

NEWS (Excerpts from an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*)

What do a wine writer, saxophonist, and pastor have in common? They're working toward a Ph.D. in creativity.

The program is the first of its kind in the country. It aims to teach participants to think in a different way, to walk a path that isn't there yet.



Director of Ph.D. in Creativity Jonathan Fineberg (facing camera on left) and program faculty Zach Savich (facing camera on right) with Ph.D. in Creativity students at the end of a day of study at the Mütter Museum at the College of Physicians in Philadelphia on Wednesday. Read more [ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer](#)

by [Susan Snyder](#)

Published June 25, 2022, 5:00 a.m. ET

They sat in a circle last week, the Department of Defense analyst, the saxophonist, the church pastor, the Wall Street firm marketing officer, and several others.

They were beginning a quest to learn the same thing: how to nurture creativity and use it in their fields.

If all goes well, three years from now they'll have a doctorate in creativity from Philadelphia's University of the Arts, which claims to be the first and perhaps the only school in the United States to offer such a Ph.D. The program, endorsed by Questlove, the West Philadelphia-born musician and [award-winning filmmaker](#), awarded its first batch of nine Ph.D.s this spring: A psychotherapist, a wine writer, an Ethiopian filmmaker and a Philadelphia School District administrator were among recipients.

The program aims to teach participants to think differently, to walk a path that isn't there yet.



Director of Ph.D. in Creativity Jonathan Fineberg (left) and student James Brandon Lewis walk together at the end of a day of study at the Mütter Museum at the College of Physicians. Read more ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

“I want to train people to break out of those patterns of thought that constrain you and to free you up,” said Jonathan Fineberg, program director, Harvard graduate, and former art history professor at the University of Illinois. “The whole point of this program is to get students into experiences which they don’t expect, they have no tools for, and they have to make sense of it. And they do it as a group.”

The program differs from many other Ph.D. programs that first require students to learn all there is on their subject and then build on it, a hundreds-year-old approach that needs to be rethought,

said Fineberg, 76, who had spent decades supervising Ph.D. students before [joining Rowan] The main requirement is producing a dissertation, and other than a two-week immersion program on campus in the beginning and a shorter stint over winter break, the rest of the three-year program is online, allowing students to continue their jobs.

“I don’t have the time or money to give up my life and do a full-time Ph.D. program,” said the New Haven, Conn.-based pastor, also a dancer and musician.

UArts’ approach was so novel that it took time for the university to gain accrediting approval from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. But it’s really not a leap for an arts [department. Its] mission is “to advance human creativity.”

[There is a] need for creativity in problem-solving in virtually every industry. [We started] “thinking what could it look like if we offered a Ph.D. not for artists but sort of for anyone who thought creativity would be important to their career or profession or themselves.” Fineberg made the initial contact with Questlove after he purchased a house previously owned by the artist’s manager.

Along with the whiskey distiller The Balvenie, Questlove [fund\[ed\]](#) a fellowship.

Questlove, the Roots drummer and bandleader of *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* who [won the 2021 Best Documentary Feature Oscar](#) for his *Summer of Soul*, was a UArts’ [graduation speaker](#) this spring and received an honorary degree. He has launched a podcast on creativity called [Quest for Craft](#), featuring interviews with fellow artists, such as *Saturday Night Live*’s Michael Che and Patti Smith.



student James Brandon Lewis (left), a composer, saxophonist and writer, talks with Ph.D. in Creativity program faculty Zach Savich. ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

The first recipient of his new fellowship is [James Brandon Lewis](#), 38, a composer, saxophonist, and writer from Brooklyn who wants to study the intersection of molecular biology and music.

“All living things have four basic chemicals,” Lewis explained. “Most music — not all, but most — has four basic harmonic environments. How can I build my own system of improvisation and composition based on always including those basics but then exploring the fringes?”

Annual tuition is about \$40,000. Fineberg said the school helps students get funding through nonprofits, foundations, or other aid.

Frank Machos, executive director for the arts and creative learning in the Philadelphia School District and one of the first graduates, had nearly all his costs covered. He said the program taught him how to better integrate arts in every new program, from elementary up, and through workforce development.

“We started approaching creativity as something that lies at the center of everything,” said Machos, 41, who got bachelor’s and master’s degrees from UArts and has worked for the district for 18 years.

During the two-week, on-campus immersion, which the new student group is participating in this month, Fineberg said he does everything he can to get them out of their comfort zone and build a community of learners. Students went to the Mütter Museum, where they sketched human skulls and other medical-related exhibits. They also visited the Pig Iron Theater company, where they created a character for themselves and wrote and performed a one-act play for that character in an afternoon. Then there was a field trip that night to New York City, where they saw their classmate Lewis perform at the Lincoln Center.

Other than a visit to campus over winter break, the rest of the program is conducted online with students meeting regularly for discussion and lectures and with their advisers as they progress toward a dissertation.

Fineberg pairs students with experts in their field. He matched a provost with retired presidents from New York University, George Washington University, and Gratz College. Another student worked with the scholar Henry Louis Gates, who directs the center for African and African American Research at Harvard. A psychotherapist from London, who wanted to know what happens to people when they are alone in nature and how that could be used in therapy, was matched with a classical psychoanalyst, an anthropologist who had lived with a shaman and a philosopher who writes about nature.

Susan H. Gordon, a wine writer and Temple graduate, was paired with a specialist on Italian history, a winemaking industry expert, and a former national security adviser to George W. Bush, who is a wine enthusiast. She said they met online monthly, guiding her project.

“My dissertation is in the form of a book about a small winemaking area of Italy from which has come one of today’s best-known wines, and was written not only as a deeply researched celebration of this place but also in an attempt to change the way wine-writing is done these days,” said Gordon, who got her PhD this year.

The new group of students are beginning to hone their ideas.

The Department of Defense analyst said he is in the program to learn how to “routinize and bureaucratize imagination,” something that could have helped the department anticipate 9/11. The pastor said he hoped to learn to “encourage transpersonal community transformation and healing.” The marketing officer wants to better understand how to generate “collaborative creativity” across multidisciplinary fields.