



# HISTORY AND HERITAGE

150 YEARS

## THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL WORK: ROOTED IN THE PAST, RESILIENT IN THE MOMENT, READY FOR THE FUTURE

In 1871, Ezekiel Hanson Cook, a teacher and administrator at area high schools, became the first principal of the newly opened West Chester Normal School, a two-year training school in elementary education. Looking at today's College of Education and Social Work (CESW), which traces its roots directly to the Normal School, Cook would be proud that many CESW faculty members began their careers working in the kinds of jobs for which they are preparing their students: K-12 teachers, social workers, school counselors, clinical mental health counselors, higher education professionals, and other roles that strengthen our communities. In fact, CESW Dean Desha Williams began her career as a high school math teacher in Conyers, GA.

One constant since Cook's time: the unwavering commitment by faculty and staff to advance student success despite such external impacts as wars, economic recessions, and pandemics.

"I remember what it was like to be a new teacher in the classroom and I know how critically important it is to empower our students with the tools they need to succeed in their respective career fields," says Williams.

Williams became dean in June 2020, after serving as chair of the department of teacher education and a professor of mathematics education at Georgia College and State University. While her roots are in secondary education, she is quick to emphasize that CESW is home to undergraduate and graduate social work, clinical and school counselor, as well as education — a result of the 2016 reorganization of WCU's colleges. The undergraduate and graduate social work programs moved from what was then the College of Business and Public Affairs and joined education and counseling programs to form the new College of Education and Social Work.

"The union of WCU's education, counseling, and social work programs is a synergistic partnership that has created new possibilities and avenues of growth for the College," says Williams. One of her priority goals is to create more collaborations that tap into the expertise of multiple disciplines and departments. In some cases, this will mean partnerships between existing programs; in other cases, the creation of entirely new initiatives.



## COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & SOCIAL WORK INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE

**A**nother priority goal for Williams and the College is “inclusive excellence” and addressing systemic inequities, including providing greater access to underrepresented students. Some barriers can seem small but, nonetheless, are significant. For example, extensive community service has long been required for admission to teacher education candidacy. For students who lack reliable transportation, work long hours, or have other conflicts, however, this requirement is an obstacle. To overcome this barrier, students can now fulfill service-learning requirements through courses that include a field component.

One innovative and rewarding field experience is the Community Immersive Semester for Educators (CISE), which infuses service learning throughout the curriculum. CISE provides Early Grades Preparation (K-4) students the opportunity to work with schoolchildren in historically marginalized communities. During this 15-credit experience, students put in long hours at the cooperating school three days a week, plus some required evenings and weekends. The program is currently partnered with the Add B. Anderson School and the surrounding Cobbs Creek



**COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & SOCIAL WORK  
DEAN DESHA WILLIAMS**



**CISE FACULTY**

Left to Right: Katie Solic, associate professor, Literacy; Kathleen Riley, associate professor, Literacy; Katherine Norris, professor, Early and Middle Grades Education; and Dana Morrison, assistant professor, Educational Foundations and Policy Studies.

community in West Philadelphia. While CISE students are helping in the classroom and via service projects, the Cobbs Creek Community mentors (parents, neighborhood elders, and others) share their knowledge of community values, strengths, and needs with CISE participants.

“We see teaching as relational work, and we emphasize and highlight the value of relationships throughout CISE with community mentoring experiences,” notes program co-leader Katie Solic, associate professor of literacy.

Another CESW program that prepares educators to serve in underserved communities is the WW STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) Teaching Fellowship, which focuses on those interested in teaching STEM subjects. It has been likened to a medical residency in its intensive and immersive approach. Students graduate with a master’s in education as well as teacher certification and make a three-year commitment to teach at a high-needs public school in Philadelphia. WCU was one of just three Pennsylvania universities selected in 2018 to take part in this prestigious program.

## PROFESSOR EMERITA JUDITH S. FINKEL M’73: EVOLVING TEACHER TECH

In her nearly 40 years at WCU, Judith S. Finkel M’73 saw teaching technology grow from the 1970s “teaching machines” that helped K–6 children learn to read to today’s apps and the iPad. She began her career in 1968 in what is now the Department of Early Childhood and Special Education, eventually chaired that department, and also served as interim dean of the School of Education (now the College of Education and Social Work).

