

## Spring 2022 Gaudino Fund Newsletter



### **Greetings from board co-chairs Lars Ojukwu '08 and Laura Winston '75**

We are excited to assume leadership of the Gaudino board which includes alumni taught by Bob Gaudino as well as more recent alumni who participated in programs initiated by Gaudino Scholars or in fellowships supported by the Gaudino Fund.

This fall we are planning an event to celebrate the roughly 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the establishment of the Williams-in-India and Williams-at-Home programs. We hope this event will give us the opportunity to connect with some of you more directly.

We are grateful to outgoing board chair Randy Thomas for his thoughtful leadership of the Gaudino Fund. In this newsletter, Randy reflects on his experience on the board, provides an overview of the activity of our three most recent Gaudino Scholars, and closes with some Gaudinoesque questions for reflection.



## **Reflections by outgoing board chair Randy Thomas '74**

It has been an honor to serve as Chairperson of the Board of Trustees of the Gaudino Fund. Having been part of Gaudino's Williams-at-Home program, it provided a wonderful opportunity to remember, review, and re-ignite the excitement and passion for a form of learning which shaped me and others in a manner still not fully understood. I took it first as an opportunity to re-read several of Gaudino's papers, in the hopes that I might finally understand what his goal(s) and methodology were, bringing clarity for myself and others as we attempt to perpetuate his remarkable legacy. Only later did I find myself with the greater responsibility of guiding us through some of the contemporary challenges of our time: a co-opting of the term "uncomfortable learning" by another organization with unclear goals, the cancellation of speakers with controversial and racially-charged perspectives, and a general atmosphere which brought into question fundamental questions of free-speech. Even conscientious efforts to address contemporary concerns regarding racial discrimination created conflict and tension across campus, and challenged us to take into account the differing needs, or desires, of our very diverse student body, for "uncomfortable learning". It was a different environment from when many of us attended Williams, and it took careful consideration and understanding of those changes before we could adequately consider how Gaudino's legacy might be configured to fit our new, and might I say, "unfamiliar" circumstances, something at the heart of Gaudino's learning model. To my great fortune, I had the combined intelligence, thoughtfulness, dedication, and empathy of three Gaudino Scholars, and a host of fellow alums, to help navigate these turbulent waters.

### **[Gaudino Scholar Lois Banta \(2014 – 2017\)](#)**

As one might expect, each of the Gaudino Scholars who bore the greatest responsibility for actively shaping the specific Gaudino initiatives, approached this task in different, but creative ways, themselves acknowledging that one of the magnificent aspects of this mission is the freedom it offers the Scholar to shape these innovative learning opportunities in a personally meaningful way, unencumbered by some of the normal institutional structures or expectations. Lois Banta's tenure was shaped in ways very consistent with our understanding of Gaudino's broad goals of helping students see themselves, and others, more clearly and fully, from her support of the "Human Library", which provided others with the rare opportunity to hear and appreciate those whose background, experience, or interests diverge from one's own; to her broader initiative designed to highlight "the cost" of various personal and political choices we

make, as individuals, or as a society. In her varied initiatives which she organized under the theme of [“At What Cost”](#), students had the opportunity to reflect upon the personal cost of high achievement, or gather in small groups to identify and discuss “the ideas, goals, and big questions” they have about themselves and their life. Introspection, self-exploration and “community building” were as fundamental to these offerings, as they were to Gaudino’s mission. Also included were initiatives designed to ensure that students gained a greater awareness and understanding of some of the “costs” of which *others* suffered, exemplified in the installation of a photo exhibit in the College Chapel which captured the painful, tragic memories of apartheid, gathered by the South Africans during their Truth and Reconciliation process. Another initiative Lois, and we, can be most proud of, is the connection she made with the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory, supporting their collection and analysis of the oral histories of Estonian citizens regarding the mass deportation and murder during WWII, and laying the groundwork for a long-term connection between Williams, the Estonian Institute, and its students. This is just another beautiful example of how we can give students the opportunity to be a ‘witness’ to the lives of others within our global community, who face immeasurable obstacles and challenges - and through this, enrich their understanding and compassion for others.

