Not many undergraduate students can claim that they collaborated with a professor to research and produce a piece of work. Thanks to the WFU Humanities Institute’s College Collaborations program, however, three Wake Forest juniors can now add the title of student curator and researcher to their resume. Earlier this year Maryanne McGrath, Caroline Nelson and Caroline Culp, working with Art History Professor Morna O’Neill, each researched and wrote a dossier for a piece of art that will be showcased in an upcoming Reynolda House Museum of American Art exhibit entitled *Domestic Bliss*. The exhibit, a product of this unique student-faculty collaboration, will showcase pieces that graced the walls of the Reynolda House when it served as a home for the Reynolds family, highlighting the tension between ideal presentations and real manifestations of 18th century domestic life.
Maryanne, Caroline and Caroline all participated in Professor O’Neill’s Art 273 course, in which they studied 18th century European art from the end of Louis XIV’s reign through Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo. The class explored artistic themes across the era’s European and imperial geography, encountering topics such as the emergence of a middle class imagination and the ramifications of artistic display within domestic contexts. This study continued beyond the classroom, as Professor O’Neill and her three collaborators dove deeper into the problems surrounding 18th century depictions of women, children and family life. Participating in collaborative research empowered the students to take the ideas they discussed in class to a deeper level, achieving a new level of ownership over their own academic discovery. For example, Maryanne, a WGS minor, used her final paper for Art 273 to discuss the figure of Madame de Pompadour, the official mistress of King Louis XV of France. Her piece in the exhibits depicts
Mrs. Fitzherbert, the mistress of England’s George IV, challenging viewers to wrestle with 18th century perceptions of womanhood and propriety. The project also prompted the students to confront larger issues surrounding art and scholarship. Caroline Nelson remarked that preparing her contributions continually reminded her that each piece she encounters has a lot to teach her, that there is “always so much more to learn than meets the eye.”

As for Professor O’Neill, she regards this kind of project as a perfect opportunity to help students move their intellectual engagement beyond the classroom. “It makes them think about issues like scholarly voice, point of view and presentation of materials,” says O’Neill. Additionally, moving students beyond the typical coursework helps them take the critical leap from student to expert, in this case, “from art history student to art historian.” Everyone involved in the project hopes that their example will empower other students to initiate collaborative research opportunities in the future. As Caroline Nelson put it when asked what she would say to other students who were thinking about conducting research with a professor: “DO IT. The end.”

*Domestic Bliss* will be on display in the Reynolda House Museum of American Art December 17, 2011-May 20, 2012. For more information on the exhibit click [here](#). The images in this story were posted courtesy of the [Reynolda House Museum of American Art](#), Winston-Salem, North Carolina.