall 2005 after 32 years of teaching at VCU.
Publishing books is the tip of the iceberg for scholarship in the department—the number of articles, essays, stories, poems, reviews, and papers is too long a list. Here are the last three years of our books:


Bryant Mangum, professor of English in the College of Humanities and Sciences at VCU, released his latest book, *F. Scott Fitzgerald in Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press), in March. *F. Scott Fitzgerald in Context* is a collection of essays that highlights how the works of Fitzgerald depict the Zeitgeist of the 1920s and 1930s.

You are a recognized scholar of Scott Fitzgerald. Why Fitzgerald over other expatriate authors?

I first became acquainted with Fitzgerald when I read *The Great Gatsby* and some of his best stories like “Winter Dreams” and “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” as an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina. I was intrigued from the beginning by Fitzgerald’s attempts to maintain his Romantic idealism while acknowledging his membership in a generation “grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, and all faiths in man shaken,” as one of his early characters described the generation Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway would later label “a lost generation.”

Then as a graduate student at the University of South Carolina I was able to focus sharply on Fitzgerald as I catalogued, transcribed, and studied letters to and from Fitzgerald, as well as original holograph manuscripts that my mentor, Matthew J. Bruccoli, was using for his in-progress biography of Fitzgerald. By the time I finished my doctoral dissertation, which was a study of all of Fitzgerald’s 165 short stories, I had become committed to devoting much of my research and writing energy from that point forward to the lives and works of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald.

Although I remain fascinated by other expatriate writers, especially Hemingway, I continue to find unparalleled beauty and brilliance in the lyricism of Fitzgerald’s prose. Also, his persistent probing of the complexities of the American dream provides as clear a window as can be found, I think, on the glittering surface as well as the dark underside of one of the richest eras in American culture and fiction: The Jazz Age.
From whom/From what do you draw inspiration as a teacher?

As I consider the question of sources of inspiration for my teaching, my thoughts go first to many of the extraordinary teachers I encountered during my undergraduate and graduate school days, as well as memorable ones from high school and earlier who left indelible marks that continue to inspire me—as do interactions with my VCU colleagues, many of whose approaches to teaching I continually learn from. But in the end I find that the major source of my inspiration as a professor is, and has been from the beginning, the hundreds and now thousands of students who, semester after semester and year after year, have brought and continue to bring their intellectual curiosity into the classroom. It continues to inspire me to encounter in class after class, students whose minds are open to exploring the richness of imaginative literature and to learning of the unique experiences of their classmates as they relate to the literature. It inspires me when students—English majors and non-majors alike—realize that you don’t necessarily need specialized knowledge to respond to literature; you simply have to be a human being.

What is your favorite aspect of teaching?

In addition to enjoying seeing students interact with stories and novels and with each other in the process of our discussions of the literature as I described it earlier, I suppose one of the quirkier things that has become one of my favorite aspects of teaching is learning the names and nicknames of every student in my classes and often the names of their beloved pets—their dogs, their cats, their hamsters, their birds, their snakes, their hermit crabs. I’ve not thoroughly analyzed the reason that this has become one of my favorite aspects of teaching, but I trace the origins of my sense of the importance of learning the names of all my students to an example set by a Religious Studies professor I had as an undergraduate at UNC. Dr. Bernard Boyd was a widely published scholar at the top of his field of Biblical Studies, and he taught a large lecture class that I was enrolled in. His lecture classroom in Murphy Hall was always filled with 200 students, many of whom sat in aisles and on windowsills to hear his lectures—some of them not even officially enrolled. Around mid-semester I passed Dr. Boyd on the sidewalk on Franklin Street in downtown Chapel Hill, and without missing a step he turned his head to me and said, “Mr. Mangum, I enjoyed your essay on the synoptic gospels.” Then he continued his walk without another word. To this day I’ll never understand how Dr. Boyd knew my name or why he remembered what I expect was a rather mediocre paper I had turned in, but I know that I will never forget the impression that he cared enough about his many students to remember their names and, at least in one case, to know their work. His reasons for this will remain unknown to me, but I know that for myself learning the names of my students and learning about something of importance to them (the names of their pets, for example) has become a small but constant reminder to myself as I meet each class, grade each test, and mark each essay that I am not simply teaching a subject: I am teaching individuals—people whose life stories are filled with rich and unique details that I could never in a million years have imagined accurately.

Can you give a concrete example of how you challenge your students through your pedagogy?

