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Colbert Gift to U.Va. Helps Launch New College Arts Scholars Program

May 3, 2011 — Sixteen incoming first-year students will be the first beneficiaries of a new College Arts Scholars program in the University of Virginia's [College of Arts & Sciences](#), made possible in part by a gift from Evelyn McGee Colbert, a 1985 graduate of the College, and her husband, comedian Stephen T. Colbert.

[College Arts Scholars](#) will be given special access to the best arts resources at the University and funding for arts-intensive summer work.

"The program will give us the ability to recruit, retain and educate some of the most exceptional young artists and artist-scholars in the Commonwealth and the nation," said Bruce Holsinger, associate dean for the arts and humanities. "As Echols Scholars have for decades, Arts Scholars will occupy a prestigious and coveted position within the College."

Arts Scholars will interact closely with U.Va.'s most distinguished arts faculty and will gather regularly for exclusive Arts Scholars events and offerings, building a community of some of the most gifted artists on Grounds, explained the program's inaugural director, Michael Rasbury, an associate professor in sound design for theater. The program is dedicated to enhancing students' artistic growth at U.Va., Rasbury said. An annual event will showcase Arts Scholars achievements.

Each year 15 to 20 incoming Arts Scholars will be selected based on arts supplement packages submitted as part of the undergraduate admission process. Arts Scholars will have demonstrated talent in the disciplines of studio art, dance, drama or music.

College Arts Scholars who elect to major or minor in one of those disciplines will be eligible for an award worth up to \$3,000 to help fund an intensive art-related project in the summer between their third and fourth years of study.

Similar funding has already been awarded to a few students each summer since 2007, and those recipients were designated as Arts Scholars upon the award of the funds.

This spring marks the beginning of the Arts Scholars program as a comprehensive undergraduate program operating from student admission through graduation.

The Colberts' gift will support at least four summer awards per year over the next three years, a period in which they will be known as Colbert Arts Scholars Awards.

In past summers, students have used these grants to support intensive work in the arts in Charlottesville and at sites around the world – from Germany to Ghana.

Cornelia Granbery, an economics major and dance minor, spent last summer in residence with an internationally renowned dance company in New York City, studying both modern and ballet techniques. "This was one of the best experiences of my life so far," she said of her summer.

The College is seeking additional funding to sustain and expand the program. Further funding will provide summer grants to every Arts Scholar who majors or minors in one of the arts disciplines.

(Arts Scholars Awards are separate from the University Undergraduate Award for Arts Projects, which debuted last year, which also give students up to \$3,000 for art-related projects, for use in the summer or during the academic year. Modeled on the Harrison Undergraduate Research Awards to promote interdisciplinary art projects, they are open to all undergraduates, regardless of schools or majors.)

The well-established strength of U.Va.'s liberal arts offerings, plus rich arts resources, means that "at U.Va. you don't have to give up anything in order to also have a great arts experience," said Evelyn Colbert, who double-majored in drama and English and participated in several Heritage Repertory Theatre summer productions. In contrast to attending a highly focused conservatory or art school, "U.Va. is great for students who may not necessarily feel that the arts is all they want to study," she said.



Evelyn McGee Colbert, a 1985 graduate of the College, and her husband, comedian Stephen T. Colbert.



Arts Scholar Jacquie Walters starring in the U.Va. play "The Glass Menagerie"

(Photo: Courtesy of U.Va.'s Department of Drama)



Michael Rasbury (click for high-res version)

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Her husband added, "Evie and I are so happy that we can encourage students to make the arts a significant part of their curriculum, a tradition at U.Va. that we hope our gift will continue and strengthen."

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It's hard to make a career in the arts, and many artists end up teaching art in some capacity, Evelyn Colbert said. "You need a strong degree. You want to have strong liberal arts background."

The Arts Scholars program, she predicted, will help create a bonded group of artists who will jointly navigate the college experience and, facing so many time demands and activity options, will be there to remind each other, "Don't give up your passion."

Part of what makes the arts at U.Va. unique is their relation to the rest of the University, Holsinger said. "Unlike at many major universities, the arts have never been closed off from the rest of the College's curriculum, nor housed in separate schools for specialists. Rather, our arts programs thrive precisely because they are woven into the fabric of the University experience as a whole."

The program's launch is part of a transformative reshaping of the arts environment at U.Va., Holsinger said, that includes the 2008 completion of [Ruffin Hall](#), a new home for the studio art program; 2009 renovations to the Bayly Building, home of the University of Virginia Art Museum; restorations in 2006 to make Fayerweather Hall the home of the art history program; and construction currently emerging in the recently christened [Betsy and John Casteen Arts Grounds](#), including the [Hunter Smith Band Building](#) and a planned addition to the Drama Building that will include the 300-seat [Ruth Caplin Theatre](#).

The new Arts Scholars program, Holsinger said, "is part of our vision of the arts as an indispensable part of the student experience."

— By Brevy Cannon

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