Introducing AUP’s 13th President, Sonya Stephens

Following a rigorous international search to find the 13th President of The American University of Paris, Professor Sonya Stephens has been selected to take on the role as of September 1, 2022. Professor Stephens is an exceptional academic leader and an internationally recognized scholar of 19th-century French literature. She has long devoted herself to advancing liberal arts education and is a highly skilled academic, fundraiser, administrator and community builder in the context of higher education.

“I am deeply honored by this opportunity to serve as the next president of The American University of Paris, and I could not be more pleased, nor more excited, to be joining this vibrant global community,” said Professor Stephens. “I look forward to our work together and, building upon the exceptional legacy of Celeste Schenck, to furthering AUP’s critically important mission.”

For the last five years, Stephens has held the presidency of Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, from 2016 as acting President and from 2018 on a permanent basis. Her presidential tenure coincided with the successful implementation of an ambitious strategic plan, during which she focused on securing the college’s long-term financial stability, eliminating a structural deficit, and on the stewardship of the endowment, which has grown by 60% during her tenure. As acting President, she also successfully oversaw a campus-wide self-study as part of the college’s reaccreditation process and the construction of a $50 million community center.

Her other presidential achievements include strengthening the college’s reputation, which led to the college rising 11 points in the USNWR ranking during her tenure. She was also committed to issues of diversity, equity and inclusion, initiating the annual BOOM! (Building on Our Momentum) conference and hiring the college’s first Vice President for Equity and Inclusion and Chief Diversity Officer. For the benefit of the College’s community for generations to come, she also steered a commitment to reaching carbon neutrality by 2037, Mount Holyoke’s bicentennial.

Clear, Consistent Devotion to Service and Scholarship

Stephens joined Mount Holyoke in 2013, when she was appointed as Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty following a national search led by an all-faculty committee. In this role, she worked closely with offices and departments across the college as well as with partner institutions in the Five College Consortium to enhance the college’s reputation and increase support for faculty research and curricular innovation.

As Chief Academic Officer, she was responsible for faculty research and curricular support, faculty governance, academic budgeting and infrastructure. She oversaw an operating budget of $52 million and worked closely with offices and departments across the college, also collaborating with the Five College Consortium on shared initiatives, departments, programs and faculty hiring.

As dean of faculty, Stephens was instrumental in the creation of academic programs such as the Data Science Initiative, a concentration in data science in the college’s Nexus program, and a Women in Data Science partnership. She promoted entrepreneurship opportunities on campus and prioritized environmental commitments. She also developed a program in support of emeriti faculty and their continued scholarly engagement with the college and promoted an integrated curriculum-to-career initiative alongside a re-envisioned Career Development Center.
A Lifelong Francophile with a Passion for the Liberal Arts

Professor Stephens is a fluent French speaker and has traveled extensively in France. An expert in 19th-century French literature and its relation to visual culture, she is the author of *Baudelaire’s Prose Poems: The Practice and Politics of Irony* and has also edited several books, including *A History of Women’s Writing in France* and *Translation and the Arts in Modern France*. She holds a doctorate in French from the University of Cambridge and a master’s degree in French studies from the Université de Montréal, where she was a Commonwealth Scholar. She earned her bachelor’s degree in modern and medieval languages from the University of Cambridge.

Her previous roles highlight her deep commitment to furthering liberal arts education. Before joining Mount Holyoke, Stephens served as chair of the Department of French and Italian and Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education at Indiana University Bloomington. There, she led the campus-wide development and implementation of new general education requirements, the establishment of an integrated Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, and was responsible for assessment and reaccreditation efforts. She began her career as a faculty member at Royal Holloway, University of London, where she chaired the Department of French and led the creation of the School of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures, also serving for eight years as the faculty-in-residence director of a team responsible for the academic and personal welfare of 850 undergraduates.

“The impact of a liberal arts education is uniquely powerful and generative, especially one so intentionally and explicitly international in its context, focus and perspectives, and so contemporary in its expression,” said Professor Stephens. “So much of what AUP represents calls to my own intellectual, professional and personal commitments, and it is an extraordinary privilege to be appointed to lead the University in this moment in its history, and in these times. I extend my heartfelt thanks to AUP’s Board of Trustees for the confidence they have placed in me.”