



BRIDGEPORT BRANCH NEWSLETTER



DECEMBER 2020



Our Mission Statement

AAUW advances equity for women and girls through advocacy, education and research.

Our Value Promise

By joining AAUW, you belong to a community that breaks through educational and economic barriers so that all women and girls have a fair chance.

From the President's Desk...

After a beautiful season of fall colors, and a Thanksgiving like no other, we're now facing more holidays that will be celebrated in different ways than we are used to. The stores are decorated, and our mailboxes are full of promotional emails and catalogs, but finding the joy in Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa and New Year's will take some creativity this year while trying to stay safe and follow pandemic guidelines. It's been a long haul since March, but there's good news about vaccines that's finally giving us something hopeful to look forward to.

As you know by now, the Bridgeport Board decided at our November meeting to cancel the annual Holiday Social. We'll miss the traditional teas and goodies, the special décor prepared by Louise M. and most importantly the chance to see each other. But it was the right thing to do. And we're hoping we can reschedule this celebration in the New Year. If you have made or bought knitted hats, gloves, socks or scarves for Wilbur Cross School students, please let me know and I'll be happy to deliver them when it's possible.

If you attended our general meeting on Thursday, Nov. 19 (via Zoom), you heard the speakers from Housatonic Community College and Gateway Community College talk about important programs addressing the challenges faced by so many women in our area who are seeking higher education and economic security. So while we don't have a calendar of AAUW events to communicate in this newsletter, we do have a thoughtful article from Vice President Felicia K. about these issues and the ways we, as a women's advocacy organization, may be able to help support these programs. We look forward to hearing what you think.

Next up will be our first general meeting of 2021 on **Wednesday, Jan. 20** (virtual, of course). And last, but not least, we are still planning a 90th anniversary celebration in September 2021. Any ideas for celebrating this milestone are welcome; please let me know your suggestions. And for now, save **Saturday, May 15, 2021** for our Annual Meeting and Scholarship Luncheon—hopefully it will be in person!

In the meantime, I wish you all a blessed holiday season....please be safe and stay well!

Carole

Carole J. F. President

AAUW Bridgeport Area Branch

Update from Branch Vice President, Felicia K.

I have a hypothesis: If we build programs that visibly enable women in our community to achieve better education, careers and income, we will not only satisfy our mission but we can more easily attract new members to help us execute these programs.

According to VolunteerHub.com, around 40% of volunteers proactively find, and often become involved in an organization because of a personal tie to that organization's cause. Another 44% join after being invited to do so. They join to collaborate and work with a group of like-minded individuals that have similar values and priorities. Women with college degrees lead the way in volunteering, particularly between the ages 35 and 54.

We currently have about 50 branch members of which approximately half are actively involved in our planning and operations. Since we're all aging, there's been ongoing discussion about the urgency to recruit new, younger members to carry our 'torch'. To accomplish this, we need a strong value proposition – a means to demonstrate our importance in the community. It'll be much easier to attract and recruit new members if we can easily share who we are, what we do and why that matters.

Many of you have shared with me you are not sure what we stand for anymore. It's not that our scholarships and charitable contributions are not important – it's just hard to describe the significance of our programs. Also, many of us joined AAUW not only to give back to our community, but to develop friendships, and some are concerned this may not be as relevant a reason to join today.

So how do we create a compelling value proposition? There are three areas I recommend we focus on. I'll address the first today, and in subsequent newsletters address the other two areas.

Focus Area One -- A Clearer, Deeper Purpose

Per our current bylaws, we “**promote equity, education, and the development of opportunities for women and girls that enable them to realize their full potential.**” We have a clear, but very broad mission. With that, one way to differentiate our organization, and refine our value proposition, is through our programs. We have an opportunity to offer programs that solve very specific problems and/or address very specific needs. The more specific, the easier it will be to state who we are, what we do and why it matters.

Last spring, we awarded six \$1,000 college scholarships out of around 11 applications. Looking back, we fulfilled our mission by helping a half dozen women attending college in Bridgeport to pay for their college tuition. No doubt each recipient was very grateful for our help. As we look forward, we have an opportunity to

reflect on: what we've learned about both the community we serve and ourselves; what worked, what didn't and is there anything we'd change?

As we consider these questions, we also can gain a better understanding of the women we want to help. What are their pain points? What are their specific financial and non-financial challenges? What resources are already available to them? Where are the cracks, or gaps, in financial aid that, if filled, could make a meaningful difference in their journeys to get ahead? What help could we provide that would really matter?

We are already taking steps to gain this clarity and understanding. We invited **Tricia Hyacinth, Senior Director at the Fairfield County Community Foundation (FCCF)**, to speak at our recent board meeting. Tricia leads the Women and Girls Fund which works to invest in sustainable solutions that support the safety, health and economic security of women and girls across Fairfield County. Next, we invited to our November 19

general meeting **Daniela Squizzato, Acting Director of Student Success Initiatives at Housatonic Community College**, and **Alese Mulvihill, Dean of Student Affairs at Gateway Community College**. They both have leadership roles in the Family Economic Security Program (FESP) at these schools. FESP is a program that targets low income students in our community seeking a higher education degree and a better life. And at our next general meeting, on January 20, we will hear from speakers at the University of Bridgeport about programs that support low income women today and any anticipated changes following the transition to Goodwin University. (Zoom info to come.)

