How Clothing Connects Us to History and Culture

“I’ve always been very interested in clothes, even when I was little,” says Kyle Huber, a theatre arts major in the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. “I was always a little more concerned with what my clothes said about me than most kids—especially guys—my age. When I got into college, my interest in acting slowly shifted to costume design.”

As a first-year student, Huber found a mentor in Karen Gilmer, lecturer and costume designer in the Department of Theatre Arts, through the First Experiences in Research program. Through that partnership, Huber had the opportunity to see costume design go from page to stage via extensive research.

“Students like to be a part of a project that they can see through from beginning to end,” says Gilmer. “Students feel proud of themselves because they see what the research contributed to the final design. I see the curiosity pique as they discover that, in research, costumes and fashion are really good ways of discovering culture through clothing.

“The research tells us about how people lived,” she continues. “While this allows us to create better theater through our costume designs, it also gives us insight into what life was like in any given time period. Clothing is such a massive part of culture, and it needs to be studied.”

Huber echoes this with his own experience: “Conducting research definitely improved my ability to design costumes when it came to working on actual theatrical productions. I had to know what the fashion from each period of history looked like and what garments, fabrics, hairstyles, and makeup were worn. I became very interested in making sure my designs were accurate so that the stories on stage were a little bit more truthful.

“But it also gave me insight into different cultures and different times. One research project that really meant a lot to me was looking deeply into drag performance and the way it has represented different gender identities and the LGBTQIA+ community for a very long time. It was especially interesting to look at how the diversity of drag aesthetics has allowed for a wider conversation about gender fluidity and expression just through the use of costuming, hair, and makeup.”

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Gilmer says that she enjoys working with undergraduate students because they bring new perspectives and insights to a project, which carries over into the research. “Undergraduate researchers are inquisitive, curious, diligent, committed, [and] hard-working and strive to find the answers and learn new ways of looking, thinking, feeling, and experiencing the world we are researching,” she says. “A good sense of humor is also needed, as is a willingness to put oneself out there and gain knowledge and skills that are useful in all areas of life.

“I am happy to be a part of helping students to see their potential to learn and grow by finding new information. I have imparted a life skill that will lead them to continue to want to know more and discover the possibilities that research can offer,” Gilmer concludes.
Since 1787, Pitt has never stopped pushing the edge of what's possible. Since day one, that spirit of progress has run through every aspect of the University of Pittsburgh and the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences—and through our students, faculty, and Pitt community members.

Amanda Gamwo's story about presenting her research at a professional conference as an undergraduate is a great example. Her story begins the way so many student stories start: "I never thought what I did here was possible." Through inspired and supportive faculty mentoring, Dietrich School students push their limits every day to make the seemingly impossible a reality.

More than 200 years after our founding, Pitt is still driven by the search.

Consider Kyle Huber, (mentored by lecturer and costume designer Karen Gilmer), who does research in theatrical costume design connects him not just to a potential future career, but also to the people, places, stories, and cultures of centuries past. As Gilmer notes in the story, undergraduate research leads students "to continue to want to know more and discover the possibilities that research can offer."

Another story within these pages highlights the Dietrich School's dedicated advisors who help mold students' futures. These award-winning advisors work tirelessly to leave a lasting impact. Their work is in reality the core of the Dietrich School and the University: focusing on human impact and the relentless pursuit of positive change in every student and within our communities.

In addition to the stories you see in this issue, you’ll also notice our new design.

As part of a university that never stops reinventing, we are always looking for ways to better connect you and our student to the stories and values that define the University of Pittsburgh.

John A. Tyyning
Associate Dean
for Undergraduate Studies

Seeing Ideas Converge through Interdisciplinary Research

Traveling abroad to do research is an experience that I will never forget. Working and living in a foreign city gives you such a different perspective! Whether you're in the archives looking at documents or on the bus going out to dinner, you are constantly seeing and experiencing new things.

The London Field Studies program gave me my first experience with research at Pitt. I had done lots of science work through labs, but the London program was very different from what I was used to. I wanted to challenge myself.

My project looked at an event called the Dissolution of the Monasteries and the formation of the Royal Hospitals in London in the mid-16th century. This was a transition from having care of the sick and poor done predominantly by individual churches to centralizing the system under the control of city government. My secondary research focused on looking at the history of medicine and reading about the Royal Hospitals and the practice of medicine in early modern England.

Being in London, I got to work in some amazing libraries and archives that had materials that aren't available in the United States. I looked at original charts for hospitals, books of government, meeting minutes, archives, and various other documents. Being given access to original documents from the 16th century made me feel like a professional researcher, and to have that feeling as an undergraduate student is something so amazing. The experience was extremely empowering. I felt like my work and my ideas were respected and encouraged, which gave me confidence to continue down this path and to want to do more research in the future.

Embracing Opportunities, Forging New Paths

"I had this realization that presenting at a national conference as an undergraduate was a possibility but every time I came to the lab, it seemed as if working on travel award applications to attend ABRCMS was the priority. I didn't quite understand it then, but my faculty mentor's insight was right. My experience with this conference proved to be life changing. The whole process was a learning experience, from preparing for the conference to traveling to the conference to attending the conference and even returning from the conference.

While preparing for the conference, I learned to take every opportunity seriously, to communicate my ideas clearly, and to be confident in my own abilities. The experience showed me that my research is valuable and that my ideas are important. It also taught me the importance of networking and building relationships with other researchers.

"I want you to apply for a travel award for the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students (ABRCMS)" seemed to be the theme of the instructions I received from my research mentor, Sandra Murray, a professor in the University of Pittsburgh Department of Cell Biology.

