The Presidents’ College: 
A Brief Introduction and History

The Presidents’ College at the University of Hartford had its beginnings nearly thirty years ago, in the academic year 1989-1990, as part of the University’s outreach to the larger community (though the name came later). The Presidents’ College is a program of non-credit courses designed for adult learners, especially older adults, and taught primarily by university faculty members. These courses and related activities, of varying lengths and intensity, are available to all members of the public. Tuition is charged on a per-activity basis, but participants can also become Fellows of the President’s College and receive discounts on tuition and on other University services.

The director of the program from the beginning was Patricia Cremins, who served until 2006, working initially in the University’s continuing education division, then as part of the President’s Office, and finally as a member of the Development Department, reporting initially to the Vice-President for Institutional Advancement and, as of 2005, to the Director of Alumni Affairs.

In the early 1990s, when it was founded, the Presidents’ College was unusual: not too many institutions had outreach programs of this kind, directed at adult learners interested in maintaining and expanding their knowledge and forging links with a local college or university. Today numerous institutions have similar programs. In many instances they are products of a growing awareness of the importance of creating a friendly and supportive environment for higher education among all age groups. Institutions recognize that it makes sense to cultivate the friendship and goodwill of members of the larger community, and, increasingly, older people find that having such a connection with a higher education institution is beneficial to them and their quality of life. They often become faithful participants in the life of the university and donors to its programs.

The President’s College came about through a series of historical accidents, beginning in 1990 with Shakespeare lectures taught by then-president Humphrey Tonkin as a way of reaching out to the larger community. This series, given each spring, generated such interest that eventually it ran for four years and covered all of Shakespeare’s works.

In response to requests from those who attended the first round of Shakespeare lectures, Patricia Cremins was asked to establish and run a rather broader non-credit program for adult learners, in 1994 named the President’s College (with the apostrophe in front of the “s”). The new courses branched out into other areas of literature and music and into new formats – including opera trips to New York City and extended study tours to other locations in the United States and overseas.

A Fellows Program, whereby individuals could sign up as Fellows of the President’s College and enjoy discounts on PC courses, library borrowing privileges, parking privileges, access to the Sports Center, and various other advantages, was launched. Many of these Fellows already had connections with the University as attendees at special lectures or performing arts events. The PC cemented their links to the University, leading in due course also to contributions to the Annual Fund and to bequests. Connections with local retirement communities were forged. When important visitors came to campus – the actor Michael York, the director Jonathan Miller, the writer Frank McCourt, and others – the President’s College was included in the arrangements, and Fellows of the President’s College got to meet and listen to these well-known personalities.

When the President’s College was first established, it was ahead of its time. Quite early on, the pioneering effort gained national attention when it was honored by the University Continuing Education Association with its Philip E. Frandson Award for innovation in adult education, as a result of its long-running Shakespeare lecture series.
When Humphrey Tonkin left the presidency in 1998, the program continued, moving out of the President’s Office to the Development Office, largely for reasons of administrative convenience, but functioning very much as before. While the move made administrative sense, it separated the College from the academic side of the institution and subjected it to a different and sometimes problematic set of pressures. Yet the program continued to grow. Its total enrollment reached 1200 in the academic year 2003-2004.

However, the location of the program in Institutional Advancement began to take its toll. In the spring of 2005, the Director, Patricia Cremins, appointed a Planning Committee, chaired by Humphrey Tonkin and including Cheryl Altman, Nancy Brennan, Joan Dusard, Julius Elias, Eunice Groark, Nancy Mather, Richard Reynolds, Catherine Stevenson, David Tine, and Edward Wood, plus Patricia Cremins, ex officio. The purpose of the committee was to conduct a comprehensive review of the President’s College and make recommendations for its future. In the fall of 2005, the committee presented its report, in which it recommended giving the College a significant role in the University’s outreach and continuing education activities and in which it suggested that the program, with certain modifications, could become financially self-sufficient. The report proved extremely helpful internally, providing guidance to those involved in the PC in reshaping the program, but in 2006 the salaried position of Director of the President’s College was discontinued in a round of institutional cost-cutting.

At this point, Humphrey Tonkin, now a member of the faculty and teaching in the Theatre Division of the Hartt School, stepped in and assumed the responsibilities of Director on a part-time basis, with the assistance of a corps of volunteers, established in the fall of 2006 under the leadership of Nancy Mather. The fortunes of the College took a turn for the better. The new Director made use of his close connections with the faculty and administration, to negotiate a way of handling finances and to engage the best faculty members in the institution. Nancy Mather made use of her community contacts to build the volunteers. Soon it was agreed that the President’s College would be housed in the Mortensen Library, becoming in due course an outreach program of the Harrison Libraries. Director of Harrison Libraries Randi Ashton-Pritting provided leadership and support. It was agreed that any surpluses generated by the operations of the College would go to the Libraries to be used to boost the collection and increase its availability. This linkage has proved crucial to the success of the College and has contributed in no small way to the quality of the Harrison Libraries.

Since 2006 we have seen significant progress. The number of courses offered by the College has increased, as have the numbers of participants—to more than 1500.

The progress in recent years has been due in part to the increasing recognition by the administration of the role that the College plays in university outreach and in constituency-building. September 2008 saw the first President’s College Showcase, a full day of lectures and panel discussions which soon gained the support of the President’s Office and the active engagement of President Harrison. In 2011, the momentous decision was made to relocate the apostrophe in the President’s College and rename it the Presidents’ College, in the presence of former President Stephen Joel Trachtenberg and then-current President Walter Harrison – along with former president Humphrey Tonkin, who pointed out that if in everyday life we can get along without apostrophes, for the members of the Presidents’ College, imbued with the life of the mind, apostrophes matter…. Thus the program was brought under the auspices of all of the University of Hartford’s presidents, past and present.

There have been numerous other innovations – a formal agreement between Duncaster Retirement Community and the University, in which the Presidents’ College was designated as the main point of connection; outreach to a dozen or so community organizations through collaborative arrangements and joint programming; the creation of a system of Patrons of the Presidents’ College; increased cooperation with the University’s alumni; the establishment of three important lecture series open to the public; and a broadening of programming beyond
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literature and the arts to embrace the sciences, technology, health, and current affairs. As moral support by the senior administration has grown, so has the support of the deans and department chairs. Increasingly, the Presidents’ College is seen as an asset to the University, a place for interesting public programming, a device for building audiences for the performing and visual arts, a fundraising opportunity, and a means of faculty development. Above all, its success is built on the efforts of dozens, even hundreds, of individuals willing to pitch in and cooperate for the love of learning and belief in the life of the mind.

In the fall of 2014, Provost Sharon Vasquez announced that when Humphrey Tonkin retired from the University at the end of calendar year 2015, he would be succeeded as director of the Presidents’ College by former Dean of Arts and Sciences Joseph Voelker. While he was able to make further positive changes in programming, he retired from the University soon thereafter. The PC was fortunate to have as his successor Steve Metcalf, former music critic of the Hartford Courant and closely associated over many years with the Hartt School, most recently as director of the Garmany Chamber Music Series, under whose direction the program continues to flourish.

(compiled and edited with the assistance of Humphrey Tonkin)