

# M.A. in Liberal Studies *Newsletter*

SUNY Old Westbury, Fall 2025

## THE ART OF GRAPHIC DESIGN

Combining studio art and graphic design comes naturally to **Patricia Harris**, a professor in Old Westbury's *Visual Arts Department*. She sees herself as an artist/designer, and her creative projects inhabit both worlds. She designed her Spring 2026 course, *VA6310 Case Studies in Graphic Design*, with the interdisciplinary MALS students in mind (details below).

Harris has exhibited her work nationally and internationally. After completing her MFA at Queens College (CUNY), and a year at the School of Visual Arts, she worked as a designer in the publishing industry, for Scholastic, Columbia University Press, and the Book of the Month Club, winning numerous design awards.



VA Prof. Patricia Harris

She has also won competitive public art commissions, for an organization called *Art Attack International* ([artattackinternational.org](http://artattackinternational.org)), with projects in Europe and New York. She won competitive commissions for public art in the Rockaways ("Ride the Wave," 2013-2016), and Central Park ("Look Up," 2017). ([pattyharris.cargo.site](http://pattyharris.cargo.site))



MALS Alumni, Vincent Trionfo

### "Milkweed Phenology"

Recently, Harris installed a permanent public art installation, entitled "Milkweed Phenology," at Hawthorne Valley Farm, in Ghent, New York — a biodynamic working farm that also hosts a research center with active scientists, and a Waldorf school for experience-based learning. Her assignment was to install a work of public art along a valley connecting the farm to the research center. Walking the grounds with one of the center's scientists inspired Harris to focus on the milkweed, a plant that is vital to the ecosystem, and the sole food source of the monarch butterfly larvae.

"Milkweed Phenology" featured six panels, cut out of corten (weathered) steel, each showing a different stage of development of the milkweed plant, capturing the plant's dramatic changes from early spring to the end of its life cycle at the end of fall. The seeds then burst out of the shriveled pods and float over the landscape, spreading the plant's reach. "I wanted to design something that looked as though it belonged in that place," Harris explained, "so that if someone was taking a walk down this dirt road, they could discover these



Harris, "Milkweed Phenology," Ghent, NY (2025)

details bit by bit as they walked. That was really important to me — that it would be sensitive to the site."

### Design as Communication

Harris's interest in design grows out of her work as an artist, while her knowledge of design informs her public artwork in significant ways. "With art," Harris says, "you want there to be some mystery, but design really does make you focus on the best way to communicate ideas." To that end, she takes pains to connect her public

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## A Passion for Life-Long Learning

**Vincent Trionfo** found Old Westbury's MA in Liberal Studies (MALS) program attractive because he could choose his own course path. "I truly consider myself a life-long learner," he explains. "MALS just gave me the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone — I was able to get the master's I needed, but then also finally take courses

that were a little more interesting."

A teacher at George McVey Elementary School in East Meadow, Trionfo joined the MALS program with the entering cohort in Fall 2015. Because he came with initial certification (from his undergraduate education program), he was able to complete the

*"A Passion for Life-long Learning" continues on p. 2*

### *"A Passion for Life-Long Learning" (continued from p. 1)*

a master's degree with the content courses he needed. Later, Trionfo returned to Old Westbury for his Elementary education extension, and has taught the fourth grade ever since: "I absolutely love it," he says.

Trionfo fondly remembers MALS classes like *Intro to Interdisciplinary Study, Sports and History*, the *Sociology of Music and Listening*, and especially *U.S. Constitutional and Political History*, a class he is "always going to remember," he says. "Not only was the class great but Prof. Cocca was truly an amazing professor." He loved taking courses that "just really called to me." Social Studies was his area of focus, "but I was able to take six other classes that I just had a genuine interest in."

"I loved the flexibility" of the MALS program, Trionfo says, and also cites many lasting friendships. For teachers with certification, he says "I think it's a great way to take courses that actually align with things you're truly interested in learning, outside of classroom knowledge."

Apart from the course work, Trionfo also recalls his Capstone Internship with Long Island WINS, an organization devoted to communications and messaging about immigrant rights. He spent most of his placement in the LI-WINS office (then at Old Westbury), an experience he describes as "awesome, given how diverse Long Island is." Trionfo appreciated being able "see first hand immigrant experiences, learn about the Dreamers, really learn about the struggle of what many immigrants do face." As an elementary school teacher, he's had students confide in him about their situations, and he credits his internship as giving him insight into their lives. The experience "sticks with me every day," he says, "every day in the classroom, every time I have a student who may be going through that situation."

