From the Department Head’s Desk . . .

It is with great excitement that we begin another academic year here at the Top of the Hill. The Department of Philosophy and Religion has undergone some changes in the past year, but once again a dedicated faculty and energetic and inquisitive students embark on the careful study, reflection, and discussion of matters philosophical and religious. It is a journey that faculty and students take together in an effort to attain insights and clarity about the world in which we live and the ways in which we live in it.

This year begins with important staff changes. We celebrate with Dr. Edward Schoen and Dr. Arvin Vos their decisions to enter the WKU optional retirement program, joining Dr. John Long who moved into optional retirement last spring. We are fortunate that this program will allow all three to continue teaching in the department on a part-time basis, and we thank them for their many years of excellent teaching and the contributions they have made to the department and WKU. Another change has been my arrival as the new department head. I am honored to have been asked to join the department in this role. I am enthusiastic about the department's past success, excellent faculty, and prospects for further growth and new initiatives. I look forward to our work together.

Students in the department as well as alumni who return to visit also will notice physical changes in the department. New technology is being put into classrooms, renovations to others are being completed, a language lab is taking shape, and even the student library and lounge is getting some needed new furniture and renovation. For alumni who are in the neighborhood, be sure to stop by when you have a chance. We'd be happy to show you what's been done and what is planned next.

In this issue of the newsletter, you'll find news about what faculty and students have been doing over the summer as well as some of the physical changes and initiatives that are going on in the department. We'd also like to share alumni news in future issues of the newsletter, so if you are an alumnus of the department please be sure to keep us up to date on what’s going on. Enjoy.

Eric Bain-Selbo
Department Head
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Departmental Faculty Win Prestigious Awards

Two members of the Department of Philosophy and Religion received significant college and university awards this past spring.

Joseph Trafton received the Teaching Award for the Potter College of Arts and Letters. Dr. Trafton has achieved a strong reputation for his teaching skills and his attention to student success. Frequently nominated for College awards, this is the second time he has won the Teaching Award. In addition, he is one of two Distinguished University Professors in the department (Dr. Michael Seidler is the other).

Jeffrey Samuels was this year’s recipient of the Potter College Research/Creativity Award. His many publications in Buddhist studies (particularly Buddhist monasticism) have garnered critical acclaim and led him to be recognized as a leading scholar in the field. Dr. Samuels was honored further when he was selected as this year’s recipient of the University Research/Creativity Award. He also is a past winner of the college Teaching Award.

The faculty, staff, students, and alumni congratulate Dr. Trafton and Dr. Samuels on these honors. They represent well the department's commitment to the education of our students and the role that active scholarship can play in that endeavor.
Professor Vos Delivers Lectures in China

In June of 2006, Professor Arvin Vos participated in a Sino-American Symposium on Medieval Philosophy at Peking University in Beijing. At that conference he met several of the Philosophy and Religious Studies professors from Wuhan University. Early this spring Prof. Sang Jingyu, head of the Comparative Philosophy Division, invited Dr. Vos to come to Wuhan and deliver lectures on medieval philosophy. And so he did, delivering four lectures in June—one each on Augustine and Dante and two on Aquinas.

Dr. Vos reports being very impressed with the students at Wuhan and also with the interest of faculty members in Western philosophy, medieval philosophy and Thomas Aquinas in particular. For example, members of the department are currently publishing a new translation of the entire Summa theologiae. Dr. Vos found the students very capable and with a lot of stamina—each lecture was about 1.5 hours and the question period lasted another half hour or more.

Attendance at the lectures varied from 20 to 35 students, a number of whom were doctoral students, as well as a number of faculty members. The goal of many of these students is to have an opportunity to study in the United States.

Feel free to ask Dr. Vos about his trip and his lectures the next time you see him.

Dr. Samuels Returns From a Year at Cambridge

Dr. Jeffrey Samuels returns to the religious studies program at Western Kentucky University after spending the 2006-07 academic year as a visiting scholar at Cambridge University and a research associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Funded by a yearlong fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Dr. Samuels spent the year in the U.K. completing a manuscript on Buddhism and emotion in contemporary Sri Lanka.

In addition to presenting papers at Oxford University, University of London, Bristol University, and the International Buddhist College (Thailand), he published an article on “Buddhism and Caste in India and Sri Lanka” in Religion Compass and a chapter titled “When Words are not Enough: Eliciting Children’s Experiences of Buddhist Monastic Life through Photographs” in Visual Research Methods: Image, Society, and Representation.