### **[Gaudino Scholar Susan Engel \(2017 – 2020\)](#)**

When Susan Engel took the reins, the internal strife on campus, which mirrored that across the country, only accentuated something we were becoming increasingly aware of: a level of diversity in the student population that did not exist during Gaudino’s tenure; students no longer needed to be sent off campus to be exposed to others with vastly different beliefs, background or experience. While this increasingly diverse environment provided fertile soil for students to confront issues of difference, it posed a challenge for Gaudino’s model of “uncomfortable learning”: While those students with more stable and secure backgrounds needed greater exposure to those from less privileged or less secure circumstances, those who already suffered the cost of living in a society in which they were undervalued, demeaned and discriminated against, sometimes on a daily basis, required a learning environment that eased their discomfort, was responsive to their suffering, and gave them greater control over their lives in order to make it safer and more secure. With this as the backdrop to her scholarship, [Susan’s Conversations Project](#) arrived at just the right moment. She prepared the soil upon which students could sow the seeds of engagement and offer fellow students opportunities to talk about a range of topics in an environment which they felt would be conducive to an open and honest dialogue. It laid the groundwork for creating the kind of dialogue Gaudino loved to have, exploring the meaning and importance of even the most mundane or ordinary events, as he did when he reportedly asked one of his students, “What would Socrates say about this football game?” With no preconceived expectations and no explicit parameters, students were given the opportunity to engage their peers in whatever way they thought might elicit the kind of interchange and engagement that was far too rare on campus, facilitating discussions about issues often too controversial to speak about, confirming our belief that “while there is a big, complex world beyond Williams open to

students to explore, there is an equally complex world within the Williams community, which students need support to explore.”

### Gaudino Scholar Jason Josephson Storm (2020 – present)

Gaudino was a master at turning the tables on those with whom he conversed, heightening awareness where there was none, posing those unspoken questions, searching for previously undisclosed perspectives. He strongly believed the world is incomplete and impoverished if there is only one point of view and everyone is in agreement; diverse or contrasting perspectives enrich us, and allow us to see the world more fully, and others more empathically. Jason Josephson Storm’s “Utopia” project, embodies this, as he works to rectify the imbalance of primarily dystopian thinking with its opposite, a vision of utopia which does not attempt to deny our sense of impending doom, but works to counterbalance it by creating a space in which students can “exercise (their) capacity to imagine a better future.” Equally valuable to our mission, Jason has enlisted several of his colleagues in this effort, all of whom have constructed classes with a similar utopian focus, and in this way, expanded Gaudino’s reach across campus. Pandemic or not, dystopian thinking will be countered with utopian visions, creating the dialectic Gaudino loved, two forces operating in opposition but contributing to our growth and development, as individuals and as a society.

### **Questions to Get Uncomfortable Over**

And so I offer my questions for the future, my vision of what we might ask ourselves in our effort to keep the Gaudino mission alive. Here are a few questions which might serve as guideposts for those who endeavor to create the kind of learning environment Gaudino envisioned.

1. Is there a place for **self-development** within our model of a liberal arts education?
2. What is the **role of emotion** in our educational model?
3. Do we recognize and appreciate our **aversion to conflict** (just like in the family), the **fear of rejection** associated with it, and the debilitating effect this anxiety has on our knowing ourselves and others, better?
4. To what extent do we believe, and allow for, **interpersonal interchange** (as opposed to individual study), as the means for identifying ‘the truth’, as well as gain a full perspective on ourselves and the world?
5. How much value do we place on **knowing others with differing views**, beliefs and/or backgrounds?
6. How valuable is it to see our **reaction to difference**, and assess our ability to deal with fundamental differences between ourselves and others, and what are the means for accomplishing this?
7. Is there a place in our educational mission or philosophy for helping students to become more **empathic**, truly placing themselves in other people’s shoes and imagining what life looks like from their perspective?

8. What are some appropriate **venues** for discussion across differences, how do we make them sufficiently **immersive and emotional** to increase student awareness of self and other, and **who** is in the best position to help students reflect upon these experiences?
9. How do we properly and thoughtfully “**dose**” **uncomfortable learning** in a manner that takes into account differing life experiences of students with more or less privilege, providing safety and security to some, and tension and conflict to others?
10. How much **responsibility** can we give students for their own learning?