

# D.C. as Classroom

By Ellen N. Woods

Catholic University is redefining the conventional classroom by taking advantage of Washington, D.C.'s rich history and culture. For some students, class meets at the National Gallery of Art, the Library of Congress, or along historic District streets.

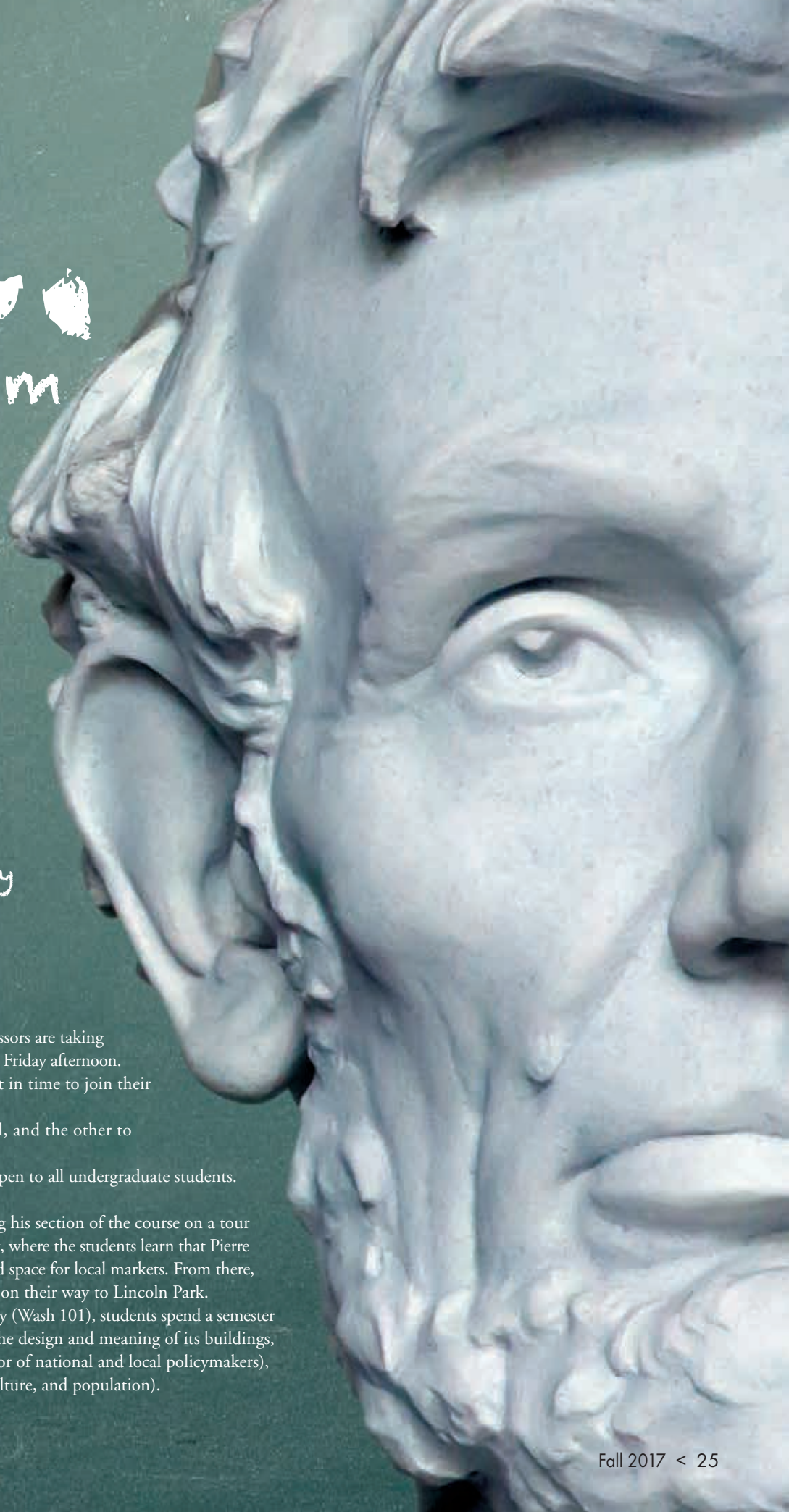
Outside the Brookland-CUA Metro Station, three professors are taking attendance as they stand amid about 60 students on a hot Friday afternoon. A few stragglers dart across John McCormack Road just in time to join their classmates as they head to the train platform.

