My colleagues who work in theatre have taught me my new favorite word: collaboration. Being the lone medievalist in my field at a small liberal arts college, I’ve learned to work on active collaborations with friends in fields outside medieval studies. We can meld our approaches into a process that works for both of us, since collaboration primarily requires working together closely to create a finished product. Starting from the same background knowledge does not matter. Coming together over shared materials — while appreciating my colleagues’ distinct approaches and methodologies — has reinvigorated my teaching and research, making possible different class projects, better class discussions, new research initiatives, and new classes and co-curricular opportunities.

Three main strategies have helped me in these collaborations: working with those in adjacent fields, building connections to active artists and practitioners, and offering historical perspective. While a smaller school certainly facilitates these kinds of close connections I have enjoyed with my colleagues, hopefully my reflections will help others consider how they can build collaborative endeavors with their colleagues. Some of these thoughts may also be relevant to adjunct and contingent medievalists who desire to stay intellectually engaged, but are receiving less institutional support and resources for research.
The first strategy, working with fellow faculty in adjacent fields, came the most naturally to me. In graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, a host of formal groups — the Medieval/Renaissance Seminar, the Medievalists@Penn reading group and the Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies reading group — made those connections easy for me. At a small liberal arts college, however, I don’t have the luxury of specialized working groups with their formal structure to develop ideas, or dozens of colleagues with similar backgrounds and methodologies. At a small liberal arts college, I find myself fighting the constant temptation with colleagues to revert back to discussing teaching, what we have in common, instead of stretching myself to discuss our very different research agendas, which involves a lot of explanation. Planning to get lunch or coffee to specifically discuss our current research, or making a conscious effort to ask about a friend’s work, is a stretch but has helped me understand their work better and often yielded new ideas for me as well.

Conversations with colleagues have given me a fresh perspective on existing research interests that can also cycle back into teaching. At present, I do not teach the material that forms the basis of my scholarly writing and research. Without that really direct, obvious link between classroom praxis and research agenda, I’ve found that leveraging my colleagues’ expertise to rethink the foundational ideas about my research helps me sustain the “teacher-scholar” balance. Chatting with friends about my current teaching and writing helps me narrow the gap between my on-campus commitments and my long-term research interests. Casual conversations with our resident classicist Philip Walsh, for example, led to us holding a one-time special event that brought together students from his Elementary Greek class, my general education course on the Bible as Literature, and my upper-level English majors seminar on Anglo-Saxon Language and Literature. We worked together to create the symposium, in which students from each class read aloud and discussed the account of the nativity from Luke’s gospel in Greek and Anglo-Saxon. Since both Phil and I work on translation and reception, this exchange was a chance to integrate our teaching and re-
search, with some exciting discoveries about etymology and cultural inheritance happening in the moment with the students. The students enjoyed the program and brought those ideas back to subsequent classes. Phil and I have been able to continue that conversation about translation with more knowledge of each other’s research and background, which keeps those ideas fresher in my mind. In the course of lunches with my medievalist colleague in the history department, Janet Sorrentino, she brought up her own recent research on Muslim travel writing. Janet inspired me to teach some Arab travel writers alongside Mandeville in a Medieval Literature survey course. Instead of having to research the genre and its context from scratch, I could leverage her background to help me prepare to teach those new texts. I’m constantly talking with colleagues to glean ideas, questions, and expertise from them, whether it’s the poet who talks about reworking history as metaphor, the business professor enthused about revision and rhetorical precision in writing, or the philosopher excited about feminist theory developments. Some of their ideas have led to better teaching strategies, and other times just having the conversation about common interests keeps me motivated to carve out time for my own writing.

Being immersed in the work of teaching can make encounters with colleagues’ research newly vital and transformative because the stakes can be so much higher. My friend Jonathan Hsy visited campus last spring and presented his current research on the history of eyeglasses in the Middle Ages. Before Jon’s visit, I prepared my Arthurian Literature students by discussing the burgeoning field of disability studies. A student then decided she wanted to bring that perspective to bear on Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval*. Her sharp and insightful essay on Perceval as an autistic character completely transformed my understanding of the text. Those new insights led to me rethinking my Attendance and Participation syllabus policy, with help from Andrea Vassar, director of the Disability Services and the Office of Academic Skills on campus. This more precise and explicit policy, structured like a “social script” that spells out expectations in a particular scenario, has actually resulted in a better classroom
environment since expectations are now more clear for all students. Talking about research as a regular activity with colleagues and students can yield these kinds of fortuitous benefits, and can help us bridge the divide between the teaching that ties us to our home institutions and the research that nurtures us.

Building connections to active artists and practitioners, a second and very different form of collaboration, has required me to think more critically about how what I teach connects with the present. I try to attend as many presentations and craft talks by visiting artists as I can. The presence on campus of the Rose O’Neill Literary House and its attached Print Shop, with hundred-year-old antique letterpress, offers unique opportunities to ground my students in material texts, such as when I could bring Medieval Literature students in to handle lead type and see letterpress for themselves as we discussed early printing. Then a visiting typography designer, Cyrus Highsmith, helped students connect unfamiliar manuscript culture with their daily experiences with electronic and print typeface. By explaining his process and showing finished typefaces he had designed, Cyrus attuned students to the importance of empty space and legibility as key elements in designing lettering and the look of a page. Students returned to studying the mise-en-page of online images of the Auchinleck Manuscript with new attention to line breaks and empty space as actively creating meaning. Instead of just talking about the content, students looked at manuscript images and discussed, for example, how rhyming couplets reinforced line breaks, and how stanza organization in Middle English romances seemed more significant units of meaning in the edited versions than the manuscript, where they were not as visually prominent, changing how they read the text. The modern artist’s perspective helped us deepen the literary sophistication of our class discussion.

