

Listening, Learning, and Building Community

Civic engagement courses at Skidmore are making an impact.

by ANGELA VALDEN



Bill Cole, owner of Cole's Woodwind Shop in Saratoga Springs, shows Warren King '23 and Raisa Ihnat '24 how to repair instruments during a workshop held at Ticonderoga High School as part of The Arts and Rural Poverty class's spring break field experience.

To prepare today's students to address challenges they see in their communities and affect meaningful change — now and in the future — 2021-22 Periclean Faculty Leaders Evan Mack and David Howson say it's all about cultivating productive empathy, generating energy, and building confidence through education.

"If you see a problem that you're not happy with, don't wait around for someone else to solve it. You solve it," says Mack, senior teaching professor of music and founder of We Are Instrumental, an organization he started two years ago to address the needs of struggling music programs in the Adirondacks.

"This generation of students seems to have a heightened sense of awareness and purpose," observes Howson, senior teaching professor and Arthur Zankel Executive Director of Arts Administration. "I commend their altruism. What we're doing is giving them the tools to make a greater impact on whatever they want to focus on. Our students are not risk averse, but giving them the courage is really important."

Their course, The Arts and Rural Poverty, is among a number of civic engagement courses at Skidmore that help prepare graduates to lead lives of consequence as informed, responsible, and globally and interculturally aware citizens.

Through Project Pericles, a consortium of 30 colleges and universities that promotes civic engagement within higher education,

Skidmore faculty are supported in developing and teaching innovative courses across the humanities, STEM, and social sciences that provide students with an opportunity to tackle real-world issues while enhancing partnerships between the College and local communities.

"Learning how to navigate a community, how to embed yourself in the community, and doing a lot of listening and observing is how you can make a difference." — *Evan Mack*

Centered on Mack's We Are Instrumental program — which collects and repairs used instruments, puts them into the hands of schoolchildren, and educates band directors about instrument repair — the Arts and Rural Poverty course shines a light on the systemic challenges faced by many in the beautiful but deeply complex Adirondack region of New York state, just north of the Skidmore campus.

"These music programs are doing amazing work. It's just that they face these daily barriers," says Mack. "And so enlightening our Skidmore students about the problem, and then as a group coming up with ways to address these issues through We Are Instrumental and

beyond, is both helping the community and helping give perspective to our students."

Through readings, discussions, field trips, and in-person and virtual guest speakers, students in the spring semester course learned about the political, educational, and cultural challenges associated with generational poverty in the Adirondack region — from limited broadband internet service to struggles in accessing healthcare — as well as about fundraising, grant writing, and other solution-oriented resources. Visitors included representatives from community organizations, local politicians, and Teaching Professor of Management and Business Cathy Hill, who stopped by to deliver her lecture "The Big Idea," on developing a concept and turning a problem into a high-impact solution.

Ahead of spring break, the students interviewed band directors at select school districts using what Mack calls a productive empathetic approach, drawing out solutions from the impacted community. From there, they handed off a list of questions and circumstances that they wanted to know more about to the four students with "the boots on the ground" during the week-long spring break field experience, who would shadow band directors, interview students, and experience downtowns throughout the Adirondacks. From Ticonderoga to Tupper Lake and Peru and Chazy near the Canadian border, they covered a radius of approximately 100 miles, visiting small towns and school systems that each face their own distinct challenges.



Sarah DiPasquale, associate professor and chair of the Dance Department, leads *Lea Leventhal '23, Annika Bergofin '24, Julianna Willis '22, and Amanda Francis '25* in practicing a dance routine for *Dance to Success*.

Warren King '23 recalls that while shadowing Ticonderoga Music Director Mike Iturrino, he was immediately struck by the sense of belonging that many music students at the school district felt in their lessons and music ensembles, as well as in and around the band room.

“Ticonderoga is the embodiment of a loving and nurturing program headed by a hardworking educator who truly cares, and *We Are Instrumental* was able to help this program grow and prosper even more,” King says. “It made me nostalgic to see that dynamic again, as something I had experienced and treasured in my high school years. I hoped we could do it for all the schools in the Adirondacks.”

At the end of the week, the four students took part in an instrument repair workshop alongside band directors from around the region, led by Bill Cole, owner of Cole’s Woodwind Shop in Saratoga Springs.

“Learning how to navigate a community, how to embed yourself in the community, and doing a lot of listening and observing is how you can make a difference,” Mack reflects. “I think Skidmore students really want to make a difference in their communities. And while they may not go into their communities and create a *We Are Instrumental* program, they’re going to do something else, and they’re going to learn the skills from this experience and other classes.”

In the curriculum and in the culture

Other courses taught by Periclean Faculty Leaders at Skidmore have spanned social policy and advocacy, activism in the arts, environmental science in relation to politics, history, and economics, and elementary education and dance — all taking a hard look at complex societal challenges through an interdisciplinary and action-oriented lens.

Students in Assistant Professor of Social Work June Paul’s course, *Social Policy and Social Justice*, have studied the history, politics, and structure of the U.S. social welfare system and worked directly with the National Association of Social Workers of New York State to complete a semester-long policy-advocacy project.

