

UMassAmherst

College of Humanities & Fine Arts



HFA Dean's Office Newsletter

February 2026

Dear HFA Community,

I am happy to welcome you back for the spring semester. I hope that you had a restful and restorative break. While fall brings a level of energy and excitement to campus, the spring semester is my favorite. By spring, things feel more settled and focused, the days are longer, and we can at some point look forward to warmer weather. Spring is also the time that we support our graduates as they move into another phase of their lives.

Yet, while I remain excited for this spring semester, I am also thinking about the turmoil, uncertainty, fear, and disruption currently happening in our country. Like many of you, I am deeply troubled by what is unfolding in places like Minnesota, but I have also been fortified by the people of Minnesota – united, brave, and resilient. Being proud and profoundly human means that I carry my hope (like spring) with the anxiety I truly feel about the state of things. I am trying my best to sit in this tension. It is not easy.

This semester, I invite you to continue to do excellent work but to also know about and when necessary, share resources available to all members of our community.

These resources include:

- [Center for Counseling and Psychological Health](#)
- [Federal Actions Webpage](#)
- [Office of Global Affairs](#)
- [Student Legal Services Office](#)
- [Basic Needs Initiative](#)
- [Resources for New Graduate Students](#)
- [Graduate Student Support](#)
- [Food Security](#)
- [Undergraduate Student Success Center](#)

This spring, let us move forward with hope, purpose, and solidarity.

Maria del Guadalupe (Lupe) Davidson
Dean, College of Humanities and Fine Arts

NEWS & UPDATES

COLLEGE INITIATIVES

HFA Board of Advocate's Humanities at Work Fellow 2026-28

This new fellowship recognizes and supports a faculty member who is passionate about and committed to preparing students in the College of Humanities and Fine Arts for careers upon graduation. The HFA Board of Advocate's Humanities at Work Fellow will act as a strategic partner to the Dean and the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education and Student Success to support student career development in HFA, create internship opportunities and pathways, and prepare HFA undergraduate students for employment.

[Learn More & Apply](#)

Academic Alerts

Starting in the spring 2026 semester, HFA is partnering with the Undergraduate Student Success Center, Academic Deans, and Advisors to take part in the University's Academic Alert Initiative. HFA instructors will be invited to provide students with early course progress feedback and resource connection to support course persistence and overall academic success. Alerts encourage students to talk to their faculty about how to do better in their course and meet with an HFA Advising Center team member to talk about campus supports and academic policy in relation to possible course withdrawal.

Questions can be directed to Assistant Dean for Advising & Student Success, [Kara Eich-Richardson](#).

AWARDS & GRANTS

Congratulations to our newest HFA award recipients! The 2025-2026 academic year marks the inaugural launch of three new funded faculty opportunities, introduced by Dean Davidson as strategic investments in the College of Humanities and Fine Arts. These awards are designed to nurture creative practice, support sustained scholarly work, and foster collaborative, interdisciplinary research that advances the college's academic and artistic mission. One of the awards, the Humanities Research and Creative Laboratories Grant for Humanistic AI, Data Sciences, and Emerging Technologies, is offered in partnership with the Manning College of Information and Computer Sciences, reflecting HFA's commitment to cross-college collaboration and innovation.

HFA Arts, Design, and Creative Productions Fund

Cobus du Toit, *South African Flute Festival*

Lindsay Pope, *Verdi's Requiem: UMass Choirs & Orchestra*

HFA Dean's Manuscript Development and Completion Fund

Yiyi Luo, *Beyond Nostalgia: The Polyvocal Literary Work of Yu Xin (513-581 CE)*

Amanda Seaman, *Women Writing Illness: Literature, Affliction, and Female Identity in Modern Japanese Literature*

Humanities Research and Creative Laboratories Grant

Katrin Erk and **Rajesh Bhatt**, *Analyzing Word Meanings with Large Language Models*

Malcolm Sen and **Marjorie Rubright**, *The Art(e)facts Project*

Barbara Zecchi and **David Bendiksen**, *Environmental Humanities Lab: Co-Criticism & Eco-Praxis*

Marjorie Rubright Named Next Renaissance Society of America Vice President

Marjorie Rubright has been appointed the next vice president of the Renaissance Society of America, effective July 1, 2026.

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Julia Jorati Wins Journal of the History of Philosophy 2025 Book Prize

Professor Jorati was awarded the prize for her book, *Slavery and Race: Philosophical Debates in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*.

[Read More](#)



MFA Alum Robert Casper Named President and Executive Director of the Academy of American Poets

Robert Casper MFA '04, has been appointed president and executive director of the Academy of American Poets, one of the nation's leading literary organizations.

[Read More](#)





College of Humanities & Fine Arts Annual Report

The 2024–25 HFA Annual Report is available online, with print copies now available in South College for those who prefer a hard copy.

[Read More](#)

Welcoming the Next Class of HFA Students

We're celebrating students newly accepted to HFA. In this short video, our alums share how their HFA experience helped shape their lives and careers.

[Watch Video](#)



IN MEMORIAM

Remembering Awotunde Judyie Ella Al-Bilali



Awotunde Judyie Ella Al-Bilali, 72, full professor of performance and theater for social change passed away on January 16, 2026. Iya, as she was known by her students, was the first Black woman to hold the title Full Professor in the

Department of Theater at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She had a long-spanning relationship with the university that included her time as an undergraduate student in the W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies and the Department of Theater in the 1970s. She returned to campus nearly two decades later to earn her MFA in directing in 2001. For her third act, she joined the UMASS faculty in 2013 with a joint appointment in Theater and the Commonwealth Honors College. At CHC, she served as the longstanding Honors Program Director for theater. She later joined the Department of Afro-American Studies as an affiliated faculty member.

[Read More about Awotunde Judyie Ella Al-Bilali](#)

EVENTS

For a full calendar of HFA Events, [visit our website](#).

