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'I'M LIVING WHAT I'M LEARNING'

SENIOR CREDITS AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES MINOR WITH HELPING HIM FIND HIS PASSION.

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | February 29, 2024

Above: Director of African-American Studies Dr. Pat Hopkins

Read time: about 3 min

When Matthew Johnson was a freshman, he knew he wanted to major in English.

What he didn't know then, but he is sure of now, is that he wants to be a professor of African-American Literature. In large part, that is because of the base of knowledge he has drawn from one of his minors: [African-American Studies](#).

Johnson, '24, is majoring in [English](#) and [History](#), and minoring not only in African-American Studies, but also in [Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies](#).

Combined, all of his studies have allowed him to build a solid educational foundation he believes will support him in his journey to obtain a doctorate in African-American literature. Johnson credits his minor in African-American Studies with changing his worldview and perception of himself and his purpose. It has added depth and understanding to his life that did not possess four years ago, he said.

"It was not just important, but essential," Johnson said. "It was important for me to be able to connect with and understand my own blackness. It was essential in helping me be able to better conceptualize and figure out race dynamics. It helped me to understand myself as a Black man, and also to understand the world itself.

"It was a step toward racial reclamation for me," he said. "It helped me to better understand my position in the world."

During his time at CNU, Johnson has taken a wide array of courses offered under the minor, all of which have been life-changing for him.

"The minor shaped the course of my academic career," he said.

Dr. Pat Hopkins, Director of the African-American Studies program, came to Christopher Newport in 2006 from University of Pennsylvania.

"Diversity and understanding diversity is important," Hopkins said. "It's important for me to grow the minor. I've been nurturing it because I think it's very important. We are nurturing and teaching the next generation. We need to prepare our students and develop them to the best of our abilities."

African-American Studies is the systematic study of cultural, legal, psychological, economic and social conditions of African-Americans past, present and future. Students, according to the program's description, "will acquire a basic knowledge of the African-American experience by understanding the racial system of the United States was never simply Black or white."

Hopkins said the minor can fortify any student's college path, and in doing so, will impart perspective and knowledge that will help them successfully navigate the workforce and the world.

"This isn't a minor just for Black people, but for Americans," she said. "The swiss cheese holes in our foundation are filled with the minor. It's important to know the whole story. This will make you stronger, no matter where you go from here. It will give you a stronger foundation. Let's make our foundation solid."

Courses in the minor focus on a wide variety of subjects, ranging from slavery to civil rights to African art to the Roaring Twenties to constitutional law. The topics vary widely in an effort to provide a breadth of knowledge in many different areas. Hopkins teaches several classes, including one on author Toni Morrison's works.

"We want students to connect that African-American history is everywhere," she said. "We want our students to be well rounded. We want them to use this minor to change the world."

Students who want to be successful in the work world, she said, must be able to embrace diversity and different cultures they will encounter. "Diversity is the key word," Hopkins said. "If you don't look like me, how diverse are you? How comfortable are you in a diverse situation? You have to be willing to learn about someone outside of your comfort zone, who may not look like you. The minor gives you the skills of being able to critically think and apply what you have learned to new settings."

For Johnson, the minor has done just that, establishing in him the confidence to move forward and the focus to embrace the subject he has grown to adore at CNU: Black literature.

"It has given him the confidence to step into his identity," Hopkins said.

Johnson said he leaves CNU a completely different person than when he came, with a mindset and knowledge base that has been positively impacted by his education. A huge part of that, he said, can be attributed to what he has learned in the field of African-American Studies. He decided to take on the minor after studying author James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son" during an English class early on in his college career.

"It was genuinely transformative to me," he said. "It was my aha moment."

Pursuing the minor ignited a passion in Johnson, and he feels that he is stronger, wiser, and certainly more comfortable in his own skin than he was four years ago.

"It's given me a better understanding of my position in the world. It just isn't me learning how to be Black, but what it is to be white also," he said. "I'm living what I'm learning."

Johnson has applied to a wide variety of doctoral programs all over the country, and so far has been accepted to nine, including Duke, University of Virginia, Washington University, Johns Hopkins, and the College of William & Mary.

He is excited to one day share his passion for African-American literature as a college professor. Hopefully, Johnson said, he will be able to provide his students with the same type of enlightened educational experience he has had at Christopher Newport.

I want to pay it forward and teach it," he said.