For her course *Theater for Social Justice and Change*, Eunice Ferreira, associate professor of theater, has partnered with local community groups MLK Saratoga and Black Dimensions in Art, as well as Skidmore’s John B. Moore Documentary Studies Collaborative (MDOCS), to elevate BIPOC voices, facilitate conversations about injustice, and explore how the arts can be a catalyst for change.

Political Ecology, taught by Associate Professor Nurcan Atalan-Helicke of the Environmental Studies and Sciences Program, has demonstrated the myriad ways in which history, institutions, culture, politics, economics, and broader power structures shape the use of resources, conservation, and environmental policies, and then has asked students to tackle an urban political ecology issue with a local community organization. Past partners have included Sustainable Saratoga, Seeds for Peace, Mohawk Harvest Food Cooperative, and Bikeatoga.

The course *Dancing Toward Success: Arts Education for Public Schools* has examined issues surrounding arts education access, funding, and the relationship between arts and learning. Students in this class taught by Sarah DiPasquale, associate professor and chair of the

Dance Department, have collaborated with the Gloversville Enlarged School District to design and implement a dance education residency, bringing the power of art and movement to elementary schoolchildren in their community.

The positive impact of that mind-body connection for young students was also the inspiration behind DiPasquale’s creation of “*Dance to Success*,” an innovative streaming series that helps elementary school teachers and students use movement to explore topics such as sharing, listening, and expressing and processing emotions. She collaborates with students from a variety of majors, as well as faculty and staff across the College — including the Education Studies Department, the Management and Business Department, MDOCS, and the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery — to develop and share the programming.

Videos in post-production this spring focused on bridging some of the gaps in emotional development that children are experiencing due to the pandemic, such as dancing through themes like conflict resolution, self-confidence, patience, and inclusion.

Through existing partnerships with the Gloversville school district, Saratoga Performing Arts Center (SPAC), and local PBS affiliate WMHT — and now through a collaboration with PBS Learning Media — the educational series is being offered to communities and schools throughout the region and across the country, for free.

“We have no intention of ever charging for this work,” says DiPasquale. “It’s physical research, it’s educational research, and it’s really a community service that we hope to continue for decades to come.”

In addition to the courses made possible through Periclean Faculty Leadership Program support, Skidmore offers a wide variety of

Students in Associate Professor of Theater Eunice Ferreira's **Theater for Social Justice and Change** class engaged in an intergenerational community partnership with local groups Black Dimensions in Art (BDA) and MLK Saratoga, with further support from a Mellon-funded project with the MDOCS Co-Creation Initiative.



Applied Civic Engagement courses that emphasize the value that community-based research brings to scholarship. Topics range from gender and intersectionality in political marketing to educating parents in the digital age.

For the Skidmore Bridge Experience, a new requirement of the general education curriculum, students critically examine how power and justice have shaped the experiences of people with a variety of identities in the United States and how they have responded to the reality of inequality in their lives. A practice and application component of the course calls on students to reflect on their own positions in their communities and on campus, and to connect their study of power, justice, and identity to other areas of their education and their everyday lives.

It's not uncommon for the volunteer component of Skidmore courses to inspire deep personal reflection, and it's the crux of the EN 105 writing seminar *What's In It for Me?* Brenda Pashley-Rabbitt, a lecturer in the English Department and academic counselor and peer academic support coordinator for Student Academic Services, asks her students to take on a community service project and then ponder its impact on self and community as a foundation for their writing in the class.

Arianna Cruz '24, who volunteered with the organization Camp Good Mourning!, offering bereavement services for children between the ages of 7 and 17 who have lost a parent or sibling, reflected on how profound an impact the opportunity had on her life. "It has been the most rewarding experience," she wrote. "I know that everything I've done to help CGM! has had a positive effect on grieving children.

Not only that, but in giving my time I have reaped so many benefits, including pride and satisfaction, enhanced communication skills, valuable networking acquaintances, and a greater perspective on what it really means to be a responsible member of the community. It goes to show that kindness and good deeds have a way of coming back to you."

Eric Morser, professor of history, faculty director of civic engagement, and director of the Bridge Experience, says he feels fortunate every day he comes to campus and works with Skidmore faculty who are committed to civic engagement. "Their classes are innovative, robust, inspirational, and important. They challenge students to apply what they learn in the classroom to address real-world problems and, in the process, teach them to be critical thinkers and good citizens."

Even beyond the curriculum, civic engagement is an integral part of Skidmore's culture, observes Michelle Hubbs, director of community service programs.

From the campuswide effort behind the College's annual Skidmore Cares donation drive, to the community service projects undertaken by athletic teams and organized by resident assistants for their halls, to the student clubs that make it their mission to give back, examples of responsible and generous citizenship abound.

"What I love about Skidmore is that civic engagement and community service are really embedded throughout the College," Hubbs says. "You'll find it everywhere."

SKIDMORE-SARATOGA CONSULTING PARTNERSHIP:

A Secret Treasure

by PETER MACDONALD

For more than 20 years, the Skidmore-Saratoga Consulting Partnership has generated fresh, impactful ideas for local nonprofit, for-profit, and arts organizations, an important example of how Skidmore courses are making a difference in the local community.