“The lab school was an unusual setting for the 1970s,” she recalls. “Third, fourth, and fifth grades were open classrooms. We had teaching machines that prepared our students for computer-assisted instruction” — a natural progression since the Laboratory School shared space with the computer center in Bull Center at what was then West Chester State College.

In the late 1990s, Finkel came full circle and established a center to link tech-savvy and forward-thinking educators across the region: the WCU Educational Entrepreneurship and Excellence (3E) Institute.

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According to WW Teaching Fellowship Program Director Dan Ilaria, whose passion for math is obvious, there is no such thing as a “math person.”

“Any student can learn mathematics,” says Ilaria, a mathematics education professor in the Department of Secondary Education. “Math isn’t about the manipulation of symbols on paper. Rather, it’s about noticing patterns and structures and learning to frame arguments, such as what a particular graph tells us about something.”

Ilaria says that an “amazing team of faculty members” work to ensure that each year’s cohort of WW Teaching Fellows embrace the mindset that STEM is accessible to all, whether the subject they will be teaching is 8th grade algebra or advanced placement physics.

A focus on inclusive excellence can be seen throughout CESW. Case in point: the work around affinity groups advanced by Suzen Wysor Nguema, assistant chair of the Undergraduate Social Work department, and others throughout the College and University. Formed in spring 2021, such groups include one for those who identify as black, indigenous, and other persons of color, and another for those who identify as white. “To advance racial equity, there is work to do separately and together,” says Wysor Nguema. “Affinity groups provide spaces for people to work within their own racial and ethnic groups. For white people, this can mean time and space to reflect on their own racial identity, how that shows up in the world, and ways to process their own feelings to be better accomplices in anti-racism.”

## PRE-CERTIFICATION TO DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

WCU’s education programs are broad and deep, starting with pre-certification courses for undergraduates on up to a doctoral degree that was launched in 2016, as well as newly launched superintendent and principalship certificates.

The doctorate in Policy, Planning, and Administration features a strong cohort identity that enables students to easily turn to each other for support, says program co-director Heather Schugar. “At orientation, I tell students that there will be both highs and valleys. When you hit the valley, that’s when the support of your cohort members is so instrumental.”

The Ed.D. program features a track in curriculum and instruction and a newer track in higher education. Many students choose to conduct applied research, such as one assistant principal who did his dissertation on the attributes of teachers who are viewed as “caring.” His research showed that small, simple behaviors, such as greeting students at the door, had powerful beneficial impacts on students. He shared his findings with the teachers in his building and, thanks in part to his advanced degree, has now earned a principalship position.





## SOCIAL WORKERS: MICRO TO MEZZO TO MACRO IMPACT

**B**y his own admission, Pablo Arriaza, chair of WCU's Undergraduate Social Work department, has occasionally missed a meeting if he knew his presence wasn't urgently required. It's not a sign of lassitude, but rather of Arriaza's responsiveness to students. "This is a student-centered department," he says. "If a student needs my immediate attention, I do everything I can to help them at that moment in time."

Undergraduate social work, introduced at the West Chester campus in 1970 and at the Philadelphia campus in 2014, has a strong presence in both locations with 170 students in West Chester and nearly 100 in Philadelphia. The program trains students to respond to the needs of the marginalized at the micro level (assisting individual clients), the mezzo level (focusing on the community and group level), and also how to effect change at the macro level (understanding systemic barriers and policymaking).

Social work is a broad field: Graduates work in school, hospital, community, and government settings and even in the private sector, advancing corporate social responsibility. One of the things that makes undergraduate social work at WCU unique is its strong

emphasis on field placements. While the department's accrediting body — the Council on Social Work Education — requires a 448-hour, senior-year field placement, WCU mandates an additional 224 hours of field work during the student's junior year. Arriaza also points to the fact that department professors have a strong record of social work practice. "We teach our students by using real life experiences," he says. "We also emphasize the mentorship we provide our students and the professional life-long relationships we establish with our graduates."

WCU also has a thriving master of social work (MSW) program, chaired by Ginneh Akbar. "If there was a silver lining to the pandemic, it was that our Philadelphia and West Chester students were able to take classes together virtually," she says. "Most of our Philadelphia students are already working in the field, while our West Chester cohort tends to join the program right after earning their bachelor's degrees. Taking classes remotely together, they were able to learn from their different experiences."

