



LeMay has longstanding experience employing creative writing in medical contexts. After earning her undergraduate degree in English from Barnard College and completing an MFA in Poetry Writing at the prestigious University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, LeMay was hired at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine to start a writing center within the medical school. She attributes her success in this position in large part to her liberal arts undergraduate degree. This background, she says, instilled curiosity in her and made her willing and able to seek out opportunities and conversations so that she could "understand how the things [she] did fit in a larger picture."

Through her work at Carver College of Medicine, LeMay says that she learned "how human health speaks to each person professionally and personally" and that health professions need people from all sectors; they're "not just clinical care." This program used "narrative care"—reflection as a care technique—for both patients and providers. As LeMay engaged in this writing center work, she also learned approaches for building community, engaging in conversations with

multiple stakeholders, and working in interdisciplinary ways. Additionally, she became a medical writing consultant and continues that work currently as an active consultant for an allergy and immunology journal. Gina Hausknecht, John William King Professor of English Literature and Creative Writing at Coe, notes LeMay's "long experience in working with doctors and medical students" which has added to her "expertise in medical humanities, a growth field in higher education."

Coe College's Center for Health and Society

Coe College is expanding its focus on pre-health paths, allied health, and the medical humanities with the recent establishment of the David and Janice McInally Center for Health and Society (CHS); LeMay is beginning her second year as one of the Faculty Co-Directors. According to Coe's website, the CHS "enables an intentional health focus across the liberal arts," "facilitates dialogue on the future of healthcare," and "offers opportunities and support for students of the liberal arts to integrate elements of health and care within their area of interest."

Collaborative Curiosity at Coe College

by Cynthia Mwenja, PhD

Margaret LeMay, Assistant Professor of English and Faculty Co-Director of the Center for Health and Society at Coe College (CHS), demonstrates through the many facets of her work the possibilities that lie at the intersections of writing and medicine, liberal arts and healthcare. She also embodies liberal arts values of collaboration and curiosity in her work on campus and in the community.

To ensure a holistic view of health care and to properly plan for how the system will evolve, Coe has established a CHS advisory board consisting of fourteen health officials and advocates from local hospitals and across the country. Board members provide input for the planning of the facility, programming, mentoring for future providers and technology to ensure those studying to join the industry are prepared. One of the key aspects of the CHS is inclusion of the latest technology including a digital anatomage table. Outside of the building, two Top 25 teaching hospitals and fifty-five square blocks of medical offices and clinics are within walking distance for internship experiences in the MedQuarter Regional Medical District.

LeMay says that her story is one way of understanding what the CHS can do, but the possibilities are endless. Through the CHS, she says, each person is welcomed to the conversation around healthcare and "encouraged to see themselves as an essential contributor to health and society," no matter their discipline. LeMay says that this framework will "help young people understand that meeting their life goals happens in a broader context and



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conversation” and may encourage them to see themselves in a healthcare profession even if they have decided not to become a doctor.

The new CHS building, opening this fall, will be named for recently-retired President Emeritus David McInally and his wife, Janice McInally. McInally was key in creating Coe’s current strategic plan, in which the CHS plays a significant part. McInally saw an opportunity to take further advantage of Coe’s location, which is within walking distance to the Cedar Rapids urban center and has two hospitals close by.

Fundraising for the CHS was successfully led by former vice president for advancement and current President David Hayes ’93. The 2021 Strategic Plan says that, through establishing the CHS, “Coe will become known as a premier destination for students interested in health care by offering experiential learning in partnership with nearby hospitals, and through our multidisciplinary approach to studying health and society, drawing on the full range of the liberal arts curriculum to examine historical, cultural, social, economic, spiritual, and ethical issues related to human health.”

Hayes is convinced the medical humanities approach will thrive within a liberal arts setting. He says the establishment of the CHS is proof liberal arts colleges can drive progressive ideas in health and health education. He added that he wants students to “apply their creative and problem solving skills when they think about the impact of health care in everyday life and imagine the possibilities.”

Hausknecht points out that LeMay is perfect for encouraging students to “think more capacious” in this regard because she “knows the power of words to examine these ideas.” Additionally, LeMay’s open, imaginative ability to “think past what is to what could be” really benefits the CHS.

Marty St. Clair, Ben Peterson Professor of Chemistry and Environmental and Faculty Co-Director, C3: Creativity, Careers, Community at Coe College—as well as head of the Coe Water Quality Lab—was previously LeMay’s faculty mentor. He now serves as a resource to support her work in the CHS while the other Co-Director, Scout Kelly, is on leave. St. Clair says that LeMay is “a delightful

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person to work with" and—as a creative person—is "ideal to look at the center in a liberal arts way." Further, he notes that Coe has done traditional liberal arts things, such as offering pre-med courses—but students often recognize that being a physician is "not the direction they want to go." Through the Center's work, students find that "they can still participate in healthcare in a meaningful way," St. Clair says.

Some upcoming CHS events offer insights into the depth and breadth of its mandate. One event will focus on medical Spanish and translation, bringing together a medical Spanish class and local community members. Another event will offer a conversation about public health with a former attorney for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A third event will be a poetry reading with an award-winning poet and Coe alumna, focused on the topics of motherhood and health. LeMay says that having a physical locus in the center of the campus will contribute to the success of the CHS, but the true success of the building will be shown when "every student feels welcome and sees the CHS as a place they belong."

