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A Nontraditional Route to the Presidency

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A nontraditional route to the presidency



At a glance:

Hobbies: *quantum physics and comparative theology*

Favorite Miles Davis (jazz musician) song: *Sketches of Spain*

Book he frequently gifts: *How to Win Friends and Influence People*

Stephanie Willis '21 remembers clearly her first meeting with Miles Davis.

“He walked up to me in Dillin Hall and said, ‘You’re Stephanie Willis. I know of you,’” she recalls. “I was freaking out. This is the president, yet he knew who I was.”

Since that August day, Willis has had many conversations with Linfield’s new president, cheered with him at sporting events and joined other resident advisers spending time with his family.

“Every interaction I feel like I’m listened to,” says Willis, an education major and member of the Black Student Union. “He wants my point of view as a student.”

Davis had never heard of Linfield College, nor set foot in Oregon, when a recruiter first contacted him about the presidency. Now, only months into his appointment, Davis compares the time to being in a different country as he adjusts to the food, climate, language and cultural nuances.

“I feel a bit like an anthropologist, getting to know and explore all the things that make Linfield, McMinnville, the state and the Pacific Northwest distinctive,” says Davis, who admires Linfield’s strong foundation and long history. “If you want to engrain yourself in the culture, you have to spend time in it.”

Follow Davis on social media (Instagram @milesdavisphd; Twitter @DrDtweeters; Facebook Miles K. Davis) and you’ll find he’s doing just that. You’ll see him attending community events, cheering at Wildcat games, diving for fossils with faculty members, dancing with the marching band (also in its first year) and comparing colorful socks with all challengers (#sockchallenge, see page 19).

A science fiction fan, he likens social media to The Force in *Star Wars*. It can be used for good or for evil.

“Social media lets me amplify my voice,” Davis says. “People want to know about who is leading the college.”

“If you want to engrain yourself in the culture, you have to spend time in it.” – Miles Davis

“We can be liberal arts plus. It’s not an either/or. We can do both. The world needs people who can think and adapt to a changing world.” – *Miles Davis*

“During his years at Shenandoah, he sought out differing opinions as he diligently learned more about the academy and honed his leadership skills. Linfield is lucky to have him.”

– *Tracy Fitzsimmons*
Shenandoah University president

He’s finding a rhythm in a job that has no distinct pattern. In addition to the demands of being president, family time, exercise, self-reflection and meditation are priorities. An early riser, he often sends messages at 4 a.m., and he and wife Naomi Pitcock start their mornings with coffee on the deck overlooking Cozine Creek, watching hummingbirds, before getting daughter Elisabeth, 11, off to school.

Davis has three distinct goals for Linfield – achieve sustainable financial footing, increase enrollment and increase the college’s visibility.

“Linfield has the potential to be the premier institution in the Pacific Northwest,” says Davis, who values programs that are based in the classical liberal arts and sciences but also have an applied focus. “We can be liberal arts plus. It’s not an either/or. We can do both. The world needs people who can think and adapt to a changing world.”

He’s also tempering his strong bias for action as he learns the intricacies of Linfield.

“You don’t know what you don’t know,” he says. “What to me may be simple on its face might have greater historical



Miles Davis, shown here at a Linfield College football game, is immersing himself in the Linfield community and beyond, and gaining “an appreciation of the history and connection of the college to the area,” he says.

context. I know that some of my decisions are going to be wrong, but they will never be malicious. I will recognize when they are wrong, and I will apologize and make course corrections.”

Born and raised in West Philadelphia, Penn., Davis says he had to develop a stout work ethic helping to support his family as a young teen. He was the first in his family to graduate from college, beginning at the local community college, before transferring to Duquesne University. He later joined the Navy, where he served for six years, including during the first Gulf War. Next, he entered the business world, working as a managing consultant and principal for EDS Corp., and serving on the boards of numerous non-profit organizations and publicly traded companies. He ultimately earned a master’s degree from Bowie State University followed by a doctorate from George Washington University before joining the faculty at Shenandoah University where he served as dean of the Harry F. Byrd Jr. School of Business.

“I have the opportunity to connect with students who came from similar backgrounds. Some see in me a possibility. That’s why I do what I do.” – Miles Davis

Though Davis didn’t expect to ever become a college president, others around him did, including Tracy Fitzsimmons, Shenandoah president.

“Miles stood out from the beginning as a future college president,” says Fitzsimmons. “During his years at Shenandoah, he sought out differing opinions as he diligently learned more about the academy and honed his leadership skills. Linfield is lucky to have him.”

Pointing to key mentors along the way in his own growth and development, Davis says he tries to take on that role for others.

“I have the opportunity to connect with students who came from similar backgrounds,” he says. “Some see in me a possibility. That’s why I do what I do.”

His time in the Navy and working in the business world also stand out, and aren’t necessarily the norm among college

and university presidents. Jake Olson ’19, an international business major, calls Davis’ business background and leadership style inspirational.

“He talks about the value of our education, our ROI. This is music to my ears,” says Olson, ASLC club director and Japanese Club president who studied business in Hong Kong last spring. “He’s asked to see my business plan; he’s invested in student success.”

Davis leads by example, influencing rather than wielding authority, Olson continues. He’s one of the first people at an event and the last to leave.

“He’s asking how we can improve this college together,” says Olson. “Leadership and motivation go hand in hand.”

– Laura Davis

#SockChallenge

Like a growing number of college presidents, Miles Davis uses social media to amplify the institutional message, and his personality comes through as well. He often compares creative sock choices with students and friends who take the “sock challenge.” Find him on Instagram @milesdavisphd, Twitter @DrDtweeters and Facebook Miles K. Davis.