In classes I have taught to date, we’ve enjoyed visits by several other working artists: a dramaturge, a director, a lighting designer, a playwright, and a poet. These artists will note elements of craft I did not initially see, as when an actor physically shows us all a staging problem in Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s plays, or
a published poet discusses an adaptation of alliterative meter in modernist poetry influenced by Anglo-Saxon traditions. Such insights always deepen and enrich the conversation. In turn, that often encourages students to ask more questions and try to connect our literary, historical material to their own experiences in the creative and performing arts. Seeing advanced practitioners offer those connections models for how students to connect their own avocations to medieval literature and culture. Those connections make my potentially marginalized position—working on historically distant and little-known material—more clearly central to the humanities and arts as whole on campus, both for me and for my students.

Finally, the third strategy I’ve used in forging collaborations has been in exchanges with other subject matter experts, which often takes me beyond the humanities, and means I’m offering a literary historical perspective to others. The temptation will always be to talk about teaching, the easiest common denominator, but there’s validation in discussing research with a friend who hears your ideas develop, even if they don’t know the context. When I was researching torture, I visited my colleague Rachel Durso’s class on the sociology of punishment. I walked students through medieval and early modern methods of judicial torture, incarceration, and punishment to give a historical context to how systems of punishment reflect cultural values. In turn I learned from Rachel about post-1800 American penal systems, which often were presented as enlightened in contrast to “medieval” models. Asking our ornithology expert Jennie Carr about bird behavior in poems by Anne Bradstreet arose from a student question in a class on premodern women writers: “To what extent is the bird behavior described in a poem merely a metaphor, or does it describe how real birds behave?” In answering that question, Jennie and I discovered many cases of birds in poetry imitating the behavior of birds in real life. We are now collaborating together on an NEH-funded project contrasting how birds are depicted in Chaucer’s “Parliament of Fowls” against actual bird behavior and modern day classification systems. We will be working with both my own students
from Chaucer and Medieval Literature and Jennie’s Evolutionary Biology class to explore these questions, bringing together biology and English majors. That joint research will form the basis of a talk in Fall 2016, as well as an interactive gallery exhibit open to the public in downtown Chestertown. All of this work will be incorporated into a website to serve as a teaching resource for others interested in teaching “Parliament of Fowls,” which I will be piloting myself by teaching the poem in a British literature survey course in Fall 2016. Hopefully, just as English and poetry fans will glean some better understanding of birds and the natural world from this project, science students and colleagues will learn about the historical roots of observing the natural world and what medieval studies has to teach them.

When I say “subject matter experts,” I include collaborations with my faculty-librarian colleagues, who constantly help me and my students to engage more deeply with primary sources. My most recent completed digital humanities project came about because a colleague in Environmental Studies mentioned his work with the MIT Annotation Studio, a collaborative web-based annotation tool that enables students to annotate texts with video, pictures, web links, and comments. Specialists in Academic Technology helped me implement the technology side so that I could focus on helping students create these multimedia annotations. In their pop-up annotations, students considered how the research they did changed their understanding of Middle English romances — as when some students developed more sympathy for the mother in Lay le Freine, for example, after reading articles about medieval childhood, and they noted their reactions on the specific lines they now read differently. Another set of students became more disturbed by the Saracen/Christian conflict in King of Tars once they learned about coexisting communities in medieval Spain. They linked the text to images of historical maps they found online to illustrate the proximity and interconnections among members of these religious groups, demonstrating that these conflicts were not inevitable in the medieval world. Densely annotating these texts in this way would not be possible without this technology
that enabled multiple students to work simultaneously and collectively with a variety of media. The students gained greater historical perspective because they were working with modern technology that enabled them to connect everything they were learning back to the text in a visual, interactive way.

My biggest future gambit in bringing historical perspective will be a planned summer course in England for summer 2018, co-taught with Laura Eckelman. As a professor and professional practitioner of theatrical design and productions, Laura will be able guide our students’ exploration of performative and contemporary elements of the medieval mystery cycle plays performed that summer in their original towns of Chester and York. Her expertise on space and place, and more recent theatrical history, will be invaluable. Our hope is that students will become deeply versed in our main theme, “Ways we relate to the past in present locations.” Whereas I’m firmly rooted in (relatively) stable texts and a past that has always already happened, Laura brings an entirely different perspective as someone who works in the present. Whatever happens in that class, I suspect I will probably come back more changed than the students.

Developing these collaborative strategies has taken time. When I started at Washington College, I thought about intellectual community primarily in terms of shared research interests. Graduate school training, our major conferences like Kalamazoo and Leeds, and our professional organizations all prepare medievalists to flit across disciplinary boundaries. But we don’t always cultivate cross-period connections — or going beyond the humanities — with the same assiduity. On the advice of a friend I joined Twitter to stay connected with the larger medievalist community when I took this job. That helps to motivate my own research and makes conferences livelier events as I meet up with other medievalist Twitterati, and live-tweet panels. But to my surprise, the real transformation has been expanding my own sense of what it means to be a collaborative medievalist, going beyond my discipline to work actively with others here at Washington College. I don’t think I’ve felt this excited about learning new things, without even knowing
where they might lead, since I started my own undergraduate education.