

# TEACHING the VISIONARIES

Clafin Nurtures, Challenges, and  
Flourishes in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



**T**he South Carolina Center for Biotechnology is no place for weak stomachs. Viruses, infection-causing microbes and cancerous tissues—the scarier aspects of biology—are unnerving, even when safely contained. For the same reason, though, the center is a place of daily excitement for scientists and students who analyze nature’s mischief with a zeal for breakthrough discoveries. Dr. Omar Bagasra, center director, knows these destructive forces on human health can spawn life-saving vaccines.

The biotech center, located at Claflin University in Orangeburg, is drawing interest from research organizations and international scientists. Claflin and the University of Illinois/Chicago recently shared a federal grant with a unique purpose: to reduce prostate cancer among African American males. Bagasra is at the forefront of scientists investigating prostate cancer. He oversees groundbreaking studies into potential deterrents to other fatal diseases, including breast cancer, HIV, diabetes and malaria. Example: He hopes to develop an anti-HIV vaccine that can block the virus *after* it has invaded a human cell; most experimental HIV treatments were formulated to prevent it from entering a cell.

Bagasra grooms his students to be imaginative. “I train them to think out of the box. If you think within the box, it will never work.” He, his colleagues and students are championing Claflin’s 21st-Century emphasis on research. They’re in keeping with the university’s motto: **The World Needs Visionaries.**

Research scientists are but a few of the visionaries Claflin has produced during its 140-year history. In the administration building are photographs of distinguished alumni who’ve proven it’s one thing to educate, quite another to inspire. From the outset, students have applied their education for human good. William Bulkley, one of two members of the first graduating college class in 1882, became an educator and one of the first African Americans to earn a doctorate of philosophy. His classmate, Nathaniel Middleton, became a physician in Texas.

Two years later, Alice Jackson Moorer and Annie Thortne Holmes became two of the first five black women in the world to earn college degrees.

Their successors entered many fields. William Wilson Cooke was a federal government architect who applied his training at his alma mater, designing the Lee Library and Tingley Memorial Hall. Cassandra Maxwell Birney was the first black woman admitted to the South Carolina Bar. James S. Thomas was the first African American bishop of the Iowa Conference

of the United Methodist Church. Earl M.

Middleton became a philanthropist and owner of Coldwell Banker Middleton and Associates. Ernest A. Finney Jr. became the first African American chief justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court. Leo F. Twiggs is an internationally lauded artist. And the list continues.

New generations are fanning into the world with their own knowledge and talents.

“Professors know they are preparing students for long-term world changes and for jobs that have not been invented as yet,” notes Dr. Donna L. Gough, chair and professor in the Department of Mass Communications. Dr. Christopher M. Curtis, chair of the Department of History and Sociology, observes, “Teaching Claflin students is similar to watching someone put together a jigsaw puzzle without the assistance of a picture of what it should look like in the end.”

**C**laflin, a private liberal arts university, is classified among the nation’s historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The oldest in South Carolina, it’s currently the highest-ranking HBCU on *Forbes’* magazine’s list of higher learning institutions. *U.S. News & World Report* recognized it for its faculty’s dedication to students.

Administrators and faculty lead by example. When current president Dr. Henry N. Tisdale initiated Claflin Pride Day, an annual spring clean-up/fix-up project, he and his wife Alice participated.

The school always has been coeducational, and while it has a minority student base, it turns down no





**Dr. Henry N. Tisdale,**  
*Clafin University President*

applicant on the basis of race, color or religion. Most are from South Carolina, but others come from across the U.S. and from 15 foreign countries. A scholarship attracted an art major from Mexico; a mass

communications student from Brooklyn confesses the weather influenced her decision. “I didn’t really know about Clafin,” acknowledges Ashley McCants, an Honors College biology major from Michigan. “I visited and thought it was a very personal environment.” Prospective students notice the state-of-the-art classrooms and laboratories and the comfortable dormitories, all recently renovated—and that the Laundromat is free.

