



Dr. Jim Heldman

WKU English

Department Head, 1972-1979

By Collin Massie

“Even in the most unlikely places
and among the most unlikely
people...Jane Austen’s novels can
be a source of reassurance, joy,
and even survival.”

- Dr. Jim Heldman

Dr. Jim Heldman began his career as English department head fall of 1972, after Dr. Wood’s resignation from the position that spring. After a national search, Dr. Heldman was chosen for the position, coming from the University of Missouri. One can infer from his documented discourses in *The Herald* that he came to the new position with a sense of cautious excitement—cautious because he was hesitant to discover how he would handle his new managerial duties, but excited because he could combine them with teaching.

Dr. Heldman was a man born for teaching. After his final years of service in the Air Force, during the Korean War (at which time he married his life partner, Nancy Atkins), he went back to his alma mater of UNC to earn his Masters in drama. He then taught at Roanoke College for two years, as their one-man theater department. He later earned his PhD in English from UNC and taught at the University of Delaware and the University of Missouri before arriving at WKU.

Dr. Heldman is credited with teaching the department’s first study-abroad course, leading a London theatre tour. He would later, when no longer department head, continue to lead study-abroad courses as a professor. Throughout the 1980’s, other professors began to teach study-abroad as well: Joe Glaser, Pat Taylor, Walker Rutledge, Jim Flynn (department head 1979-1984), and later Lloyd Davies. Professor Rutledge and Dr. Davies continue to do so at the time of this profile.

Also, during Dr. Heldman's time as head of the department (indeed, starting in 1972, at the start of his term), there was the birth of the Writing Center, or, as it was originally called, the Writing Lab. The Writing Lab took some time before it became the Writing Center we know and love today—a room filled with student workers and graduate assistants eager to help students from all over campus. At the start, it was only a one-manned operation, under the directorship of John Reiss, who would continue to be its director until 2000.

Though there were indeed a number of improvements made in the department under Dr. Heldman's leadership, he ended up feeling near the end of his term that he wasn't doing as much for the department as he believed the department needed; he felt that he didn't have the time to devote the necessary effort to helping it grow. In 1979, when he decided to step down from his managerial duties, he said that he was being "promoted" to a teaching job. "Because of my work here," he said, "I've moved further and further away from books and students. I've had time to realize that those are the things that matter to me." He had only been able to teach one class a semester during his time as department head, and, for a man who loved teaching as much as he did, that was not going to be enough. "Frankly," he said, "I'm delighted with the promotion."

Dr. Heldman continued to teach in the English Department until 1997, when he entered into early retirement with special tenure status. During his post-department head professorship, he joined the Jane Austen Society of North America, becoming its vice president in 1993 and later its secretary in 1996. He loved the works of Jane Austen; her and her works made up the central figure of his academic concentration on Victorian literature. He presented a number of works to the society, including "The Crofts and the Art of Suggestion in *Persuasion*: A Speculation."

Dr. Heldman passed away peacefully on Aug. 2, 2015, at the age of 85. He was survived by his wife of 63 years and his daughter, Julia Thomas, and her family. Dr. Heldman, like those before him, continued the legacy of leading the WKU English Department with a genuine spirit and strong effort to improve it. Thus, the position passed on to Dr. Jim Flynn.

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