

Alfred University graduate honors mentor with gift to support innovative degree programs

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Dr. William LaCourse, a glass science professor with five decades of experience as a teacher and researcher, was acting head of the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, when he began wondering how he and others could foster increased interdisciplinary opportunities that would take full advantage of the educational environment that is unique to Alfred University.

“What would happen if the University could make it possible to earn both a BS in Glass, Ceramic or Materials Engineering and a BFA in a related Art discipline in five years rather than a normal seven years?” he wondered.

“The combination seems unusual at first,” he said, “but companies, museums, architectural firms, and others that deal with both the science and design aspects of materials are in need of people with the creativity that results from such programs.”

The College of Ceramics contains two top-ranked programs, the School of Art and Design, and the materials-based programs (biomedical materials engineering, ceramic engineering, glass engineering science and materials engineering science) in the Inamori School of Engineering, so his ruminations on fostering collaborations between the two were to be expected.

There have been examples of successful collaborations between art and engineering faculty over the years, including a course, “Ceramic Science for Artists,” pioneered by Dr. William Carty, professor of ceramic engineering, and John Gill, professor of ceramic art; they continue to teach it as a non-credit course during Ceramic Art Summer School. Another course, “Glassartengine,” is also team-taught by an artist and engineer. Angus Powers, associate professor of glass art, and Dr. Alexis Clare, professor of glass science, will teach it this coming fall.

Together with student summer employees, these professors are busy developing totally new “Studio Laboratory” courses in which double-degree students will perfect their artistic abilities while simultaneously studying the “invisible science” that makes the art possible. It is this approach that permits the accelerated double degrees and an enhanced creativity of the students, LaCourse said.

LaCourse and his wife Patricia, emeritus librarian at Scholes Library, which houses both art and engineering materials, created a fund that allows the University to facilitate those intersections of art and engineering. But creating and sustaining an academic program such as LaCourse envisions would require substantially greater resources, and that’s where one of LaCourse’s former students wants to help, said Alfred University President Mark Zupan.

The graduate, who wishes to remain anonymous, has committed \$1.25 million through a bequest to support LaCourse’s dream program. “The gift will not only provide funds, but has already encouraged and energized the participating faculty as they work to finalize and implement the program,” Zupan said.

“That’s the kind of magic that happens to benefit the entire University and generations of students to come when a mentor like Bill LaCourse has such a profound impact on one of his students,” Zupan added.

Anyone interested in the double-degree program is asked to contact the Admissions office, admissions@alfred.edu, or to call 607 871 2115.