

# The Albion Pleiad

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## Black Professors on Resilience, Representation and Sharing Cultural Perspectives



Visiting assistant professor of political science Milkessa Gemechu sits in the Pleiad Office on the fourth floor of the Kellogg Center. Gemechu has worked at Albion College for five years since moving from Ethiopia with his family (Photo by Domis Gibson).

Sophia Valchine  
Multimedia Journalist

For associate professor of education and department co-chair Betty Okwako-Riekkola, it was a desire to “make a difference in somebody’s life” that led her to teach at Albion, where she said she works to connect with students and help them by drawing on her own life experiences.

Okwako-Riekkola is one of several Black professors at Albion who teach in departments ranging from communications to political science and are dedicated to teaching students and building community with them to show them they belong.

### Where Did They Get Their Start?

Visiting assistant professor of political science Milkessa Gemechu was born in Ethiopia, where he was the first in his family to attend high school and earned a doctorate in federalism studies. His early teaching career was marked with political unrest, which he said would go on to impact his teaching style.

“I grew up protesting an oppressive system, an oppressive government in Ethiopia,” Gemechu said. “I participated in social movements in a very significant way.”

As a result of these protests, the movement Gemechu was a part of succeeded in getting the “authoritarian” prime minister to resign in 2018, he said.

Gemechu added that he went on to hold a position in the Ethiopian government as a cabinet member for the state of Oromia, during which he “pushed for reform” and “democratic election.”

Since arriving at Albion, Gemechu said his experiences growing up in a different religious, social and linguistic setting influence how he teaches in the classroom.

According to Gemechu, his upbringing gave him an understanding of how people deal with struggles.

“I’ve gone through ups and downs, challenges; I would say they made me resilient,” Gemechu said. “Whenever you face challenge, take it as an opportunity. It is for good, and it makes you strong.”

Okwako-Riekkola said she got her start teaching in Kenya, adding that her motivation was to elevate herself academically to “make a difference.”

During her doctoral program in the United States, Okwako-Riekkola said she had a group of professors look out for her and support her through the work, describing them as “guardian angels.”

Having that kind of support motivated Okwako-Riekkola to become someone like the professors who helped her and to make a difference in the lives of her students, she said.

“I want to be able to connect with students, but particularly the students who feel like they have no voice,” Okwako-Riekkola said.

Okwako-Riekkola also said she enjoys helping international students with any questions they might have about American culture and giving them reassurance. She added that she’s “fortunate” these students feel like they are able to come to her with their questions so she can help them navigate their situations.

“There’s so many things that I have been through that can be relatable, and I can share my life experiences,” Okwako-Riekkola said.

Visiting assistant professor Gilbert Kipkoetch was born and raised in Kenya before moving to the United States to earn his doctorate in communication and media studies and eventually becoming a professor at Albion, he said.

**‘Whenever you face a challenge, take it as an opportunity. It is good for you, and it makes you strong.’**

Kipkoetch said his personal life brings a new point of view that students from the Midwest haven’t been exposed to yet, adding that he has noticed a curiosity to understand more about different perspectives.

“They get to experience the world they haven’t been to yet, which kind of becomes a window of opportunity for them to experience something new,” Kipkoetch said.

Having these different ways of thinking allows students to have a global view of the world, Kipkoetch said, and gives historically



Co-chair and associate professor of education Betty Okwako-Riekkola sits in her office on the second floor of Olin Hall (Photo by Domis Gibson).

underrepresented groups a sense of “efficacy and confidence” through learning about people who come from the same background.

“There’s also some sense of community that we are building together in those classrooms, which I think is a good thing,” Kipkoetch said.

### The Impact of Faculty Diversity on Students

Detroit senior Bria Jackson said there can be “uncomfortability” when Black students like herself have majority white professors, adding that it’s harder to relate to course material when she can’t relate to the professor.

“When you don’t connect to your professors or don’t find a way to connect to them outside of academics, it makes it harder for you to actually grasp the things that you talk about in class or have some type of cultural connection to bring it back to,” Jackson said.

With Executive Director of Special Programs Ari McCaskill, Jackson’s “Intro to Black Studies” instructor, Jackson said that since the beginning of this semester, she has been more “engaged” with the material and “included” in the environment of the classroom.

“I feel like we’ve been unpacking a lot of things that are just not on the surface, but the reasonings, why those things happened and how it affected other things that aren’t really talked about in high school or middle school,” Jackson said.

Chicago junior Sarynete Holmes said Gemechu’s understanding of her writing made her feel a greater sense of belonging in his classroom.

Being questioned for having a different writing style from her peers, Holmes said, was something she has experienced with white professors, but not with Gemechu.



