join us as we celebrate the
Class of '54 Commitment to Teaching Fellowship Award Recipients

Through the generosity of the Class of 1954, which has established a Commitment to Teaching Fund, Amherst College is able to award stipends each year to a limited number of Amherst graduates who have been teaching for ten years or less and have committed themselves to teaching in underserved communities across the United States.

2021

Melissa Aybar ’14
Joey Kelly ’11
Ashley McCall ’12
Laura Smith-Bland ’08
Micayla Tatum ’16
Cathleen Villapudua ’12
Melissa Aybar ’14 graduated from Amherst with a degree in Psychology and French, curious about language and the mind. While at Amherst she became involved in numerous educational support organizations, like Girls Inc. She also led a Springboard project with Reader to Reader in Dominican Republic, advocating for special education programming. She discovered a passion for working with young people, schools and literacy initiatives. Upon graduating, she became a teaching fellow at the Epiphany School, a middle school back home in Boston. She quickly discovered a passion for the classroom and pursued her M.Ed. in Secondary English at Boston College as a Donovan Urban Scholar. This is her seventh year at Epiphany, where she’s learned that instilling a love of learning requires teaching the whole child. She loves working in an environment that embraces all learners and prioritizes providing an equitable and humanizing schooling experience to students. Melissa’s students use their own experiences to guide their questioning and learning. Melissa is currently the 8th grade lead teacher at Epiphany and Co-Director of Curriculum & Instruction as well as head of the English Department. She also leads the Epiphany Summer Program, providing learning opportunities year round.

Joey Kelly ’11 graduated from Amherst with a degree in Mathematics and Philosophy. While at Amherst, Joey was also strongly impacted by classes at Smith and Hampshire, studying abroad in India, and participating in Students for Justice in Palestine. His passions for mathematics, learning, and justice led him to enroll in Boston University for his MAT in Mathematics Education. Joey is currently in his 9th year of teaching high school math in the Boston area, where he is always trying to make his classes more active, human, and joyful. He has also loved getting to know students outside of class through a philosophy club and a Rubik’s Cube club. Joey deeply enjoys learning with and from other teachers. His favorite professional development involves doing math collaboratively, and he co-created a website called “Play With Your Math” to share his favorite problems more widely. Joey has been a lead teacher for his department and has mentored four student teachers. A few years ago, Joey joined a working group to learn about Restorative Justice and has been working to incorporate those practices in his classes ever since. Currently, he is teaching Pre-Calculus and Intro to Programming at Waltham High School while further learning about mathematics, leadership, and equity through a fellowship at Boston College.

Ashley McCall ’12 is a native of Cincinnati, OH. While at Amherst, she studied Political Science and Spanish and worked as a Diversity Intern with the Office of Admission and as a Student Hiring Assistant with the Office of Alumni and Parent Programs. She was also a member of the Women’s Tennis Team, Amherst LEADS, and the Black Students Union. Ashley now serves as a 3rd grade bilingual English/Language Arts teacher at César Chávez Multicultural Arts Center on the south west side of Chicago and serves as a teacher representative on the Chávez Local School Council. She collaborates with colleagues to incorporate social justice/civic engagement experiences throughout the school year (e.g. Todos Cuentan, Say it Loud/Dilo Fuerte). Ashley works part time with The Academy Group and serves as a Learning Designer of the Justice curriculum. In addition to her classroom work, Ashley partners with teachers, families, and community leaders as a community organizer.
Well known teacher, first African American Head softball coach, and community activist **Laura Smith-Bland ’08**, is a lifelong Jersey girl and graduate of Long Branch High school. While at Amherst, Laura majored in Women’s and Gender studies and Psychology while also playing on the Women’s Softball team and intramural rugby. With a strong foundation provided by Amherst, Laura was then able to continue her studies at Montclair State University in efforts to fulfill her dreams by receiving her P-3 teaching certification. Laura was then fortunate enough to be employed as a teacher and coach right in her hometown, Long Branch Public School District. While being employed for the last several years as an educator, Laura never stopped using what she learned in her psychology and gender studies courses at Amherst. As a result, she became a voice in the community ensuring all residents of Long Branch are provided equal opportunities. Specifically, she has worked with newly immigrated families in efforts to ensure their children are well adjusted in the school district and that the adult members are comfortable in the city she loves and grew up in. These experiences have led Laura to attend the National Conference on Early Childhood Education, representing her school district as one of the first districts to successfully have full day preschool programs. Once Laura was able to see how one person could make such an impact in her community, she further flourished and became a member of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee and a member of the Continental Societies Inc. that services children in low income surrounding communities in the areas of Health, Education, Employment, and the Arts. The more Laura works with educators and fellow community members, she is reminded that she serves a greater life purpose. A lifelong learner, Laura will graduate this summer with her MA in Educational Leadership from Montclair State University. In addition to being a proud educator and coach, Laura’s joy is her family; two twin middle school children and a husband who also serves as a local voice in the community. When asked what advice she would give to an aspiring educator, Laura eagerly replied “you need to be constantly forming connections with the school to give children exposure to resources and experiences. Always be a voice in your community--although it takes a village, you yourself were born to stand out.”