Trionfo recently completed an administration program at Stony Brook, and hopes one day to become a principal of an elementary school. But he continues to credit his MALS degree with inspiring him as a teacher on Long Island.

### *The Art of Graphic Design (continued from p. 1)*

art to a particular place. "I'm interested in going in somewhere and paying attention to what's happening right there and working on something that seems to fit for an experience of that place, and its context, and issues going on there – things that are relevant," she says. In this sense, graphic design tools give her an edge: "I think of them as design pieces, because they're simple and iconic, and they relate to larger systems."

Harris's "Milkweed Phenology" project left her with an ongoing fascination with the "migration patterns of the Monarch butterflies." Every year, she explains, "these creatures that are so incredibly fragile make this very long journey to Mexico," returning in spring to find the milkweed plants to feed their larvae. The science of keeping the ecosystem healthy, and addressing climate change, animates her work.

Similar concerns led to her participation last summer in the "Arctic Circle Residency," joining a small group that travelled from Svalbard, an island north of Norway, to the ice pack, to see the impact of climate change. "It was amazing," Harris says. "The boat was small, so we were able to get into a lot of the fjords, and even very close to the glaciers, and it was traumatic because the glaciers are collapsing in front of you. You hear a thundering in the background and then, twenty seconds later, a big piece comes off and falls into the water and creates a wave. Everything is in motion, everything is melting and moving." She plans to incorporate this experience into her next project.



*Harris on the ice pack near Svalbard*

### **Spring Course—Case Studies in Graphic Design**

Harris will teach **VA6310 Case Studies in Graphic Design**, for MALS students for the third time in Spring 2026. Students will learn about 20<sup>th</sup> century design movements, then apply their growing "visual vocabulary" to create their own posters, logos, and typography. The course develops basic skills with *InDesign*, *Illustrator* and *Photoshop*, in Adobe Creative Suite, along with digital fabrication tools.

Harris designed the course specifically with the interdisciplinary MALS student in mind: "I want to emphasize that you don't need prior experience in these programs to do well in this class." Through design, students can bring together concepts from other areas of study, and other courses, into new communications, to visually articulate ideas.



# Some of Our Spring 2026 MAT Content Courses (MALS Electives)

In **CERVANTES AND THE GOLDEN AGE (ML6530)**, says **Prof. Fernando Guerrero**, “we read the two parts of Don Quijote, the universal masterpiece written by Miguel de Cervantes at the end of the XVI century (volume I) and the beginning of the XVII century (volume II).” Students will read weekly, complete two exams, and write a research paper at the end of the semester.” The course is taught in Spanish.

**Guerrero** is the Chair of the *Modern Languages department*. His research focuses on Latin American and Spanish literature. Among other work, he published the book *Jose Lezama Lima: El maestro en broma* (2008). Currently, Guerrero is working on his first novel.



**POINTS OF CONTACT: US & LATIN AMERICA** “contrasts, through literary texts and essays, the historical perceptions of the United States and Latin America,” says **Prof. Ruben González**. While the course is taught in English, “written discussions and exams can be presented in Spanish if the student so desires.”

**González** is a Professor in the *Modern Languages department*. His most recent book, *La utopía puertorriqueña de Rodríguez Juliá* (2024), analyzes “the novels and chronicles of Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, considered as one of the most important Latin American writer. Some critics have called him the new García Márquez.” The book consists



of two parts, according to González: “a historical vision and a utopian vision of Puerto Rico, and how these, although antithetical, complement each other.” González has also published articles on literature and culture in México, Chile, Perú, the United States,

and Puerto Rico. He was awarded the Long Island Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Excellence in Education Award (2010), and the SUNY College at Old Westbury Alumni Association Excellence in Education Award (2008). He also served many years in Old Westbury’s administration, as Dean of Education, and Associate Provost. “Currently, I’m working on two projects,” González says: “Rodríguez Juliá’s detective novels and novels about academia in the United States.”

**TOPICS IN AFRICAN HISTORY (HI6550)**, will be taught through African films, alongside recent scholarship about selected movies or historical events, explains **Prof. Sylvie Kandé**. Students will engage in short class presentations, along with “a final paper that brings together some of the movies we watched around a specific theme, such as women in and at war, or colonization and its aftermath.”

**Kandé** is a critically acclaimed French-Senegalese poet and scholar, and professor in the *History & Philosophy department* at SUNY Old Westbury. She recently was a recipient of the *SUNY Chancellor’s Award for Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Activities*. Her three critically-acclaimed poetry collections include *Gestuaire* (2016),

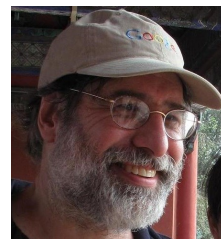
recipient of the 2017 *Prix Louise Labé* and soon to appear in Nancy Naomi Carlson’s translation as *Gestuary* (Seagull Books, 2026).