One group is going to U Street, one to Capitol Hill, and the other to Penn Quarter.

This is Washington 101, an interdisciplinary course open to all undergraduate students. In this course, the city is a classroom.

Stephen West, associate professor of history, is leading his section of the course on a tour of Capitol Hill neighborhoods, starting at Eastern Market, where the students learn that Pierre L'Enfant's 1791 plans for the city of Washington included space for local markets. From there, they walk along streets lined with Victorian row houses on their way to Lincoln Park.

In Washington Past and Present: An Introductory Study (Wash 101), students spend a semester learning about their "college town" as a symbolic city (the design and meaning of its buildings, monuments, and museums), a political city (the behavior of national and local policymakers), and a living city (the city's economy, neighborhoods, culture, and population).







The unique course was designed by a group of professors from politics (Matthew Green), history and archives (Maria Mazzenga and Timothy Meagher), English (Taryn L. Okuma) and social work (Laura Daughtery) with the support of then dean of the School of Arts and Sciences L.R. Poos in fall 2010 as a way to help freshmen learn about and become comfortable in their new city. It was offered for the first time in spring 2011. The course became so popular it is now open to students in all classes. In 2013, a group of the original team of faculty members who introduced the course wrote their own course textbook, *Washington 101: An Introduction to the Nation's Capital* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Enrollment in Wash 101 is so large that three sections meet with an individual professor during the week. On Fridays, all three sections come together to hear lectures from Washington insiders, many of whom are alumni, in areas such as government, museums, architecture firms, and development agencies, or to explore the National Mall, the U.S. Capitol, neighborhoods, and embassies.

Field trips are not uncommon at the University. Many courses take advantage of the University's capital location to visit Congress, embassies, NASA, NIH, or museums. But some classes, such as Wash 101, are taking an innovative turn by making the city a regular meeting place for class.

## NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

"Extending our classrooms to the many museums and galleries in Washington, D.C., is a hallmark of Catholic University's Department of Art," says Nora Heimann, professor and chair of the department. The art department offers CUA @ NGA, a course that meets each week at the National Gallery of Art and is taught by one of the gallery's art historians. Last spring the course concentrated on Renaissance Masterworks.

During one of their 2 ½-hour Friday classes last spring, students gathered in a semicircle sitting on tiny folding stools around Matthias Grünewald's *The Small Crucifixion*. The painting by the 16th-century German Renaissance master is an eerie, haunting, and painfully honest depiction of Christ's death — and it is the only Grünewald in the United States.

The students are engaged in the process of "slow looking," a way of appreciating art that allows time for thoughtful analysis. They are getting good at this.

After a while Lorena Bradford, an instructor for the University's art department and the head of Accessible Programs at the National Gallery of Art, breaks the silence. "Tell me what you see." There is no shortage of responses.

"Christ's arms are abnormally long. It feels like they are stretched, tortured," observes one student.

"You really see the grim reality of death by crucifixion," adds another student.

"The painting is dark, yet there is some source of light and it's not clear where it's coming from."

"That's an excellent observation," says Bradford. "Many believe that light source is based on a solar eclipse that Grünewald likely witnessed in 1502."

Bradford and her students spend each class with just three or four pieces from the Gallery's extensive collection of Renaissance paintings and sculptures. The students are also given access to the print room.

"What a joy to share my love of this museum with students," says Bradford.

"They come here every week with a commitment to look at art in a new way, to slow down and think critically as they consider each work of art in the context of history, the artist's background, artistic techniques, and the nuances of each piece."

## LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Each week, students enrolled in the media studies course Researching Media History at the Library of Congress are treated to a historical treasure. One week it's the original hand-typed copyright copy of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. The next week it's the original drawing that Alexander Graham Bell made to visualize the telephone. Another class offers the opportunity to see the original Western Union telegram to Washington, D.C., declaring that Pearl Harbor had been bombed.

Assistant Professor Josh Shepperd, who is the 2017 Sound History Fellow and director of the Library of Congress's Radio Preservation Task Force, works with the Library of Congress to teach his students how to use primary source material in the study of media. Shepperd is a believer in experiential learning. "I want students to see and experience and appreciate the unique resources that D.C. has to offer," he says.

He arranged access for his students to utilize Library of Congress resources, such as the performing arts, manuscript, and moving image reading rooms. Once a week a reading room is open to students after hours.

Grace Woo, B.A. 2017, who took the course last year, chose American radio personality Mary Margaret McBride for her research paper. "I wanted to do research on a woman in the industry who had not had as much attention as other famous people in radio. ... [Access to the Library of Congress] allows me to do research that I wouldn't be able to do otherwise because

there aren't that many resources on Mary Margaret McBride. It's incredible to see and hold documents that she held in her hands and see letters in her handwriting that I knew she wrote," says Woo.

The Library of Congress also serves as the classroom for master's degree students in the Department of Library and Information Science course Special Collections.

## WASH 101

As Stephen West and his students enter Lincoln Park, they head to the "other" Lincoln memorial, a statue erected to honor the 16th president. That statue was dedicated in 1876, on the 11th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination and 46 years before the dedication of *the* Lincoln Memorial. The site of the park, says West, once served as a camp for federal troops during the Civil War.

West asks the students how they feel about this statue, known as the Emancipation Statue. Lincoln, holding the Emancipation Proclamation in his right hand, reaches down to a kneeling freedman with his left hand. Some students say the image of Lincoln standing over the former slave in a supreme way makes them uncomfortable. Frederick Douglass shared that feeling, says West. "But still he accepted the invitation to speak at the dedication. He was not going to pass on the opportunity to address a congregation of white dignitaries."

"I prefer the Lincoln Memorial on the Mall," says a student as others agree.

"They tell two different, but historically accurate, stories, don't they?" says West. "That's the thing about Washington, D.C., there's a story at every turn." **CU**

*Joseph D'Antonio, B.A. 2018, contributed to this story.*



## Raising Awareness on the National Mall

Caleigh Nerney, B.A. 2017, says the Washington, D.C., location is one of the main reasons she chose to attend Catholic University. On a Saturday in March, the studio art major capitalized on that location by turning the National Mall into a classroom. With clear views of the United States Capitol in one direction and the Washington Monument in the other, Nerney set up 91 empty chairs draped in differently colored T-shirts as she prepared to present her senior thesis — "91 of US" — to visitors from across the country and around the world.

Nerney worked on the project throughout her senior year, including fund-raising, creating the "91 of US" art elements and hashtag, working with the National Park Service and U.S. Park Police to secure permission for her exhibit, and engaging communities on social media.

"What do the different colors mean?" asked a gentleman from Texas who was visiting the nation's capital with his family on spring break.

Nerney explained that on average, 91 people a day are killed with guns in the United States. The 57 red shirts represent deaths by suicide with a firearm, the 32 blue shirts represent gun-related homicide, and the yellow shirts represent the two people who die per day from firearm accidents.

Drawn to her display set up along the Mall's pathway, many people stopped throughout the four-hour exhibit. They picked up postcards and looked at posters designed by Nerney, and they stopped to ask questions.

The interaction was just what Nerney was hoping for.

"I wanted people to see these 91 empty seats and consider the lives lost on a daily basis," she said. "Too often we think of this issue in terms of what side of the gun control debate we are on. But there is so much more we can do to save lives."