My Dietrich School Story
Corey Schultz, history and neuroscience major

Amanda Gamwo, CGS '19

Pictured from left to right are Corey Schultz, Department of History Associate Professor Molly Warsh, and Patrick Mullen, director, Office of Undergraduate Research, Scholarship and Creative Activity, on the Oxfordshire Trail in the Cotswolds, just outside the village of Charlbury, England.
opportunity seriously. I applied for two travel awards and did not expect to receive them. I was surprised to find that I received both awards! This made the traveling expenses to the conference very manageable, but even more importantly, it taught me not to take opportunities that seem improbable too lightly.

I also learned how making a poster can help the presenter to better understand the presented material. From literature readings and coming to the lab, I had learned the basics of the research I was to present; however, attempting to summarize the research and make it visually understandable for others allowed me to better understand the research myself, reinforcing the truth that the best learning occurs when the learner teaches someone else.

At the conference, I saw what passion older adults in the scientific community have for helping younger adults to reach their full potential. I heard from speakers about the integration of public health into STEM, an immigrant’s experience with becoming a doctor, advice on time management skills, and more. I had a lot of poster practice and received mentoring from the travel award’s staff.

According to one study, 94% of students rated their conference experience as life changing or positive and none rated their conference experience as negative. (Buddy, 2016)" According to one study, 94% of students rated their conference experience as life changing or positive and none rated their conference experience as negative. (Buddy, 2016"

I connected to schools, programs, and people across the nation. I left the conference with many summer programs to apply to and connections to help make the process more likely to result in acceptance. The closest friend that I made at the conference was a graduate student. Stephanie taught me much about being a better student and some things about her experience as a graduate student in biology during our free times together at the conference.

From traveling, I learned how to better manage the transportation system and the power of my own voice. From negotiating a travel schedule that would work with my studies to managing the airline system and taxi system, I saw that by voicing concerns and questions, I could achieve my goals.

At the beginning, I didn’t quite understand why Dr. Murray felt it was so important that I apply [for an award] to present at this conference. Now I can certainly see why.


Excerpted from the December 2019 “Snapshot” newsletter
Personalized Advising and the Relentless Pursuit of Change for Good

he Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences annually recognizes outstanding faculty and staff academic advising of its undergraduate students with the Ampco-Pittsburgh Prize for Excellence in Advising. This year’s recipients are Frayda Cohen, director of undergraduate studies, senior lecturer, and undergraduate advisor in the Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies Program, and Barbara “Babs” Mowery, academic advisor in the Academic Advising Center.

Recipients are nominated by fellow faculty and staff, and their nominations are supported by testimonials from undergraduate students. These student stories convey the power and impact of personalized advising provided in the Dietrich School.

On behalf of Cohen, Rachael Bindes (BA ’18) wrote: “As a junior, I had already committed to my major and a certificate program, but Dr. Cohen saw something in me and encouraged me to join the Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies Program. Fortunately, Dr. Cohen believed in me when I did not believe in myself. Because of her determination to have me believe more firmly in myself, I graduated with my original major and two certificates, plus a gender, sexuality, and women’s studies minor. Had it not been for Dr. Cohen, I would not have learned how far I can push myself, my capabilities, and my intellect.

“Dr. Cohen’s desire to help her students realize their greatness does not stop in the classroom. In April 2018, I published ‘Before the Sun Wakes Up,’ a children’s book dedicated to promoting acceptance and equality in the minds of young children—exactly the type of material Dr. Cohen teaches her students. As someone with a tendency to downplay the significance of my achievements, I did not promote my book as effectively as I could have, but Dr. Cohen found this impermissible. Instead, she organized an entire book launch for me at the University of Pittsburgh to help me spread the mission of my book as widely as possible. Dr. Cohen not only provided me with the proper mentality to write a book about acceptance and equality, Dr. Cohen [also] emboldened me to take pride in my successes.”

On behalf of Mowery, Callen Adomitis, an economics major, wrote: “During my time as her advisee, I could not help but notice how much of an impact Babs has made in my academic career. Ever since I set foot on campus, Babs Mowery has been a name well known for her genuine commitment to her advisees. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to work closely with Babs and have developed a relationship with her. Not only has she assisted me with advising, but she has also helped me discover who I am, who I strive to be, and how to reach my goals at the University of Pittsburgh.”

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The University of Pittsburgh, as an educational institution and as an employer, values equality of opportunity, human dignity, and social justice, and promotes diversity. Accordingly, as fully explained in Policy 07-01-03, the University prohibits and will not engage in discrimination or harassment on the basis of new, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, genetic information, disability, or veteran status as a veteran. The University also prohibits and will not engage in retaliation against any person who makes a claim of discrimination or harassment or who provides information in such an investigation. Further, the University will continue to take affirmative steps to support and advance these values consistent with the University’s mission.

This policy applies to admissions, employment, and access to and treatment in University programs and activities. This is a commitment made by the University and is in accordance with federal, state, and/or local laws and regulations. For information contact: Office of Diversity and Inclusion; Katie Pope, Title IX Coordinator, and Cheryl Ruffin, 504 and ADA Coordinator; Second Floor, Webster Hall; 4415 Fifth Avenue; Pittsburgh, PA 15260; 412-624-7860.

For complete details on the University’s Nondiscrimination Policy, please refer to Policy 07-01-03. For information on how to file a complaint under this policy, please refer to Procedure 07-01-03.

“Except where exempt by federal or state laws.”

Calendar
March 8-15: Spring Recess
April 25: Spring term ends
April 26: Undergraduate Commencement Convocation

For a complete list of spring term dates, visit asundergrad.pitt.edu/academic-calendar

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