About 1,900 students populate the 43-acre campus. Enrollment has grown steadily. The current freshman class numbers almost 500, up from 390 two years ago. “God is truly smiling upon Clafin,” says Anthony Brooks, assistant vice president of enrollment. “We count our blessings here.”

It’s unlikely Clafin ever will be branded a “party school.” Students enjoy recreation but prioritize learning. Their purposeful manner is evident: Many male students wear neckties to class; many women wear skirts and dresses. The administration doesn’t enforce a dress code or even suggest it. Student behavior stems from an unspoken quest for professionalism that’s nurtured from the time they arrive.

Students routinely step aside and hold doors open for others, observes Vivian Glover, assistant vice president for communications and marketing. “I’ve never heard profanity,” she adds. “I’ve never seen any litter.”

The graduation rate is 68 percent—higher than the average of all of South Carolina’s higher learning institutions. Glover attributes it partly to the university’s endowment, which helps provide financial aid. A third of students have scholarships and most receive some level of assistance. More importantly, she says, Clafin monitors students’ “financial DNAs” to ensure they don’t get into monetary trouble. A strong work-study program helps them pay tuition. No student in the past 15 years has dropped out for lack of funds, Glover adds. “We just don’t let that happen.”

The work-study tradition harks to its early years, when students planted and worked fields and gardens, literally growing their own edibles. “Clafin always has found ways to stretch resources, to help students help themselves,” Glover says. Such frugality enables it to stay on track: During the current recession, Clafin has imposed no layoffs or canceled classes.

Clafin relies on alumni donations and grants to supplement tuition income. Alumni haven’t let down their alma mater; alumni giving is at 38 percent. Clafin has a substantial endowment for a school its size: \$18 million, up from \$7 million in 1994, when Tisdale took the helm. It has received more than \$63 million in research funding.

Faculty embrace what Dr. Peggy Ratliff, dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, sees as “the university’s vision of producing servant leaders for America and the world.” Administrators’ open-door policies give students “a nurturing and family-like atmosphere that is unique and conducive to a harmonious work environment.” Students choose Clafin partly because of that environment, Ratliff believes. Too, they perceive a scholarly atmosphere, important because most want to attend graduate or professional schools.

Strolling about campus, you might see Ratliff greet a student with a hug. Vivian Glover begins a day signing a sympathy card from administrators to a staff member who just lost a relative. “That’s the Clafin family spirit,” Glover notes simply.

**C**lafin offers 33 undergraduate degrees plus master’s degrees in business administration,

science/biotechnology and educational studies. Of the 102 faculty members, 80 percent hold the highest degrees obtainable in their areas of study.

Tisdale, in identifying Clafin's strengths, concluded research—most notably in the sciences—is its forte. In 2000, Clafin was admitted to the Leadership Alliance of research schools, which includes all of the Ivy League universities. Projects drawing national attention include the vaccine studies and environmental remediation and bio-fuels. There's a new forensic and molecular virology building. DNA research in a forensic laboratory will begin in 2010.

Learning opportunities abound. Clafin organizes a study-abroad program. In a cross-enrollment arrangement with South Carolina State College, it provides ROTC programs; graduates can enter the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force as second lieutenants.

The university is known for its curricula in visual and performing arts and its cultural programs. The Clafin University Concert Choir performed in China in conjunction with the Beijing Summer Olympics in 2008. The student newspaper, *The Panther*,

publishes in print and online.