In conjunction with the creation of the CHS, Coe has also established a minor in Health and Society, consisting of six classes across the college, including philosophy, sociology, and other humanities. As they promote the new minor, LeMay hopes to attract not only students who are interested in clinical careers, but also those who may not have previously seen how they could pursue their interests within a healthcare setting. In building the minor, she continues to speak with students and colleagues across campus to help everyone see the potential within the CHS.

Poet and Writer

In her own work, LeMay—an accomplished poet and writer—explores ideas of home, safety, and identity, she says. She is also currently working on a project with Kathy Good, director of the Chris and Suzy DeWolf Family Innovation Center for Aging and Dementia at Mercy Medical Center Cedar Rapids. Good and LeMay were introduced to one another by Tim Charles, President of Mercy Medical Center, who met LeMay at

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a golfing event for Coe. Charles knew that Good had been working on a book about her experiences caring for her husband, Dave, who lived with dementia for twelve years; Charles thought LeMay might have a role in helping Good with the book. When the two met, Good immediately admired the way that LeMay was “able to listen and then put elements together—to reflect back with improvements.” They have worked on the manuscript together for about a year and hope to wrap up soon. Good appreciates the “great working relationship” that she and LeMay share, and she is looking forward to the possibility of giving a presentation at the CHS when their project is complete.

Professor

LeMay’s students appreciate her ability to connect with everyone enrolled in her classes. Maiya Varner, who took Introduction to Creative Writing and two poetry classes with LeMay—and who also served as

LeMay’s work study assistant—says that LeMay is not only “personable” but also a “great professor who knows a lot about her craft.” Varner is a Creative Writing Major who graduated in May; she is now Assistant to Human Resources in a St. Louis school district. LeMay also embraces her students as whole human beings; according to Varner, she’s always up for a conversation outside of class, and she’s just as happy to hear about her students’ pets as she is to hear about their newly-written poems. Reagan Boyken—an English major with minors in Secondary Education and Creative Writing entering her junior year at Coe—appreciates how LeMay has listened to both her “rants about little problems” and also about her bigger fears in taking on a Creative Writing minor. Boyken says that LeMay “never stopped encouraging her.”

Varner commends LeMay for her inclusivity—“making sure everyone has a seat and feels comfortable.” Boyken echoes this

point about LeMay, saying that “She has a way of making people feel comfortable, and she genuinely cares.” Boyken, who entered college in Fall 2020, says that “It’s incredible how [LeMay] creates a close-knit community, even online.” Boyken says that she is still close with some of the students from that first class she took, and some have become her mentors.

In class, LeMay poses questions for students to apply to their readings and to their own work. A common opener is “What did you think?” Students are “allowed to express both negative and positive” reactions, Varner says, and if the answers are vague, LeMay “would dig deeper to open the discussion up.” In the class discussions, there are no right or wrong answers; this openness “allowed everyone to pitch in because all answers were valid,” Varner says. “If it reminded you of a song or a poem—or if it inspired you to write a poem—she wanted to know.” Not only is she approachable and a good listener, Varner

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says, but she also helps students learn how to listen to one another and think about how to respond.

Hausknecht says that LeMay's students "love her because she really helps them learn and grow as writers. She is also a warm, nurturing, curious person—students respond to that." Hausknecht credits LeMay with "transforming" the poetry track of the creative writing program. In one example of the depth of the feelings that LeMay's students have, Boyken states: "I love Margaret LeMay with my whole heart." Boyken—who had dreamed of being a writer when she was young but put those dreams aside when she couldn't see how they might lead to a "real job"—says that she took Writing Health with LeMay as a first-year student; this class led to Boyken adding the Creative Writing minor. In another example of the aspects of LeMay's teaching that students value, Varner—who calls herself a "big nerd when it comes to writing"—says that, through LeMay, she has become much more aware of how sound is

working in her writing. She says that poetry "comes to life when it's read out loud," and she loves to hear it.

Potential for Other Schools

LeMay encourages administrators who may want to consider pursuing projects similar to the CHS to really consider their specific locations and "build connections that are beneficial to the college and the students," thereby "integrating the institution in the environment." She points out that interdisciplinarity and multi-disciplinarity can bolster these connections. Particularly within the liberal arts context, she notes, professors are not just teaching outcomes; they are helping students to "see beyond data points to see the world."

When considering the collaborative nature of everyone associated with the development of the CHS, Hayes asserts that thinking beyond the traditional health fields and into new allied health fields such as the medical humanities will continue to be of

importance for society. He says that the "combined viewpoints and thought processes will create a more empathetic and communicative atmosphere throughout health care."

In all of her work, LeMay draws on her nature of collaborative curiosity, Hausknecht says, benefitting everyone—students, colleagues, the CHS, and the larger community. LeMay consistently encourages those around her to ask, "What are our goals?" and "How can we reach them?" LeMay—in a marvelous reflection of the qualities that others see in her—says that at their best, interdisciplinary liberal arts programs such as the CHS can guide students in learning to "listen, be curious, and have confidence in not just knowing how to get from A to B but why"—and why doing so is important.



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