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VALERIE BANSCHBACH, PH.D.

DEAN, COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF PORTLAND



Dr. Valerie Banschbach is attuned to the inner voice that guides her to relentlessly strive for equity in higher education, to enthusiastically champion the liberal arts, and to be actively engaged in all aspects of her busy life.

She is a biologist with extensive scholarship in the field of ecology — the study of how organisms relate to one another and the physical world. It's a fitting background for the ultimate connector of faculty, students and ideas as University of Portland's Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

"I'm curious about everything," Banschbach says. These days, that involves deep dives into how artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming our society. As she prompts AI discussions on the UP campus, Dean Banschbach is certain she's in the right place to help guide the ethical usage of AI technology.

"AI won't replace the liberal arts education our students receive – relational skills, critical thinking, understanding the human experience," Banschbach says. "We develop lifelong learning habits that lead to rewarding careers and gratifying lives for our students."

Banschbach's heritage as a first-generation college student, followed by years of work in scientific fields dominated by men, forged a career-long advocacy for equity in higher learning.

"We all have to work hard to create not only an equitable opportunity but a welcoming culture — a sense of belonging — to reduce the burden for students from historically marginalized groups," she says. "We must continue to ask questions about our structures and policies. Leadership is a constant argument with tradition."

Banschbach claims her proudest accomplishment is not the Fulbright Grant that supported her study of ants and agriculture in India, building successful environmental studies programs at Saint Michael's College and Roanoke College, or receiving the Outstanding Faculty Award from the State Council of Higher Education in Virginia.

"I'm most proud of my kids," she says. Audrey graduated from Virginia Tech in the spring, and Ava recently joined her mom as a first-year student at UP. Banschbach models the value of protecting their family time.

"It's tough to manage a successful academic career and be a good mother at the same time," she says. "And it's definitely not a balance. It's a process of shifting attention quickly from hour to hour. You have to keep it all in sight and mind, being as proactive and attentive as you can."