

# THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION ARTS & SCIENCES



The CAS Executive Team: Denise Solomon (Head), Mary Stuckey (Associate Head), Andy High (Director of Graduate Studies), Rosa Eberly (Director of Undergraduate Studies)

The mission statement of the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences opens with this sentence:

**“THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION ARTS AND SCIENCES IS COMMITTED TO THE STUDY, TEACHING, AND PRACTICE OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION FOR THE BETTERMENT OF PENNSYLVANIA, THE NATION, AND THE WORLD.”**

This commitment takes on new meaning during a pandemic and in the face of challenges to the well-being of our local, national, and global community. Locally, the CAS community pulled together in the spring of 2020 to take care of each other: We distributed masks and formed a mutual aid network to share resources, we created a sizable task force of faculty skilled in online teaching to support instructors new to the remote classroom, we remade our course schedule to offer undergraduates the greatest possible flexibility and to improve access to required courses, and we prioritized helping our students get the education they deserve. Our graduate students, who nimbly adapted to both teaching and learning online, were especially impressive under pressure. Their curiosity, work ethic, and morals give us hope for the future of the discipline and for society more broadly.

In our scholarly lives, our faculty draws upon theories and methods that span the humanities and social sciences to understand the role of communication in diverse interpersonal, communal, national, international, and cultural settings. Our work provides insight into the power of communication to promote more responsible health practices, as well as the role of communication in the perpetuation of social injustice and discrimination; into the qualities that define ethical democratic deliberation, as well as the conditions that undermine political discourse and the exercise of democracy; into communication experiences that foster personal and relational well-being, as well as communication practices that fracture communities and disenfranchise people. Our work is more important and relevant than ever.

The Department contributes to several initiatives that align with our mission. **The Center for Democratic Deliberation** is devoted to understanding how people use language and communication, speaking and writing, argument and persuasion, or dialogue and debate to impact the quality of civic discourse. **The Communication, Science, and Society Initiative** brings together researchers in the humanities, social sciences, and life sciences to address significant social problems that arise at the intersection of human communication and behavior and biological science, broadly construed. **The Center for Humanities and Information**, directed this year by Assistant Professor Pamela VanHaitsma who has also served as the Associate Director for the past three years, focuses on the role that information plays in the production of social meaning and value across the human sciences.



**PAMELA VANHAITSMASMA,**  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR  
of CAS and Women's, Gender,  
and Sexuality Studies and  
Sherwin Early Career  
Professor in the Rock  
Ethics Institute



**JOSHUA BARNETT,**  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

This year, the Department welcomes Assistant Professor **Joshua Trey Barnett** to the faculty. Professor Barnett, who is co-funded by the Huck Institutes of the Life Sciences, studies the rhetoric of earthly coexistence. Working at the intersection of rhetoric and environmental humanities, he considers the rhetorical conditions of ecological grief and how people come to feel and to know that they are part of – and not apart from – the earth that sustains them. Professor Barnett joins a celebrated faculty that is widely recognized for its leadership in the broader communication discipline.

Meanwhile, our commitment to the education of Penn State undergraduates has never been stronger. The CAS Department is home to four majors and six minors, and we play a leadership role in general education through our public speaking course (CAS100) and our course in rhetoric and civic life (CAS 137/138). Following the closure of campus in the spring of 2020, the Department invested significant time, energy, and resources to support and improve remote teaching. From identifying remote teaching mentors, who offer hands-on advice to all our instructors, to assigning graduate student teaching assistants to help faculty in our upper-level classes, we have aimed to provide more instructional resources to support student learning in these exceptional circumstances. We have also formed **The Undergraduate Engagement Council**, to bring into conversation the leadership of our undergraduate program (Lori Bedell), our honors program (Mary High), the CAS Club (Vanessa McLaughlin), and our communication honors society – Lambda Pi Eta (Marcy Milhomme). These are just a few of the ways that we are working to enrich the experiences of students in our classes and our degree programs.



**LORI BEDELL**



**MARY HIGH**



**VANESSA  
MCLAUGHLIN**



**MARCY  
MILHOMME**

2020 has proven to be a remarkable year, and the path ahead offers both challenges and opportunities. In the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences, we know that times of division and discord are also moments of opportunity for real and systemic change. A global pandemic has invited substantive conversations about access to health care; widespread protests are bringing sustained attention to institutionalized racism and systemic bias; and the politicization of social practices has revealed tensions between individual and collective action and raised questions about individual responsibilities to collective well-being. Understanding how people can engage challenging topics ethically and collaboratively, while preparing both undergraduate and graduate students to be leaders in these spaces, is central to our departmental identity. In these exceptional times, our educational goals remain: preparing students for a range of possible careers, instilling a sense of personal and professional ethics, readying students for active roles in public life, helping them form enduring relationships, and inspiring continued learning after college.

**THROUGH OUR SCHOLARSHIP, OUR TEACHING, AND OUR SERVICE, THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION ARTS AND SCIENCES IS DELIBERATE IN ITS EFFORTS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE WELL-BEING OF OUR COMMUNITY, OUR STUDENTS, AND OUR SOCIETY.**