Recently, she returned from the *Semana Internacional de la Poesía* in the Dominican Republic, where she read some of her own poetry translated into Spanish for the occasion. In January, she will be the Parisian Théâtre du Cyprès’ guest of honor and head of jury for a performance and photography contest. She has recently completed a manuscript on an African woman prophet and rainmaker, and was invited to write a paper on her by the Institute of Research in History and Civilizations in Madagascar.



**TOPICS IN EUROPEAN HISTORY (HI6540)** “will introduce students to major historical controversies in European history,” **Prof. Ed Bever** explains: “from the ‘Black Athena’ debate about the role of Egyptian influences on Greece’s Golden Age, through various controversies about the Roman Empire, Feudalism, and other aspects of Europe in the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods, to the Russian Revolution and German complicity in the Holocaust.” Students will read articles and book chapters, each student leading the class discussion one week to set the context for the debate, and writing a final paper analyzing their week’s readings.

**Bever**, a professor in the *History & Philosophy department*, has published research on the history of witchcraft, notably *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe: Culture, Cognition, and Everyday Life* (2008). Bever has recently been invited to share his work at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California (2023); in a new article, “Magical Treasure Hunting in Early Modern Württemberg: Spirits, Neurocognition, and Sociocultural Change,” at a symposium for the Society for American Archaeology’s Annual Meeting (2024), and a paper, “Tuning and Fine-Tuning the Nervous System: Toward a Unified Theory of Shamanism and Magic,” for the American Anthropological Association (2024), to be expanded for the journal *Anthropology of Consciousness*.



**US POLITICAL & CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY (HI6520)** focuses on “400 years of primary documents,” says **Prof. Carolyn Cocca**, “from government figures, leaders of social and cultural movements, and regular folks that get at whether and how we have lived up to our founding ideals of liberty and equality and popular sovereignty.” Through document summaries, group discussion, and in-class analytical exams, students will explore “how we can make political and social change when we need to – to better ensure that we live up to those ideals.”

**Cocca** is a professor in the department of *Politics, Economics, and Law*. Her research focuses on the politics of representation, including her award winning book *Superwomen: Gender, Power, and Representation* (2016). Currently, she is researching expressions of foodways in comic books, with particular attention to “who has access to what food, who is expected to eat and enjoy what kinds of food, who cooks inside the home and who cooks outside of it – there are comics about all of these things, and they implicate not only gender, but also class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and migration.” As she explains, representation matters: “it both circulates and disrupts dominant cultural norms. ‘Talking about these portrayals is just another way of getting people to think about everyday manifestations of power and how they can be changed.’”





*MALS students Nathan Jainchill, Sarah Bakayoko, Jeanette Morales-Rodriguez, and Kristopher Andrie*

## Spring 2026 MALS Courses and Electives

EL6520.GR1 *Foundations of English Literature* (CRN 21371), Wednesdays, 4:30 – 7 pm REMOTE, Torrell

EL6540.GR1 *Topics in World Literature* (CRN 20933), Mondays, 4:30 – 7 pm, REMOTE, Jani

HI 6520.G01 *US Constitutional & Political History* (CRN 20934), Wednesdays, 4:30 – 7 pm, Cocca

HI 6540.G01 *Topics in European History* (CRN 20935), Mondays, 4:30 – 7 pm, Bever

HI 6550.G01 *Topics in African History* (CRN 21562), Tuesdays, 4:30 – 7 pm, Kandé

ML 6530.G01 *Cervantes and the Golden Age* (CRN 20930), Tuesdays, 4:30 – 7 pm, (taught in Spanish) Guerrero

ML 6540.GNE *Points of Contact: US & Latin America* (CRN 20931), ONLINE (taught in English, with optional Spanish), Gonzalez

**VA 6310.001 *Case Studies in Graphic Design* (CRN 21640), Wednesdays 6:15 – 8:45 pm, Harris**

**Note: COURSE(S) IN BOLD** were developed for students in the MALS program. The remaining courses are open to MALS students on a space-available basis. Some require pre-requisites and/or instructor permission.

*Have you completed — or are you now completing — 15 credits of your MALS degree? If so, it's time to start thinking about your Capstone experience, which is required for graduation. You'll choose from either an internship or thesis project (worth 3 or 6 credits, respectively) based on your own preferences, career needs, and interests. To discuss your options, and get answers to your questions, contact interim MALS Director, Professor Amanda Frisken, today for an appointment.*