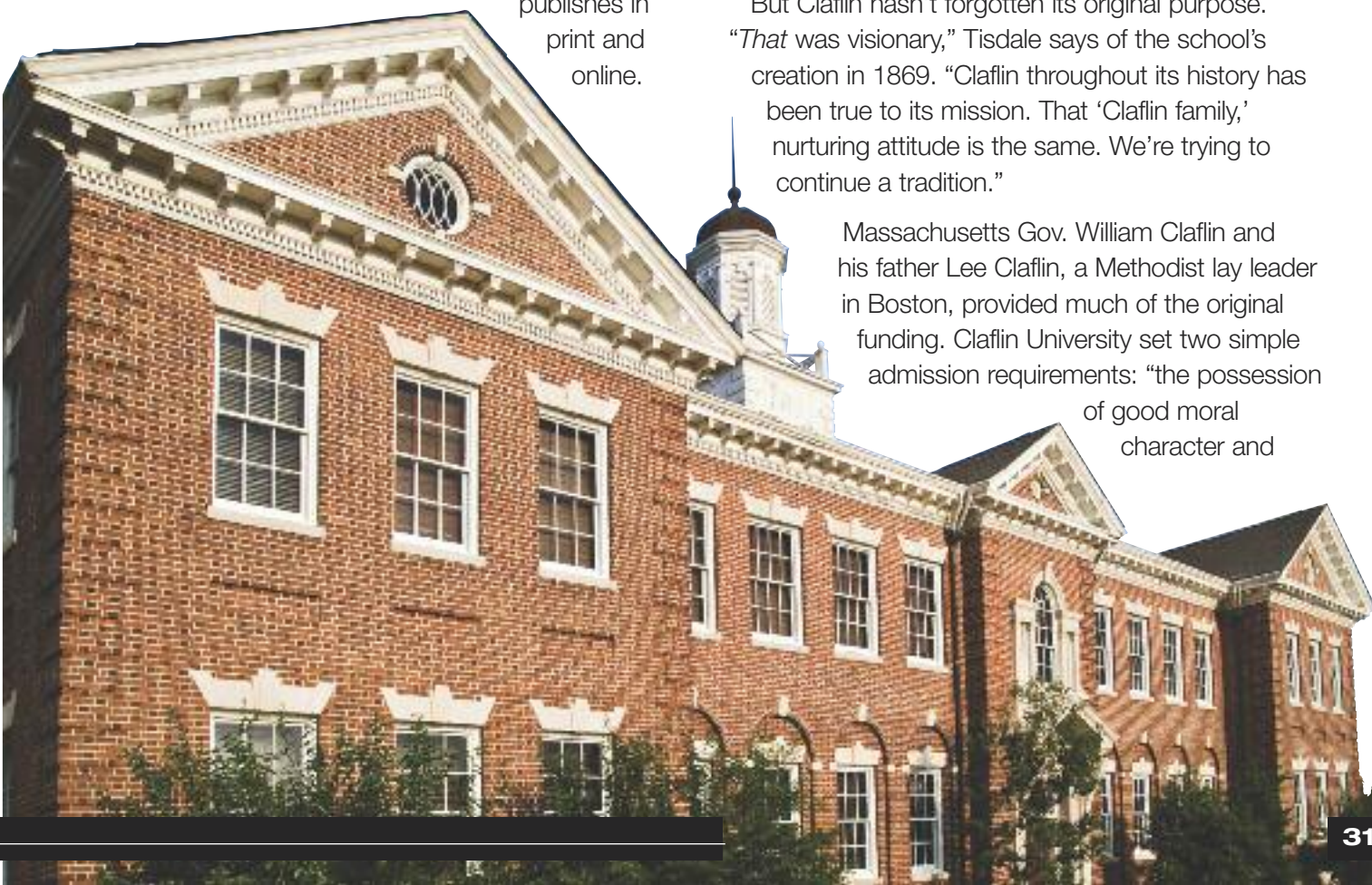
Campus radio and television stations have launched several new programs. A Charleston television station has arranged to use Clafin's well-equipped mass communications studios in case of a hurricane-forced evacuation.

Long active in intercollegiate sports, Clafin was approved in 2008 for full membership in the SIAC Conference of the NCAA. Panthers and Pantherettes compete in basketball, softball, baseball, volleyball, tennis, track and field, and cross-country.

