

Jennifer Sciubba '01

Political demographer applies her liberal arts training to assess and communicate the implications of population trends.

BY JOANNA NESBIT

Jennifer Sciubba '01 has long had a passion for asking complex questions about why things happen the way they do. The political demographer recalls a specific moment during her senior year at Agnes Scott College when she was exploring graduate programs with her academic advisor.

"I remember wanting to know if there were people who were looking deeply at the long-term underlying causes of war," she says.

It wasn't a random question for Sciubba. An international relations major, she was fascinated by political science and would later work as a demography consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense. Her first book, *The Future Faces of War: Population and National Security*, was published in 2010 after she earned her doctorate in government and politics from the University of Maryland.

She couldn't know it then, but her habit of asking deep questions set the stage for her future work. Today, Sciubba is a leading expert on demographic trends and their implications for politics, economics and social relationships. In her latest book, *8 Billion and Counting: How Sex, Death, and Migration Shape Our World*, she contends that a deeper understanding of fertility, mortality and migration is a prerequisite to creating global solutions for improved lives.

Sciubba recently transitioned to the role of president and CEO of the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) after 15 years of teaching international studies at Rhodes College as a tenured professor. PRB is a nonprofit research organization based in Washington, D.C., that analyzes demographic data to advance solutions for urgent challenges. It's exactly where Sciubba wants to be.

"I wanted to be able to impact more of the conversation around population," she says. "My work at PRB gives me that opportunity."

Looking back, Sciubba credits Agnes Scott's liberal arts emphasis and several inflection points with shaping her professional arc. Japanese language classes and a three-week Global Connections trip to Japan played a starring role. The trip and her project exploring Japan's low birthrate sparked an interest in gender and fertility.

"I was already starting to figure out there was something different about Japan because I had been studying it so much," Sciubba says. Her interest held, and a forthcoming book, *Population Politics: Navigating Uncharted Territory*, includes a discussion of gender relations in Japan.

Sciubba also remembers attending an Asian history

class the day the world crossed the 6 billion people mark in October 1999. The late Professor Emerita of History Penelope Campbell told her students she had chosen never to have children due to overpopulation.

"I was fascinated by the fact that someone would be so completely committed to the relationship between population and resources that they would change their own life," Sciubba says.

Professor Emerita of English Linda Hubert '62 helped her decide to focus on international relations.

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— Jennifer Sciubba '01, president and CEO of the Population Reference Bureau

Sciubba has always considered herself a writer and wanted to double major in English, but Hubert questioned her habit of weaving political context into her literary analysis papers.

“She made a big impression on me,” Sciubba says. “I realized then I’m always going to bring everything back to politics.” She dropped the idea of double majoring but continued to write, penning articles for the school newspaper and later working for the writing center at the University of Maryland during graduate school.

A high school passion for theater parlayed into working in film and TV at Agnes Scott, facilitated by the frequent film crews on campus. At the time it was simply fun, but the public speaking skills Sciubba developed have directly benefited her career. She notes that the broad training of a liberal arts education helps students develop not only communication skills, but also the critical ability to make connections.

“By themselves, these things don’t look like they’re related,” she says, “but they all contribute to a larger story. You can’t talk about policy if you don’t also understand some of the science behind it.”

Sciubba has stayed connected to her alma mater over the years. In October, she returned to the Agnes Scott campus to participate in the Fifth Annual Women’s Global Leadership Conference, where she spoke on a panel addressing culturally responsive and patient-centered care. She also has mentored students and recent graduates and served on the Agnes Scott Alumnae Association Board of Directors.

As students face hard decisions about what to study, Sciubba encourages them to ask themselves not what they want to do, but what problems they see and what contribution they can make.

More than two decades later, “I still care about the big questions,” she says.