A few years ago, Elizabeth Sobol, president and CEO of Saratoga Performing Arts Center (SPAC), joined the students of the Skidmore-Saratoga Consulting Partnership (SSCP) to thank them for the amazing work they had done for SPAC, calling SSCP "Saratoga's secret treasure." The Skidmore students had just completed an intensive, 12-week consulting practicum with SPAC to produce a 40-page deck of their research and findings and a PowerPoint presentation with their recommendations.

With a mission of making an impact and "making North Broadway shorter," — the Skidmore-Saratoga Consulting Partnership engages with three clients each semester, usually a mix of not-for-profits, for-profits, and arts organizations.

In the cultural arena, SSCP has previously consulted with Caffé Lena, Universal Preservation Hall (UPH), Saratoga Arts, Northshire Bookstore, Saratoga Springs Preservation Foundation, and Pitney Meadows Community Farm, among others.

When Colleen Burke, executive-in-residence and director of the program, first pitched the idea of having SSCP provide pro bono consulting services to SPAC, Sobol was receptive, thinking it could be a good opportunity to build a closer relationship with Skidmore.

Sobol recalls putting a single hour on her calendar. That first conversation ended up lasting two and one-half hours, and the partnership was sealed.

“The students had so many questions, so many ideas, so much energy,” says Sobol. “We were getting a huge amount of value out of the students’ questions and perspectives, and it was also a significant learning experience for them. We were both mentoring and being mentored.”

Burke is adamant that she isn’t going to let any deliverable go out to the community that isn’t an A+. She is also quick to point out that the success of SSCP comes from many sources: the willing collaboration of Skidmore faculty members; the interdisciplinary liberal arts curriculum; and the diversity and inclusivity of the campus community, to name some.

In true Skidmore fashion, SSCP students bring a variety of majors to the mix — math, physics, social work, political science, studio art, dance, philosophy, and more — which brings multiple perspectives to class discussions and consultant teams.

A growing Skidmore alumni network is also crucial to SSCP’s success. Some graduates come back from their consulting firms — Deloitte, Accenture, Ernst & Young (EY), KPMG, Kantor, and IBM Consulting — to recruit SSCP students for internships and entry positions. Others come to SSCP classes in person or via Zoom to share their expertise. Bill McKendree ’74 from the Clarion Group, Amy Munichello ’94 from EY, Tess Mattimore ’16 from IBM, and Jack Sloan ’18 and Mark Purowitz ’87 from Deloitte have had a huge impact on the course, says Burke.

The idea for a Skidmore-Saratoga partnership was developed by Economics Professor Roy Rotheim in 2000. Since Burke inherited the partnership in 2013, SSCP has consulted for more than 60 local businesses and organizations, including Saratoga National Bank, Saratoga Eagle, Wellspring, Saratoga Senior Center, Habitat for Humanity, the Daily Gazette, and Artisanal Brewery.

Many of the clients implemented SSCP’s recommendations: Healthy Living Market added the family-owned image to its public story; Saratoga Today adopted its “blue box” identity; bike lanes and bikeshares appeared on the streets of Saratoga Springs after SSCP engaged with the Capital District Transportation Authority and the city Mayor’s Office; and the Saratoga Farmer’s Market changed its foot traffic flow after SSCP consultants flew a video drone over the market to capture disruptions. The YMCA and Pitney Meadows even appointed SSCP graduates to their boards of directors.



Members of the 2019 Skidmore-Saratoga Consulting Partnership team that provided recommendations on positioning SPAC as a cultural destination. From left, Roman DiPasquale ’19, Emily Einhorn ’19, SPAC President Elizabeth Sobol, Bella Rinskaya ’19, and Ian Carter ’19.

In addition, SSCP students are occasionally offered positions at client organizations. Aaron Rosenblum ’20, a business major and arts administration minor, consulted with and was subsequently hired by Yaddo, the retreat for artists here in Saratoga Springs.

“More than anything, our team brought a youthful perspective to Yaddo,” says Rosenblum. “I think that is a big part of what SSCP brings to local businesses — a curiosity and fresh thinking that brings things into a different light and creates new possibilities.”

Back at the 2019 Skidmore team presentation for SPAC, a guest from the Abu Dhabi-based parent company of semiconductor producer GlobalFoundries, headquartered in nearby Malta, New York, was so impressed, he quickly hired two SSCP students: Roman DiPasquale ’19, a Filene Music Scholar (violin) and business major, and Sonju Mohan ’19, a double major in business and economics.

DiPasquale’s SSCP team focused on positioning SPAC as a cultural destination. They interfaced with about two dozen cultural leaders, from SPAC board members to the UPH president to the head of the Chamber of Commerce.

“People were excited to be involved and talk to one another, and they were impressed with what we brought to the table. ‘Oh, you’re Skidmore students — Wow!’ they said.” — Roman DiPasquale

SSCP and SPAC are now in conversations about fall 2022, when the new SPAC School of the Arts may become an SSCP client.