



MATT BRYANT CHENEY

Carson-Newman University '08

A Vibrant, Caring, and Grounded
Academic Affairs Professional



Making Space to Have Deep Conversations About the Important Things

Bonner alumni often point to a defining moment in their undergraduate career that either guided or changed their career path for the better. For Matt Bryant Cheney, it was reading "Good Country People," a short story by Flannery O'Conner. It was the tough conversations he had about this story that ultimately inspired his decision to become a lifelong educator.

Changing Course

Growing up in Knoxville, TN, Matt was actively involved in the Baptist Church. Matt chose Carson-Newman University because it was a popular regional Baptist college. Going into this school, Matt had a set career goal—become a minister. In route towards achieving this goal, however, Matt took an English class that forever changed his life.

In his first-year English Literature class, Matt read various short stories from a myriad of authors. One tale was by Flannery O'Conner, entitled "Good Country People," which Matt describes as a really violent story.

"We read that story and our class had discussions around issues of race and body image that came up in it, which raised really great questions" said Matt. "I always loved conversations, and this class got me interested in school."

Following this course, Matt declared a major in English and has continued to have tough conversations with people in his current work.

Journey into Higher Education

After graduating from college in 2008, Matt became the Coordinator for the Bonner Scholars program at Carson-Newman University. He remained in that position for three years before returning home to pursue a Masters of Arts in English Literature at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville.

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In 2013, Matt finished his Master's degree but he wasn't done with his formal education just yet. That same year he applied for and was accepted into a doctoral program at the University of Kentucky. He expects to complete his Ph.D. in American Literature.

While completing his graduate studies, Matt was encouraged to apply for the Bonner Director position at his alma mater by one of his mentors. Despite reservations, Matt applied for the position and was surprised to be offered not only the position but also a professorship in English at the university.

Matt now, in addition to finishing up his Ph.D., directs the Bonner Center at Carson-Newman University and teaches courses in African-American Literature, Rhetoric and Composition, and Documentary Film. In these roles, he makes an effort to merge his scholarship with his service. He thanks Bonner for helping him make this connection.

"The way that [professors] do academics is very separated from the daily life of people, especially in my field" said Matt. "Bonner helped me stay grounded as a human and continually understand the stakes in higher education."

To Matt, knowledge is more than a concept in a book. It's a lived experience fleshed out through deep conversations about the meaning of different thoughts and ideas.

What's next?

Personally, Matt plans to continue loving and supporting his wife and fellow Bonner alumna, Ashley, and their two children, Will and Blesan. Professionally, his goals are to complete his dissertation, attain tenure, and increase the endowment of the Bonner Center at Carson-Newman University. His advice for those who are interested in entering the higher education sector is "to keep your promises. This field depends on trustworthy people."

*Written by Alexander Nichols
Bonner Scholar at Davidson College '19*



To learn more about Matt, check out his favorite book and movie:

- The Complete Stories by Flannery O'Conner
- Good Will Hunting by Gus Van Sant