To the degree that I have something approaching a pedagogical philosophy, I think that it is anchored in the magic of storytelling. I believe in telling personal stories from my own experience when they seem clearly related to a fictional work we are reading in the class. When discussing a James Joyce story like “Araby” and the Joycean concept of the epiphany, for example, I have told the story of my delight as a six-year-old child in climbing up on the roof of the barn behind our house. The roof was shaded by a huge chinaberry tree that would drop its berries onto the shallow layer of dirt that had accumulated on the barn’s corrugated tin roof. The berries would sprout into baby chinaberry trees, and I would lie on my back among them looking happily and innocently at the clouds in the sky. One day it struck me that these baby trees could become so big they would cause the barn roof to collapse—or alternately that the trees would die because the layer of dirt was too thin for the roots needed to support big trees. In the moment of this awareness that some change was inevitable I understood on some level that I would never be able to see my world in quite the same way again—similar in some ways to the realization that the narrator of Joyce’s story has when the magic goes out of his trip to Araby. Through connections like those between the chinaberry tree story and the fictional story, students often are led to think of experiences—in this case epiphanies—in their own lives. Locating moments of their own that bump against fictional narratives often brings fresh life to the fiction and allows students to discover ways in which the magic of storytelling can connect us all to each other.
What do you find most satisfying about teaching?

I think of a college classroom as a place in which it is safe to think out loud about the subject under discussion without fear that one will say the “wrong” thing—a place where the search is always for a better question rather than for the “right” answer. Perhaps one of the most satisfying things about teaching literature in a college or university is that as a professor one has the opportunity to create this kind of safe space—a space in which the dominant mood is interrogative. There is no denying that it is quite satisfying to me as an academic engaged in research to share with a class some of the background information about works, authors, and cultural contexts that I have spent time and effort exploring (and I sometimes get carried away providing this background), but I am happiest when the sharing of background serves as a springboard into an energetic search by the class for those questions that the text under discussion begs to have asked.

Today, some would argue that students are more focused on getting a job as opposed to learning. Does your recent teaching experience support or contradict this?

I am often amused in my senior seminars when I ask graduating seniors what they plan to do after graduation. The look that I often get from them says this: “Oh, I should probably begin thinking about that.” The answer in this look delights me because it suggests that, at least for many of our English majors, the pursuit of learning and the love of language, has eclipsed the practical concern of what one actually does for a living after receiving a degree in the liberal arts. Our departmental commencement speeches often contain assurances, usually included for the benefit of parents of graduates in the audience, that a degree in English can be a pathway to worldly success. Among those often-cited former English majors in commencement addresses who have gone on to success are Martin Scorsese, Mitt Romney, Jodie Foster, Bob Woodward, Sting, Michael Eisner, Steven Spielberg, Bob Woodward, and Hank Paulson (former chairman and CEO of Goldman Sachs and 74th Secretary of the U.S. Treasury). My experience tells me that most English majors (past and present) do not pursue English Studies because they believe that an English degree will guarantee wealth and fame. In short, my recent teaching experience does not suggest that students, at least the ones I have talked with, are more focused on getting a job as opposed to learning. I do recognize that reasonable people disagree as to whether students should be thinking ahead as to their future job prospects as they pursue a college degree. And I also know that students pursue different disciplines in college for a variety of legitimate reasons, one of which is future job security. As a strong believer in a liberal arts education pursued for the sake of learning, however, I applaud those who pursue it for that reason. As a romantic, I always assure our majors that they will ultimately find the perfect job to support themselves. As an observer who stays in touch with many former students, I find that they usually do.
How has the typical VCU student changed over the years, if at all?

From the beginning of my time at VCU students have brought with them into class intellectual curiosity and openness to learning. I don’t feel that this has changed over the years. The part of this question that especially interests me is the phrase “the typical VCU student.” I have to say that I have never been able to identify what I could characterize as a “typical VCU student.” That is, to me, one of the things that continues to make VCU such a dynamic university.

It has become a cliché to say that VCU has a diverse student body, but our campus is beautifully diverse; and that diversity is a major source of our university’s richness—all the more reason that the course offerings in our curriculum and the reading lists in our courses reflect and honor that diversity.

In what way do you think technology and social media are changing the way academic work is communicated and the way students learn?