Regardless of the campus they choose to attend, students in the program can do their required field placement anywhere in the



GRADUATING MSW STUDENTS 2021

five-county region or, if they prefer, in nearby states. “It makes for a lot of driving for our field directors but it’s important that our students obtain precisely the field experience they are looking for,” says Akbar, who worked as a trauma therapist in community mental health settings and child welfare before joining WCU in 2014.

A WCU social work education doesn’t have to end with an MSW. The Graduate Certificate in Gerontology answers the growing demand for social workers who are trained to support the needs of older adults. The program also attracts professionals from a wide range of other fields, including audiologists, rehabilitation therapists, and educators. “Our program is interdisciplinary,” says Graduate Coordinator Angela Lavery. “Students can take advantage of courses in social work, nutrition, health, and kinesiology with an emphasis on older adults.”

Service learning is an important component of the gerontology program. This fall semester, the Gerontology Certificate, along with the Master of Public Health program, is partnering with the Pennsylvania Department of Aging to develop a service-learning project that will support older adults at risk for social isolation.

## PROFESSOR EMERITA MIT JOYNER: A LIFE DEMONSTRATING ADVOCACY

**M**ildred “Mit” C. Joyner has never left social work. She retired from WCU in 2011 after 32 years, including several decades as chair of undergraduate social work, then launched a business specializing in organizational change and achieving equity. In July 2020, she began her three-year term as president of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the world’s largest organization of professional social workers.

She was an advocate for WCU students and for institutional change regarding race relations. Among her achievements: leading town halls on race and fundraising for the Frederick Douglass statue. She calls the latter “the pearl in my crown.”

Another high point was the establishment of the MSW. “We were the first in the State System to earn approval for the graduate program,” she notes. For a time, she chaired both departments. Joyner also developed an interdisciplinary race relations course, lauded by students for effective delivery of critical content on race. Many in the course became leaders in student organizations: “They wanted to make change.” They had the best role model.



Tracy Wolfe M'11, Jordan Porr '14, M'17, Professor of Counselor Education Karen Dickinson, Jocelyn White M'11, Sierra Calaman M'15 at the Pennsylvania School Counselor Association Conference in Pittsburgh in 2019.

## COUNSELOR EDUCATION: FILLING A NEED FOR SCHOOL AND CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELORS

**T**he Counselor Education Department is a distinct, separate component of CESW that may be small but serves oversized community needs. It features two master's level tracks: an M.S. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and a M.Ed in School Counseling.

Saying that school counselors help students apply to college is a bit like saying a cake is made from flour. While both are true, they are only one ingredient in the recipe. School counselors — or “guidance counselors” back in the day — design and deliver a range of school counseling programs, all with the goal of improving student outcomes. “School counselors work with students who might not have adequate food and shelter, with students struggling with mental health issues, and yes, also with students who need assistance with vocational or higher education plans,” says Karen Dickinson, assistant chair of counselor education.

The M.S. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling prepares graduates for myriad career opportunities, including working in community settings, hospitals, Veterans Administration treatment centers, and private practice. Program chair Eric Owens says that the pandemic has brought much needed attention to the issue of inadequate access to mental health services in the U.S. Barriers include a shortage of qualified mental health professionals, high cost of

services, and insufficient insurance coverage. “I have never seen such a critical need for licensed counselors in more than 20 years working in this field,” says Owens, who maintains a small private practice. “As a public institution serving the Commonwealth, the University’s mission is to prepare our students to contribute to the common good. The Department of Counselor Education does exactly that, with nationally accredited programs that enable our graduates to meet a pressing societal need.”

Meeting the needs of Pennsylvania’s residents, communities, schools, and employers is more complicated today than 150 years ago, when the Commonwealth was desperate for elementary school teachers after state legislation made elementary education free and more broadly accessible. West Chester Normal School met that initial need in 1871 and, over the ensuing decades, its leaders expanded academic offerings beyond the institution’s foundational programs in education. In connecting education, social work, and school and mental health counseling programs and creating WCU’s College of Education and Social Work, the University ensures that graduates will excel in professions that support our youth and sustain our communities.

Next issue's 150th anniversary history feature will focus on the College of Arts and Humanities.