**A** Williamsburg County native, Tisdale earned an undergraduate degree here in 1965, then obtained advanced degrees in the North, including a doctorate at Dartmouth. He established a successful career as a public school and college teacher and administrator in Pennsylvania and Delaware before becoming Clafin's president. During his 15 years, he has guided the university to statistical landmarks that can't be attributed to the inevitable "march of progress." While many universities and colleges nationwide have struggled and languished, Clafin has struggled and flourished.

But Clafin hasn't forgotten its original purpose. "That was visionary," Tisdale says of the school's creation in 1869. "Clafin throughout its history has been true to its mission. That 'Clafin family,' nurturing attitude is the same. We're trying to continue a tradition."

Massachusetts Gov. William Clafin and his father Lee Clafin, a Methodist lay leader in Boston, provided much of the original funding. Clafin University set two simple admission requirements: "the possession of good moral character and



a conscientious desire to learn.” It was the first higher learning institution in South Carolina to accept men and women “regardless of race, complexion, or religious opinion.” That made it, as a matter of practicality at the time, a predominantly African American campus.

Its early struggles mirrored those of the Reconstruction-era South. The state government could give little support, nor could individual donors. Fire destroyed the Main Building in 1876. Not until 1882 could Claflin confer its first four-year degrees.

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*-Dr. Christopher M. Curtis*

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It began to blossom under the presidency of Lewis M. Dunton (1884-1922). Dunton expanded programs and backed his ambitions with extraordinary fundraising skills. He personally conveyed to northern audiences the fledgling university’s philosophy: “Train the mind to think, the hand to execute, and the soul to feel.” He deployed the school’s greatest asset: its students. The Claflin Singers became known nationwide for their fundraising concerts.

The precursor of South Carolina State University was spawned from Claflin in 1896 when the state legislature made the South Carolina State Agricultural and Mechanical Institute, previously part of Claflin, independent. The two campuses are adjacent.

Throughout the 20th Century, the school grew and expanded, often despite economic and social struggles. Claflin students and faculty participated in civil rights confrontations, organizing sit-ins and marches. This reiterated the school’s commitment to equality that had been the foundational seed. Noted human rights advocates speak here, and students participate in social causes on campus and far afield.

The board of trustees in 1979 changed Claflin’s designation from “university” to “college.” It reverted to the university appellation in 1998.

When Tisdale became president, he found the college on solid financial footing, thanks to the multiple fundraising programs of his predecessor, Dr. Oscar A. Rogers. Tisdale has continued with vigor. He’s credited with giving Claflin its vision for the 21st Century and with engendering in students and faculty an intangible sense they call “Claflin Confidence.”

Recent progress includes restoration of facilities and the completion in 1998 of the Living and Learning Center. Consisting of three imposing buildings, the center contains residential and learning space, a campus center and a leadership development center. A \$2-million music building was constructed in 2004. A \$3-million chapel, consecrated in 2007, offers sophisticated acoustics; the lower level houses the Department of Philosophy and Religion.

Glover came to Claflin in 1992 to research her book *Men of Vision: Claflin College and Her Presidents*, published in 1994 to commemorate the school’s 125th anniversary. The research riveted her. “I couldn’t stop. I would be in the library until midnight.”

Part of her fascination was in the progress—and preservation—of the campus structure. One of the oldest buildings is the Lee Library, now the Arthur Rose Museum. Built in 1898 and noted for its terra cotta brickwork, tin ceiling and wood floor, it’s become a showcase for student art. The oldest existing building is Trustee Hall (1893). Tingley Hall (circa 1908) is on the National Register of Historic Landmarks (*photo on previous page*).

Glover also was impressed by the dogged diligence of early administrators and students. Students did much of the construction during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They also helped promote their school.

Community service is stressed today. Collectively, Claflin students clocked more than 30,000 hours of service last year. “For a school this size, we’re very proud of that,” Glover notes. “We think that’s part of the leadership development process. By the time they leave here, they have that ‘Claflin Confidence.’ ” ●