Technology has influenced teaching in ways too numerous to talk about in a short space. However, the most obvious way that technology has changed the way academic work is communicated is that students are able to submit drafts of their papers-in-progress—and in the case of graduate students, theses—and ultimately final drafts, to their instructors and thesis directors. The benefits of this are obvious in practical terms related to finance and convenience. A more subtle benefit is that students may begin to realize that virtually every piece of writing is a work-in-progress and that most essays and theses can be improved with revision. For me, the jury is still out on the question of whether social media has positively affected the way students learn.

Learning platforms such as Blackboard, of course, provide an endless variety of ways in which students can communicate with instructors and with each other, as well as ways instructors can make information readily available to students. From my perspective the central value of technology for the classes I teach—graduate and undergraduate—comes from its potential as a research tool. Through library databases students can in many cases instantly access material that only a few years ago would have taken weeks to obtain through interlibrary loan, if they were able to obtain it at all. Or, in some cases, they would have had to make trips to far away special library collections to obtain the material needed for their research. Now, for example, the holograph manuscript of *The Great Gatsby* is available digitally through the Princeton University Library database. A few years ago, researchers would have had to locate one of the rare facsimile reproductions of the manuscript or to make a trip to the Firestone Library at Princeton to see the manuscript, and even then they may not have been allowed to handle it.
Cory MacLauchlin

Cory is a native of Newport News, Virginia. After receiving his bachelor’s degree at VCU, he earned his Master of Arts in English from University of Virginia.

As a member of the English Faculty at Germanna Community College, MacLauchlin teaches courses on American Literature, Southern Literature, and Writing and Research. He also teaches at a nearby state prison, where he has developed a course on the literature of confinement.

Cory’s home away from home is the city of New Orleans, and it was in preparing a course in New Orleans literature that he began researching the remarkable story of John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces*, a novel that was awarded the Pulitzer Prize long after the author’s death. MacLauchlin interviewed friends, family and colleagues and drew on the Toole archive at Tulane University. The result is a biography of Toole, *Butterfly in the Typewriter* (in paper, Da Capo Press, 2013), that tells one of the most unlikely stories in American literature. Widely and favorably reviewed, Cory’s book is now being made into a feature film starring Thomas Mann, Susan Sarandon, Nick Offerman, and Matthew Modine. The movie, shot entirely in the New Orleans area, is targeted for a 2018 release.

Undergraduate Activities

Student Honors & Scholarships

Farrah Fox received the 2017 Riely Scholarship for Women. A senior English major and Spanish minor, Farrah is a West Coast transplant who has embraced life in Richmond. She claims that the English major has both challenged and inspired her in addition to strengthening her skills as a reader and writer. In her downtime, Farrah walks her dog, takes too many photographs, and dreams of a “big-person job” that will pay her to read and write all day.

Elizabeth Farschon received the fall 2017 Outstanding English Major Award. She is an English major with a creative writing minor and is praised by her professors for her love of learning, intellectual curiosity, rigorous engagement with the material, natural writing ability and insightful comments of others’ work. Several of her professors noted her “deep empathy and respect for others,” as evidenced by her numerous leadership positions and volunteer work at VCU and the Richmond community. She has presented her research at the National Conferences on Undergraduate Research and Virginia Collegiate Honors Council conferences.

Ume Farwa received the 2017 Dinah Grossman-Wolfe Book Award. A junior English major with a double minor in Creative Writing and Business, Ume hopes to enter the editing/publishing industry after graduation. Passionate about writing since childhood, Ume is grateful to the English major for allowing her to stay true to herself as well as broadening her view of what literature can do. In her downtime, Ume enjoys watching YouTube videos and playing with her cat.

Meredith Franklin received the 2017 Black History in the Making Award. A senior English major and Spanish minor, Meredith has participated in the School of World Studies Student Research Conference in addition to performing in local musical theater productions. She credits the English major with sparking her interest in 20th Century British Literature, Contemporary U.S. Literature, and Literature of the African Diaspora. She plans to pursue one or more of these interests in graduate school and eventually have an academic career of her own.

Gretchen Gales received the 2016 E. Allen Brown English Scholarship. A senior majoring in both English and History, Gretchen is currently the managing editor of Quail Bell Magazine. She credits the English major not only with strengthening her writing, which she has published in multiple outlets, but also for making her a more empathetic and socially conscious person. She writes, “I’ve learned to value lessons...from the diverse voices I’ve read and listened to for the past 3.5 years.”