**Micayla Tatum ’16** is a fourth grade math teacher at Warren Central Intermediate School in Vicksburg, MS. In 2019, Micayla received her M.Ed. in Education Policy and Leadership from American University. During her time at Amherst, she double majored in American Studies and Anthropology, received a Five College Native American and Indigenous Studies Certificate, and was president of the Native American Students Organization (now the Native and Indigenous Students Association). She is also proud that she was one of the many who successfully advocated to change the mascot. Go Mammoths!
Cathleen Villapudua ’12, is an educator and creator based in New York City. Born and raised in Sunny California, Amherst was her big leap to the East Coast and she has been here ever since. Cathleen currently serves as the proud Dance Teacher, ENL Teacher and Arts Instructional Leader at Excellence Girls Academy. Her passion for supporting and uplifting her communities was an early love. In third grade she spent her lunch blocks mentoring English Language Learners in the library. This passion continued through her middle school and high school yearsthrough her training of new tutors for the schools. At Amherst, Cathleen was a Black Studies and Art & the History of Art double major. During her time at Amherst, she was involved in programs targeting the achievement gap, such as Pipeline Scholars and The ABC House, she interned at LitWorld in New York City and taught abroad in Ghana during her study abroad time. Cathleen now holds a Dual Masters of Arts in Teaching in Elementary Education and Special Education. Creating safe, inclusive classrooms is her calling and her greatest pride is watching scholars take their communication and artistic tools beyond her classroom where they navigate this world as their most authentic, compassionate selves.

After graduation, Micayla committed to Teach for America as a 2016 corps member. She was placed in the Greater New Orleans - Louisiana Delta Region and taught in Tallulah, LA for three years where she discovered her passion for teaching. Micayla taught first grade and also served as the grade level chair (2018-2019). At the start of the 2019 - 2020 academic year, she moved her career twenty-two miles across the Mississippi River to Vicksburg, MS. In her new role, Micayla has seen 67% of her students improve their scores on their district exams and she was recently awarded the honor of January 2021 Teacher of the Month. Outside school, Micayla is a 2020-21 Teach Plus Mississippi Policy Fellow, a member of the Vicksburg Warren Association of Educators, and the chair of her local NAACP’s Education Committee. She spends her time advocating for education in Mississippi, recently focusing her efforts on increasing the investment in social emotional curriculum and mental health resources for Mississippi’s students and teachers. Micayla is proud to be a recipient of the Commitment to Teaching Fellowship and excited to share her passion for education with the Amherst community.

Thank You
Class of 1954

Commitment to Teaching Award 2020 Selection Committee:
Madeleine Conner ’21
Sarah Frenette, Teacher Licensure Coordinator, Five Colleges, Inc.
Bob Kuklis ’61
Dashiell Shulman ’21
Robert Siudzinski, Program Director, Careers in Education Professions

Fellowship Logistics & Support:
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Videography & Sound:
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