Some say that every University of Hartford student has a class in Hillyer Hall, formerly known as the General Classroom Building. While that tradition may or may not be true, it is in fact true that Hillyer Hall is the University’s oldest classroom building on the Bloomfield Avenue campus. For many years, Hillyer Hall was the hub of campus life, which makes it the first visual that comes to mind when many alumni from the 1960s and 1970s think about the University.

Today, there are other classroom buildings on campus, but Hillyer Hall is still heavily used. This past summer, the building underwent its biggest HVAC and energy system upgrade since it was constructed in 1959. Three general-purpose classrooms were also renovated on the second floor; a section of the roof in the lobby outside Auerbach Auditorium was replaced; and a section of the building façade was replaced. But the largest change was the new two-story, 10,000-square-foot addition to the building, named the Shaw Center. It is the first major renovation to Hillyer Hall since it opened in 1960. See the following pages for more on Hillyer College.
Bright sunlight glistened off the red ribbon draped in front of the door of the University's newest addition as dozens gathered to celebrate the ceremonial opening of the Shaw Center in September. The two-story, 10,000-square-foot addition to Hillyer Hall, the University's oldest classroom building, adds faculty offices, state-of-the-art classrooms, a large gathering space for students, and—most importantly—a home for Hillyer College.

Standing outside the building that bears his name, lead donor John "Jay" Shaw A’74 spoke of his pride in Hillyer College and the renovation that “fully recognizes and integrates” it as an essential part of the University. Shaw and his wife, Debi, gave $1.5 million to the project. Their daughter, Carrie, is a 2008 graduate of Hillyer.

Although the Shaw Center is a dedicated home for Hillyer College, it will benefit the entire University because nearly all students take classes in Hillyer Hall during their college careers. “We see it as a place for all students of the University,” David Goldenberg A’73, ’76, M’76, dean of Hillyer College, said during the dedication. “This is a building everybody can take pride in and consider theirs to enjoy.”

Following brief remarks, the Shaws; President Walter Harrison; Goldenberg; Tom Groark, chair of the University’s board of regents; and Dean Andrews of Bank of America cut the red ribbon so attendees could go inside. The large, first-floor common area, known as Regents Commons, is the centerpiece of the Shaw Center. It provides an informal gathering place for students and faculty—complete with comfortable chairs, video monitors, and computer stations.

Once inside Regents Commons, the crowd was treated to a multimedia student performance called “Living Space.” The performance by the Qualia student ensemble, featuring students from The Hartt School and the Hartford Art School, incorporated dance and images inspired by the building itself. The dancers moved to sounds created when percussionists struck the floors and walls of the Shaw Center.

Guests were then able to tour the building, and some received signed copies of recently published books by five Hillyer College faculty members. Read more about what Hillyer faculty and alumni have accomplished “behind the ribbon” on the following pages.
A ‘Jane’ Fan

Robert Dryden’s first encounter with the works of popular English author Jane Austen was relatively late. The Hillyer College associate professor was at Louisiana State University working on his PhD in English when he discovered her.

“I didn’t read Jane Austen in grade school or high school like most people,” Dryden explains. “I was looking at 18th- and early 19th-century British literature for my dissertation on pirates, fortune hunters, and colonial opportunists, when my advisor suggested that I look into Persuasion and Mansfield Park. Both offered a window into the seafaring world. That’s how I started reading Jane Austen.”

Since then, Dryden’s passion for the author has turned into scholarship, with his first complete book published in June and a second book, for which the University awarded him a Vincent B. Coffin Grant, due to his publisher in December.

The first book, Jane Austen for Beginners, is the latest in the For Beginners series of graphic nonfiction books that examines visionaries and subjects ranging from philosophy to politics to history in an easy-to-understand manner.

Dryden’s next book, Jane Austen in a New Age: Pleasure, Passion, and Possessiveness in the Global Jane Austen Community, will survey Austen’s appeal around the world through essays from writers in Brazil, China, India, and other locations.
A Student of Race Relations
Professor Ashley “Woody” Doane, chair of the social sciences department at Hillyer College and associate dean of the college, was awarded the prestigious 2012 Founder’s Award for Scholarship and Service by the American Sociological Association [ASA]—Section on Racial and Ethnic Minorities.

When presenting the award to Doane in August, the ASA noted that “he manifests a delicate balance of extraordinary scholarship that has shaped the contours of our field, just as he has managed to mentor and advise students, lead his own department and institution, and direct the vision of the section.”

Committed to scholarship and service throughout his career, Doane has written groundbreaking publications that include Dominant Group Ethnic Identity in the United States, White Out, and What Is Racism? He has also freely invested his personal time and energy in working with young, aspiring race scholars.

A Poet, Performer, Professor
As a poet, performer, scholar, and teacher, Joyce Ashuntantang, a Hillyer College assistant professor of English, infuses her classes with creative energy; a rich, multicultural background; and a passion for the written and spoken word.

Originally from the western African nation of Cameroon, Ashuntantang brings to Hillyer her growing reputation on the world stage. In June 2012 she was one of 70 poets from 45 countries to participate in one of the world’s largest poetry festivals, the 22nd International Poetry Festival, in Medellin, Colombia.

“I write very strong, woman-centered poetry,” says Ashuntantang. “When reading her poems, she doesn’t simply read, she performs—often accompanied by drums. Ashuntantang is currently working on her second book of poetry, Wings of Words; her first book, A Basket of Flaming Ashes, was published in 2010.

A recognized scholar of African literature, Ashuntantang often arranges for African authors to discuss their works with her students on Skype. In July 2012 she was a guest on National Public Radio in Chicago, Ill., to discuss the portrayal of African human rights conflicts in Hollywood films.

At Commencement 2012, Ashuntantang was honored with the University of Hartford’s Belle K. Ribicoff Junior Faculty Prize, which recognizes an outstanding junior faculty member in a tenure-track position who has not yet been tenured.

Joyce Ashuntantang, assistant professor of English, has a growing reputation on the world stage as a poet.

A Scholar of Exploration
Michael Robinson, Hillyer College associate professor of history, is currently completing research for his latest book, The Lost White Tribe: Explorers, Scientists, and the Theory That Changed Africa. The book will chronicle the rise and fall of the Hamidic hypothesis, which proposes that the human species originated in Asia and all people migrated from there.

In the 1800s explorers came across groups of people who appeared to be Caucasian in areas where white people were not normally found, such as the Arctic, Panama, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The hypothesis was formed to try to explain the racial diversity of Africa. Robinson will follow in these explorers’ footsteps with a trip to Uganda this winter.

Although scientists eventually discredited the Hamidic hypothesis, it has had a large impact on the world. Europeans who colonized Rwanda used the theory as their basis for defining two groups of people as being racially different. This division eventually led to the Rwandan genocide that killed more than 800,000 people in 1994.