Crystal Giannini received The 2016 Riely Scholarship for Women. A senior English major, Crystal entered VCU at the urging of teaching colleagues in Chesterfield County, where she works full-time as an Instructional Assistant in Exceptional Education. She had completed an Associate Degree some years earlier. Embracing the label of “non-traditional student,” Crystal feels she has been able to succeed at VCU thanks to supportive faculty and staff, and “the diversity among my classmates.” She believes that the English major is granting her a “wealth of tools,” literary and otherwise, that empower her to communicate and problem-solve effectively.
Undergraduate Activities

**Student Honors & Scholarships** (continued)

**Meredith Lewanowicz** received the spring 2017 Outstanding English Major Award as well as the prestigious Philip B. Meggs Memorial Scholarship. A May graduate who minored in British Studies, Meredith hopes to pursue a career in children’s publishing and perhaps enter graduate school with the help of the Meggs Scholarship. She credits the English major with teaching her to be a thoughtful, analytical reader and writer, and is grateful for the “creative conversations” she had with professors and her fellow students while at VCU.

**Rachael Mott** received the spring 2016 Outstanding English Major Award. She took a dual major in English and Psychology. She excelled in her coursework, receiving high praise from her instructors. One professor declared that her first paper in his class was a “powerful and beautifully constructed critical argument” and another stated that “Rachael is one of the best and most industrious students that I’ve taught.” Her classroom participation was enthusiastic and her reading of texts insightful.

**Shavontae Patrick** received the 2016 Black History in the Making Award. A spring 2016 graduate who majored in both English and African American Studies, Shavontae identifies herself as a “queer, black scholar, poet, and community activist.” She currently works for The Literacy Lab (a project of Americorps), where she helps students in grades K-3 attain grade-appropriate reading skills. She thinks back on the English major as a “major that can help you thrive across disciplines,” and plans to pursue graduate study in contemporary black women’s literature.

**Imari Santiago** received the 2017 E. Allen Brown English Scholarship. A senior English major and Spanish minor, Imari works on campus as a teaching assistant as well as for the National Alliance for Mental Health. Her passions include community engagement, writing prose and poetry, and the English major. She enjoys the wealth of ideas she finds in assigned texts and appreciates the support that the English faculty offer her. This first-generation college student says you may bump into her if you head out on a First Friday to gallery hop!

**Shavontae Patrick** received the 2016 Dinah Grossman-Wolfe Book Award. A junior English major and Spanish minor, Imari is thankful for the encouragement of family, friends, and past teachers that brought her to what she calls “a university I love in a city I adore.” She is “stuffing” her shelves with books and enjoys how the English major causes her to “ruminate on individual words” and how it is shaping her into a “fierce, talented, ambitious, pensive, and opinionated woman.”

**Emery Walker** received the fall 2016 Outstanding English Major Award. After a near-decade of personal exploration, Emery returned to the classroom a stronger, more insightful and excellent student. He is described by his professors as intellectually ambitious, a strong critical thinker, and an extremely articulate and focused individual. He sets high goals for himself which he repeatedly achieves. In class, he could always be counted on to shape the discussion, to ask the pressing question posed by the reading, or to engage the most difficult aspect of the texts the class read.
Interview with Richard Fine

You are a recognized scholar of American authorship and more recently of media history… why these over other areas of study?

Mostly circumstance. My college girlfriend gave me a copy of Aaron Latham’s book on Fitzgerald’s experience working in Hollywood. I was an American Civilization major and so was more interested in the cultural contexts in which literature was written and read than in literary analysis or interpretation. This led me to write my dissertation on the ways working in Hollywood changed writers’ perceptions of authorship in America at the time. My interest in conceptions authorship and intellectual property stemmed from this first work.

My interest in the relationship of the media to the military in World War II, which I’ve been studying for the past ten years, also started with a book. When I was granted a Fulbright to France in the early 1980s, the only book in the VCU library that had the region of France (Normandy) in the title was by the *New Yorker* journalist A.J. Liebling. I became a big fan of his writing and especially of his war reporting.

From whom/From what do you draw inspiration as a teacher?

I think my own teaching style was developed observing the professor in graduate school who ultimately became my dissertation advisor. He was a very modest man and no showman, but he knew his stuff and he connected well with students. I would have to say I am also inspired by my wife, who teaches in a progressive preschool and is inexhaustibly curious about the three-year-old mind. Her respect for the thinking of her students, even though they are so young, is something I try to take to my work with a different cohort.

