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“An invaluable resource” – Pulitzer Prize Winner Heather Ann Thompson

“No place like it . . . across the Southwest between Memphis and California” – Max Krochmal, Frederick Jackson Turner Prize winner

The Texas Center for Working-Class Studies (TCWCS) at Collin College celebrates its fifth year in the spring of 2019 with a conference bringing together scholars and leaders in the field, Feb. 28 at the Plano campus. The keynote address will be delivered by Dr. Jacqueline Jones, chair of the History Department at the University of Texas at Austin. A MacArthur Fellow and past finalist for a Pulitzer, Jones published *Goddess of Anarchy: The Life and Times of Lucy Parsons, American Radical* in 2017.

A unique institution among American community colleges, the TCWCS:

- promotes research in a wide array of academic disciplines
- sponsors an annual undergraduate writing contest
- advises a student organization, Working-Class Heroes
- hosts annual conferences that draw nationally and internationally renowned speakers.

The brainchild of Dr. Lisa Kirby, professor of English at Collin, the TCWCS grew from her project as the Lebrecht Endowed Chair for Scholarly and Civic Engagement, 2013-2015. Dr. Kirby, who earned her Ph.D. from Texas Christian University, said her interest in the working-class stems from her family background and growing up in Fort Worth.

“Historically, the city was known for two major industries: cows and planes,” she said. “The Fort Worth Stockyards and the local packinghouses, Swift and Armour, helped fuel the economy for many years. Coincidentally, these two industries are a large part of my family history, in that one of my grandfathers worked as a sheet metal worker at Consolidated and the other worked in the packinghouses at Swift and Company.

“Meanwhile, my father was a machinist for an oil company for two decades before working for Xerox as a technician; my mother was a licensed vocational nurse for 25 years, before attending a two-year college to become a paralegal. Having come from a family with working-class roots, I identify with my students from working-class backgrounds.”

When Collin College established the TCWCS in 2015, it became one of only four such academic centers in America and the only one at a community college. Its yearly conference, like the center itself, draws sociologists, anthropologists, literary scholars, photographers and other artists dedicated to understanding the global working-class experience from all scholarly angles. The center kicks off each year with a special Labor Day event that showcases the importance of working-class studies in a variety of disciplines. Past Labor Day events have included photography exhibits, panel discussions and scholarly talks.

In addition, the TCWCS annually presents the Ruth A. Allen Pioneer in Working-Class History Award to trailblazing scholars whose work laid the foundation for others. The center also promotes academic excellence inside and outside the classroom, offering scholarships for student essays on working-class topics.

The conference always includes student research, both in panels and a poster session.

“The panels featuring student papers hone their talents in oral and written communication and problem solving and help to cultivate a new generation’s interpretation of the past,” said Dr. Theresa Case, history professor at the University of Houston-Downtown and author of *The Great Southwest Railroad Strike and Free Labor*.

The Working-Class Heroes student group engages in community service projects and fosters a sense of community among the many non-traditional students at the campus. TCWCS has received positive media attention for its work, with 2016 keynote speaker Dr. Sherry Linkon serving as the sole guest for an hour-long segment on the KERA-FM talk show “Think.” Linkon is a professor of English and affiliated faculty in the Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor at Georgetown University.

Dr. Linkon noted how the center’s annual conferences “make class – a topic we don't talk about nearly enough in higher education or American culture – visible and encourage participants to think about how class intersects with race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and other categories.”

Dr. Max Krochmal, an associate history professor at Texas Christian University and winner of the 2016 Frederick Jackson Turner Prize for his book *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Coalition in the Civil Rights Era*, described the TCWCS as “a gem.”

“It brings careful, intersectional analysis of working people and social class to scholars, students and the larger community of North Texas and beyond – indeed, there is no place like it anywhere in Texas or across the Southwest between Memphis and California,” Krochmal said.

“By filling this gap, the center provides an invaluable service, reminding the region's residents that work, labor unions, and class struggle still matter in 21st Century America. Scholars across the disciplines gather annually to debate the working-class experience, black and white, male and female, across time and space. In addition to offering a welcoming venue for student researchers and emerging faculty, the conference connects them to local labor activists and featured speakers who are among the top names in the field. It's no exaggeration to say that the Texas Center for Working-Class Studies has put Collin College on the map as a leading institution advancing community-engaged research and teaching on the subject of class.”

In 2015, the first-ever TCWCS conference featured keynote speaker Dr. Heather Ann Thompson, who subsequently won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in History for her groundbreaking book, *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy*. Thompson also earned the Bancroft Prize, the most prestigious award in the American historical profession.

She described her appearance at the inaugural TCWCS gathering as “nothing short of one of my favorite experiences in the last few years. The commitment of the administration to this extraordinary program was so incredible to see, as was the energy of the students, faculty and community members in attendance.”

Thompson, a University of Michigan historian, recently described the center as “an invaluable resource not only for those who have the opportunity to attend Collin College, but also for the surrounding community.”

Dr. Victoria Bynum, a history professor at Texas State University and author of *The Free State of Jones; Mississippi's Longest Civil War*, served as the 2018 keynote speaker. Bynum said that she has been in much demand as a speaker because of the 2016 Hollywood adaptation of her book starring Mathew McConaughey, but her time at Collin College stood out.

“I have received numerous such invitations, but nowhere have I encountered a more enthusiastic, informed audience than that at Collin College,” Bynum said. “In particular, the impressive level of attendance and participation by students beautifully showcased the intellectual rigor and fresh approaches to working class history for which the center is increasingly well known.”

Other acclaimed scholars echoed Bynum. Recalling his keynote address in 2017, Dr. David Roediger, Distinguished History Professor at the University of Kansas and a leading scholar of American race relations, described the experience as “exhilarating” and said that he hoped the TCWCS would serve as a role model for other institutions.

“Collin College has done a great service for students in Plano and the greater Dallas area” by promoting “an area of study that often is overlooked in higher education,” said Dr. James C. Maroney, co-editor of *Texas Labor History* and winner of the 2016 Ruth Allen Award. “Students and the public are exposed to the real-world environment faced by the working class in their everyday experience.”

The conference is free and open to Collin College students, faculty and staff. For more information, contact Dr. Kirby at LKirby@collin.edu.