Visiting assistant instructor of communications Gilbert Kipkoetch speaks about his experience at Albion College (Photo by Domis Gibson).

“I have never had to explain myself to him,” Holmes said.

Jackson also said she had a connection with Okwako-Riekkola, her education professor, who taught her to “connect her cultural background to the classroom.”

“Having that in college was a reminder that I need to take into consideration that everybody’s from different places of the world, including myself,” Jackson said.

### ‘Change Starts With Us’

When Black students don’t have Black professors, Holmes said, it feels like “we don’t matter.” Holmes said she sees a lack of diversity in the classroom, which doesn’t create a sense of belonging for her.

“Because we don’t have that representation, we can’t have a voice,” Holmes said.

Jackson said she wants to see more professors of “African descent in general”; along with this, she would like to see courses that center around Black history and culture.

“I think that would be an eye-opener for a lot of people, and that would probably draw more people to take those courses,” Jackson said.

In terms of diversity, Gemechu said he sees commitment from leadership at the college, and there is always room for discussion.

“We have to move with the societal demands. We have to see our student population; based on that, we keep changing,” Gemechu said.

Representation is a “challenging issue,” Okwako-Riekkola said, but she knows that Albion is doing their best to make those milestones in diversity to foster inclusion among Black students.

“I feel like that reassurance and that level of comfortability and belonging would really be heightened and elevated if they can relate with professors who look like them,” Okwako-Riekkola said.

Having a diverse faculty helps underrepresented students see themselves in professors and have confidence that someday they can also hold a position of authority, Kipkoetch said. Albion College values diversity, he added, and he counts himself lucky to be able to work with “supportive” colleagues.

“Like in any other organization out there, there’s always lessons to learn, things to always improve on,” Kipkoetch said.

Holmes said she would like to see more Black professors on campus, even if it doesn’t happen until after she graduates. As it stands, she said, the message she is getting from the college is that Black students are here, but they “don’t necessarily belong here.”

With professors backing up Black students, Holmes said she believes the school will take their requests for a more diverse faculty more seriously.

“Change starts with us,” Holmes said.



# Albion College's Curtis Institute: The Impact of Humanities in Social Change



Executive Director of Special Programs Ari McCaskill strikes a pose of his fraternity, Omega Psi Phi, in his office on the third floor of the Kellogg Center. “The Curtis Institute is deeply involved in cultivating talent,” McCaskill said (Photo by Domis Gibson).

Kyla Lawrence  
Assistant News Editor

82 years after he became Albion College's second Black graduate, Dr. James L. Curtis's name now anchors one of the college's most visible commitments to equity and justice.

According to Albion College's website, Curtis earned a degree in biology from Albion in 1944 – 40 years after James A. Welton, alumnus 1904, Albion's first Black graduate, earned his degree. Curtis went on to receive his master's degree from the University of Michigan in 1946.

In 2021, Albion College's James L. Curtis Institute for Social Change (Curtis Institute) was established by Executive Director of Special Programs Ari McCaskill with what he said was a “generous” gift from Curtis himself.

“He provided resources to establish an institute in order to inform society of social issues,” McCaskill said. “The Curtis Institute is one of our marquee institutes on campus that focuses on arts and humanities as vehicles for social change.”

## 'Cultivation of the Imagination' in Social Justice

According to Chicago junior Sarynete Holmes, the Curtis Institute's mission has worked to help students “see things from a different view.”

“It's definitely opened my eyes academically and also opened my eyes to where I can travel and see things, understand things from different people's point of view,” Holmes said.

The Curtis Institute works in two parts: the co-curricular, which Interim Faculty Director of the Curtis Institute and professor of religious studies Peter Valdina

said is “mostly” run by McCaskill, and the curriculum.

Valdina added that contributing to social change on campus at the Curtis Institute involves students' “own kind of experiences” and “how they're thinking about it.”

“It's using cultivation of the imagination as a way of including different voices and finding a way to collaborate on what we want the culture of Albion to look like,” Valdina said.

According to Chicago junior Tatiyana Oliver, social change is “not just about race.”

“It's about how you honestly want to change things within the world,” Oliver said. “How can you benefit from making a difference?”

Some co-curricular activities include various forms of travel, ranging from “day-to-day” trips to the Detroit Opera House or going to see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Holmes said.

In January, the Curtis Institute sponsored a trip for “about a dozen students” to visit New Orleans for a “cultural tour,” according to the institute's website.

“(The Curtis Institute) has given me the opportunity to travel and see places I've never been before,” Holmes said. “It's become one of those staple institutes for me that's actually helping me to do things. It's helped push me in the right direction of what I want to do.”