How long have you been teaching?

I started teaching at VCU in 1979, so for 38 years (can this be so?). I remember both the terror and rush of adrenalin as I walked to my first classes. The terror has long gone; the rush remains.

What is your favorite aspect of teaching?

I suspect I’m very much like other teachers in that the daily interaction with other people is the best part of the job. While I spend a good bit of time alone in my office, I also spend much time in classes, meetings, individual tutorials and such. Very rarely is this time unpleasant. Also, the older I get and now that my own kids are grown and elsewhere, I really appreciate being around younger people on a daily basis. It helps keep my mind open and sharp, and I hope it is both.

How has the field changed, as a taught discipline, over the years you have been here?

The biggest change, and a most welcome one, in the study of American literature has been the increased focus on a variety of different voices. The syllabus for the survey of American literature course I took as a sophomore (in 1971) included precisely one woman (Emily Dickinson) and one person of color (Ralph Ellison). It is great that we can now appreciate and value writing that speaks to a broad range of experiences, as one of the great benefits of reading is to give you access to experience beyond your own.

Can you give a concrete example of how you challenge your students through your pedagogy?

I’m a big advocate for “writing to learn,” that you don’t know what you actually think until you try to write it down. Thus I assign a fair number of papers and even my texts require written answers. Only once in all my years teaching have I given a multiple-choice exam, a “bubble test,” and this was in a large general education class. It was a mistake I never repeated. I felt so unclean.
What do you find most satisfying about teaching? Least satisfying?

Certainly one of the more gratifying things about teaching is having students come back after several years and tell you how much they got out of a particular course, or how much they remember from the class. Least satisfying? I have to admit that grading all of those papers I assign is a chore, and one that doesn’t get easier as time passes.

Today, some would argue that students are more focused on getting a job as opposed to learning. Does your recent teaching experience support or contradict this?

I actually don’t find our students markedly more careerist these days, and I think many understand there is actually a connection between learning something and getting a job. The biggest shift I’ve seen in students in my years of teaching has less to do with fluctuations in the economy and more to do with the fear-mongering that seems to have afflicted American culture post 9/11. It has made us all, and students especially, more fragile. I’m not surprised that “resilience” has become the mode more recently in reaction to this. My general advice to students remains the same, whenever I’m asked: find what you are passionate about and pursue it, regardless of the dollar signs attached.

How has the typical VCU student changed over the years, if at all? How has student interest in literature changed, if at all, over the years?

Overall, the general student population at VCU, those students we see in general education classes, has changed significantly. When I first arrived there were more older students who were working full time, often had families, but were back in school. In age range, at least, the student body was more diverse. In most other ways, the student body is more diverse now—by nationality (more international students), and far more students of a far greater range of ethnicities. Understandably, students appreciate and respond to literature that reflects their lives and with which they can identify. Even so, I find students remain interested in literature that transports them outside those lives, giving them insight into the realms of human experience they have not lived.

In what way do you think technology and social media are changing the way academic work is communicated and the way students learn?

When I started teaching, we used the quaint technologies of the typewriter and the mimeograph machine (I can still smell the ink). I’m nostalgic for neither of them. The internet has radically changed the way we all (students and faculty alike) do research. Overall more information is readily available to us, although at times it is a challenge to evaluate its authority. The most positive feature of on-line discussion boards and such that are tied to classes is that they often allow those whose voices might be quiet or silent in a class to be heard. When I’ve used discussion boards, I have often found that the best comments posted came from students who rarely if ever spoke in class.

How do you believe diversity contributes to the classroom, esp. literature? How does what you assign contribute to diversity?

This is a no brainer. Quite simply, when teaching literature, the more diverse the class, the richer the conversation about what we are reading. That is why I lament a bit the general absence of older students in most undergraduate classes. For example, folks who are married bring a different perspective to stories that involve marriage. Similarly, discussion of stories about recent immigrants to the country (like those of Jhumpa Lahiri and Junot Diaz) are enriched by students who have shared that experience. I often teach the course that covers American literature since World War II, and you can’t do so without making much of the fact that one of the notable features of writing during that period was inclusion of voices that had rarely been heard before, starting with Jewish American writers in the 1950s, through African American and Asian American writers among others more recently. This is to say nothing about how women writers, previously either invisible or marginalized, have gained their just place. Given my own concern for the cultural contexts of literary production and reception, I’m naturally interested in how such writers portray their experience.