Through these meetings, we set the stage to build a better understanding of the current state of low-income women pursuing higher education in our community, and their pain points. Below is a synopsis of what collectively Tricia, Daniella and Alese shared:

- Most low-income community college students are women, in their mid-20s.
 - They are either African American or Hispanic.
 - Many are parents, often single, head-of-household.
 - Most attend school only part-time because they also work (many on the frontline).
 - Most of these families have food insecurity. Many women come to school hungry, feeding their children before themselves.
 - COVID has significantly increased their daily challenges as they attempt to balance work, school, children and head-of-household duties.
- The majority are eligible for a federal Pell grant which covers most of their tuition. Connecticut also offers supplemental grants beyond this to cover any tuition gaps.
- Students that are parents have higher GPAs than those that do not. But less than half of these parents complete their degree at the community college--either transferring to another school or dropping out (most).
- Through FESP, a select number of these students receive an expanded set of 'wrap-around' supports to help overcome challenges that ultimately derail them from completing their associate's degree.

Support services span from one-on-one coaching, internships, financial assistance, free income tax preparation and personal development workshops, to events for the whole family.

- o *Note, the FESP program has proven improved graduation rates, personal finances and demonstrated positive multi-generational results.*
- Specific areas suggested that we can help with include scholarships for non-tuition education costs (e.g., books, technology, supplies) and paying for the transition to a four-year college (there are few financial aid programs to assist with this).

Insights like these will assist us in defining who we are, what we do and why that matters. For instance, we could decide to focus on low-income women who complete their associate's degree at Housatonic and want to transfer to a local four-year university for their bachelor's. As we recently learned, transfer scholarship money is not plentiful, and many will need help taking this leap. The difference, for example, between Housatonic Community College and Southern Connecticut State University is almost \$3,500 for one semester of 12 units (or \$5,200 more to attend the University of Connecticut).

We could create a program to specifically address this gap. For example, we could launch an *'It Pays to Leap'* transfer scholarship program. We might even make this program more meaningful with ongoing financial assistance through graduation date and/or by offering select *'wrap-around'* services that encourage women to *'stick with it'* and graduate (i.e., *'It Pays to Complete'*).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, earning a bachelor's degree increases the median usual weekly wage by 39%. In Bridgeport, according to the Connecticut Women and Girl's Data Platform, 20% of women have some college or an associate's degree versus 13% have a bachelor's degree. The median wage difference between those with an associate's (\$30,329) versus bachelor's (\$41,151) degree is almost an extra \$1,000 per month gross income (note, poverty line is about \$21,000/year for these families).

Bottom line, a program like this could drive a meaningful difference in earning potential (even if only for one or two individuals per year to start).

Our immediate task is to learn more about the current challenges women face in Bridgeport to achieve higher education, and ultimately, a good living wage. These insights and data will inform us, whereby we can better reflect on our purpose and if, and how, we might transform our programs to address specific needs. With a deeper, clearer and differentiated purpose, we are better positioned to recruit help through new members, and possibly even strategic partners who can not only strengthen our immediate impact, but also guide us in securing a more lasting impact.

We have a lot of work to do in the coming months. I sincerely appreciate in advance your voice, your time and your heart in exploring who we are, what we do and why that matters. Please don't hesitate to send me your suggestions or comments any time, via email or call my cell phone.

Have a lovely holiday and stay safe!
Felicia K. Branch Vice President

Member News

Branch President, Carole F. reports with sadness that Past President **Nancy Dunleavy** (1975-1977) passed away in Ocala, Florida, in September 2020. While she was a resident of Stratford with her husband Ray, Nancy was very much involved in AAUW, as well as other volunteer organizations.

Please note the following changes in your AAUW Bridgeport Member Directory:

Linda V.
cell phone number

Linda W.
address, phone and email



Bridgeport Study & Discussion Group Meetings

While Coronavirus restrictions have caused changes to regular activities and schedules, groups are continuing to meet as best possible. At this time, for the most current information about upcoming meetings, please contact one of the group leaders listed below.

AAUW Bridgeport Morning Book Club

Nathalie T.
Merrilyn D.

AAUW Bridgeport Evening Book Group

Gretchen G.
Mary M.

Contemporary Global Issues Study Group

Merrilyn D.



Important Notes

***SAVE THE DATE for our next General Meeting: Wednesday, January 20, 2021 – 7 to 8 p.m.**

TOPIC: University of Bridgeport - A conversation about the transition to Goodwin University, and current state of women students - what challenges they typically encounter in completing their 4-year degree today and what the outlook is following the transition.

GUEST SPEAKERS:

Rachael R. Cuttitta, MS
Director of Student Leadership
The University of Bridgeport;

Sara Connolly, Ph.D

Associate Provost, Director of the Bridgeport Plan
Associate Professor of Counseling/College Student Personnel
University of Bridgeport

The **Finance Committee** is seeking new members. It's a great opportunity to become involved in the Branch without a large time commitment. Call Gloria F. VP of Finance to learn more.

Our Newsletter Needs a Name!

The Bridgeport newsletter has been nameless for a while, but the upcoming 90th anniversary of our branch is a timely occasion to rectify that. A contest to find the best name is underway and all your suggestions are welcome. The winning submission will receive a prize (TBD)! Please send your ideas by January 15th to Editor Liza H.



All best wishes for a very happy, healthy holiday season



AAUW Bridgeport Branch: www.aauw-bpt.org/

AAUW CT: <https://aauw-ct.aauw.net/> AAUW National: www.aauw.org/