## The Value of the Arts, Humanities

The Curtis Institute aims to “equip and empower its members to recognize and affirm the rich, unexpected resources available both inside and outside themselves to effect equitable social change,” according to their mission statement.

Previously, the Curtis Institute was called “The Curtis Institute for Race and Belonging.” However, McCaskill said the “issue” was that “race and belonging” was “loosely tied to social justice and STEM.”

“The problem was that race and belonging didn't have tangible academic delivery,” McCaskill said. “So with resource issues and lack of structural issues, it was restructured to focus on arts and humanities.”

Valdina said the Curtis Institute is currently in the process of developing a concentration.

“When you look at how the institutes are structured, there isn't really an institute that serves the arts and humanities as the focus of it,” Valdina said.

The college's other five institutes focus on the environment, teacher development, leadership and public policy, business and management and medicine.

“For prospective students, it will be a home for people who are interested in issues of social change,” Valdina said. “But the focus that we're proposing for the concentration is really around the imagination.”

At the end of a student's four-year term, McCaskill said the goal is for them to be able to “create something” of their own medium.

“Protest art is born out of the idea that literature, sculpture, paintings, etc. can be strong ways to communicate social justice or injustices, illustrating that these things are impacting people,” McCaskill said.

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# Timeline: Albion's 'Self-Determined' Black Community

1918

According to Albion historian Bob Wall, Albion's then recently established Black community began holding large celebrations of Emancipation Day in 1918, having “enormous” annual parades for many years.



A panoramic of a photo of Albion's 1927 Emancipation Day celebration. The physical photo is more than three feet wide (Photo courtesy of the Albion District Library Archives).

1937

While auto workers were striking in Flint in 1937, Wall said unions were also striking in Albion at the Malleable Iron Company. According to Wall, when “the union and management reached a stalemate,” a malleable employee named Zeb Pierce “single-handedly” broke the stalemate and brought consensus, founding the “Molder's Union.”



A photo of class at West Ward School, taken in “the late 1930s.” For Wall, West Ward's history as a school for Albion's children of color is one of “self determination” by Albion's Black community, both in its establishment and closing (Photo courtesy of the Albion District Library Archives).

1951

In her thesis special collection, “The Beginning of Belonging: Exploring the Black history of Albion College,” Akaiia Ridley, alumna '22, makes note of Albion College's first Black student, Isaiah Washington in 1890, and its first Black Graduate, James A. Welton in 1904. According to history professor emeritus Wesley Dick, the first Black woman to graduate from Albion College was Willa Mae Ewing in 1942, who went on to teach briefly at West Ward school.



A cutout photo of Zeb Pierce published with his obituary in the March 1953 edition of the Malleable Iron Company's publication: The Circulator (Photo courtesy of the Albion District Library Archives).

1963

According to Wall, Albion College has, in the past, frequently invited famous Black artists and leaders to speak at the college, and neglected to inform or invite Albion's Black community.



A photo of Martin Luther King Jr. speaking to an attendee of his talk in Goodrich Chapel on March 13, 1963 (Photo courtesy of the Albion College Archives).

1967

For Wall, the greatest damage to Albion's Black community occurred through the 1960s and '70s: Urban Renewal.



A photo of demolition being conducted as a part of Albion's Urban Renewal initiative (Photo courtesy of the Albion District Library Archives).

2010s

At the same time, Ridley said, the aftermath of Albion's industries closing made “bridging the gap between the community and the campus important during that time.”



A photo of a man pouring liquid metal into a mold on the floor of the Albion Malleable Iron Company, taken in the 1950s (Photo courtesy of the Albion District Library Archives).

2014

According to coverage by the Pleiad, The Big Read, a program founded and directed by professor of English Jess Roberts, began in 2014.



A photo published by the Pleiad on Sept. 30, 2019, shows students of the Albion community and college posing in front of Holland Park to kick off the Big Read parade (Photo by Gabrielle Henriksen).

2025

Ridley added that as the campus evolves, she hopes the college will “keep community and culture at the at the heart of it.”



Published by the Pleiad on Feb. 26, 2025, history professor emeritus Wesley Dick poses for a picture with his friends, Darrell Williams, alumnus '77, and Yolanda Williams at the first annual James A. Welton Gala (Photo illustration by Finley Brady).

Bonnie Lord, Editor-in-Chief

A timeline showing what Albion historians and residents Bob Wall and Akaiia Ridley, alumna '22, said are some of the most important moments in Albion's Black history. “Black history is American history, the same way that immigrant history is American history,” Ridley said. “There is not one person in history that did it all by themselves” (Illustration by Bonnie Lord).



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