

Connecting the **College** *to the* **World**

An interview with Rena Fraden, newly appointed dean of the faculty, vice president for academic affairs, and the G. Keith Funston Professor of English and American Studies

Dr. Rena Fraden, formerly associate dean of Pomona College in Claremont, California, and the Frank S. Jennings Professor of English, has been named as Trinity's dean of the faculty, vice president for academic affairs, and the G. Keith Funston Professor of English and American Studies. Fraden graduated summa cum laude from Yale University and also received her Ph.D. in English from Yale. She joined Pomona College as assistant professor of English in 1983. During her 23 years at Pomona, she served as the chair of the English department from 1999 to 2003 and was a member of numerous faculty and administrative committees, including curriculum, faculty personnel, diversity, and affirmative action committees.



In announcing the appointment, President James F. Jones, Jr., notes: "Trinity is fortunate to gain such an accomplished teacher and nationally renowned scholar as Rena Fraden. With her diverse inspirations and social perspectives, she will provide thoughtful initiative and strategic leadership, both in representing the faculty's professional interests and in furthering the College's distinctive academic program."

In addition to receiving a Fulbright Fellowship in India and being a fellow at the Center for the Humanities at Wesleyan University, Fraden has received several grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. As the author of *Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theater for Incarcerated Women* and *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theater*, as well as numerous papers and articles, Fraden focuses her scholarly interest at the intersection between art and social justice.

Fraden was interviewed by *Reporter* editor Drew Sanborn.

What is it about Trinity that made you decide to come here? The College's location surely does mark it as exceptional, and it is that location and how it has been articulated—into courses, the general education program, institutes, and ambitions—that drew me to this position. I am interested in this job because of the way Trinity has taken the idea of the liberal arts college and broken it out of its isolation, its sometimes insular ambitions. I believe that how we define, understand, and connect the urban, our locality, wherever we are, to the global will be the great intellectual and political task of the 21st century. Trinity's work in the city of Hartford and in cities around the world—our urban-global connection—puts the College at the forefront of the most intellectually exciting debates taking place here and abroad. Trinity's location and its commitment to locations—what they mean, how they connect, how they intersect with all that we know, culturally, economically, politically, scientifically—makes this place potentially a leader in the educational arena.

I also think that Trinity has begun to formulate what makes a 21st-century education in the liberal arts so very different from my own 20th-century one. Where theory once mattered so much, now it feels like we need to grasp practices, and different practices, here at home and around the world. The College's commitment to a curriculum that highlights analysis, the skill it takes to read closely, carefully, and to argue with passion and logic; experience, with our myriad opportunities to intern in Hartford and at Trinity's Global Learning Sites around the world; and original research is just the tripartite pedagogy that merges the best of theory and practice. Both theory and practice are critical and critical in relation to each other. We need to know not just another language—though we need to know at least that—but also different ways of speaking, knowing, doing. Being aware of, and nurturing, different kinds of knowledge and ways of learning is the mark of a progressive, vibrant, 21st-century college.

You mentioned Trinity's urban-global initiative. Please explain more about what that initiative is and why it is so important. Liberal arts colleges traditionally were built far away from cities. They were built away from city centers in order to provide a kind of space apart from modern life—19th-century or 20th-century life—to protect students from the pressures of vocations, to allow them space and time to think about ideas apart from the world. Trinity, however, ended up in a capital city, and we have the good fortune to be able to capitalize on that location.

All liberal arts colleges now, whether they are out in cornfields or are among the few of us who are in cities, are always thinking about what life will be like after college, about how education is going to prepare our graduates, about the value of their education as they become citizens and wage earners. We are concerned not simply in a narrow vocational sense, but in the larger sense of preparing them for a world that is marked

by rapid change and a high degree of global interconnectedness. So Trinity's location in Hartford is a great opportunity—Hartford becomes an extension of the education we provide. Hartford is just about as diverse as Los Angeles and New York. People come here from all over the world, which makes this city a wonderful test run for our students.

It's also clear that our students will probably travel in their lives, they will move from job to job, and they will find themselves working in cities around the world. Or if they are not living in some of those cities, many certainly will do business with people there, running exchanges with world capitals. Trinity has also been committed for decades to putting our students into various world cities to have the same kind of test-run experiences they have in Hartford. I am impressed by the way in which the College has privileged both academic urban experiences along with experiential ones—one can study the city of Hartford at Trinity and one can also work in the city of Hartford. The same is true of our global sites. When we send our students to Cape Town, for instance, they not only take courses, but they also do internships in the city, and that kind of experience as well as academic study—yoking the two together—is the future of education in the United States.

What do you see as the value of a liberal arts education in an environment where career choices and vocational directions seem so important? The whole idea of nailing down a career is just not what we can expect any longer—even lawyers and doctors find themselves having to retool halfway through a career, and if you don't go into one of those professions then the chances are even greater that you will almost certainly change what you do. And all of us are going to find ourselves having to deal with new kinds of technology every five years or even sooner!

To prepare for a vocation is almost a waste of time. Instead, it is critical to anticipate that everything around us will change quickly and that the best thing we can teach our students is how to be prepared for all kinds of changes. I always tell my student advisees that it doesn't really matter what their major is. Instead, what we need to teach people is how to think quickly about new subjects, how to do research, and how to find answers to questions. These are the ways in which all of us have to maneuver in jobs, and these are skills you will learn in virtually any major in a liberal arts college.

It's the ability to think nimbly and broadly and deeply, which students get from a liberal arts education, that is so much more useful and durable than simply training for a specific career. I think it is a mistake for people to think narrowly and vocationally. You will find your vocation, and your vocation will likely change, but the curiosity and passions that liberal studying inspires will, I trust, support a body and sustain the spirit through whatever changes we will confront in our lives.