Dr. Samuels extensive research and publishing accomplishments reflect the university and the department’s commitment to high quality scholarship that contributes to the educational experience of Western students. In light of that commitment, Dr. Samuels received the 2007 University Research/Creativity Award from Western Kentucky University.

Philosophy Student Receives Evans Scholarship

Senior philosophy major Rebecca Brandt was awarded the Jonathan Andrew Evans Merit Scholarship for the 2007/8 academic year.

This scholarship was established this past year by Dr. Eugene Evans, a former faculty member in the Gordon Ford College of Business. The scholarship was established in honor of his son, who was a graduate of Western Kentucky University with majors in philosophy and German.

In years to come the award will be given to different students majoring in the humanities. It is appropriate that a philosophy major receive the inaugural award. Several faculty members of the philosophy program remember Jonathan Evans as one of their best students.
As Western Kentucky University embarks on its new capital campaign, please consider dedicating your contributions to the Department of Philosophy and Religion to further the study of philosophy and religious studies.

The beginning of the 2007/08 academic year is being accompanied by some significant physical changes in the department.

The most significant development is the ongoing renovation of Room 301 and upgrade of computers. The spacious room now will serve students as a language lab for those taking Arabic (and perhaps Hebrew, and Greek in the future). With six computers and ample study space, students in the department will have a new place to work on their language or other courses.

The department’s seminar room also has undergone significant change. Walls have been stripped, repaired, and newly painted. A new carpet has been installed and new furnishings are on the way. For students and faculty in seminar courses as well as for special events, these renovations promise to provide an inviting and comfortable place to do our work.

Students returning this fall also will find changes in the student lounge, now renamed the Student Library and Resource Room. New couches and tables already have been put in the room—funded by the generosity of alumni from the department. In addition, plans to replace the carpet already are in the works.

Room 302 has received an upgrade in some of the audio/visual equipment, including speakers that will benefit greatly students as they listen to lectures, watch films, etc.

Students in the coming years will be enjoying these improvements as they complete their programs with us. If you are an alumnus, please stop by and see what we’ve done.

Extensive Renovations on Departmental Floor

Professor Mukonyora Serves As Expert Witness

Dr. Isabella Mukonyora recently testified as an expert witness in the case of an African woman being tried for illegally importing animal parts into the United States.

According to the New York Post, Mamie Manneh Jefferson was charged with illegally importing parts of “wild African animals . . . to peddle to local markets.”

She was arrested in 2006 after customs officials at JFK airport found various animal parts in a shipment sent to her.

According to the Staten Island Advance, Jefferson “filed a motion in Brooklyn federal court to dismiss charges of smuggling [the animal parts] into the country.” She contends that the meat products and their consumption is “part of her religious beliefs, and that it is a protected right.”

Jan A. Rostal, the defendant’s attorney, said the prosecution -- apparently the first of its kind regarding this practice -- violated her client's right to “religious free exercise.” She branded it as “overkill.”

The Staten Island Advance reports that Ms. Jefferson is a member of a church that blends Christianity with African Traditional Religion. As part of their beliefs, they eat various boiled meats on Christmas and Easter and at weddings and baptisms. “Ms. Manneh's sincere belief is that [consumption of these meats] after [they are] blessed, makes one 'closer to God,'” her lawyer wrote.

Because of her expertise in the area of African religion, Dr. Mukonyora was brought to New York City to testify in the case.

When is religious exercise protected and when is it not?
Other Faculty, Student, and Alumni News

Alumni

Howell Williams, a 2002 graduate of the WKU Religion Program and a soon to be Ph.D. from Florida State University, will be returning to the Bowling Green campus this spring to teach one section of Introduction to Religion and one section of Religion in Contemporary America. Her dissertation, to be defended in October, is entitled "Negotiating the Choppy Waters of the Ecclesiastical sees: Que(e)rying Catholic Religious Reform Movements."

Students

Brandon Johnson, a senior philosophy and religious studies major, returned to campus this year after having spent five months in China. Mr. Johnson was funded by a Benjamin Gilman scholarship. He studied philosophy, religious studies, tai chi, and the Chinese language in Beijing. Mr. Johnson plans to continue his studies in graduate school in philosophy/religious studies with an emphasis in Chinese thought.

The Philosophy Club invites all interested students to join them at their regular meetings on Wednesdays, 5 p.m., in CH 302.

Faculty

Oliver Scharbrodt, assistant professor, was invited to attend an international research workshop on Islamic Fundamentalism and Sufism, organized by the Israel Science Foundation and held at the University of Haifa in Israel, on 1-4 July 2007 (for further information see website: http://islamw.haifa.ac.il/). Around 30 invited speakers from North America, Europe and the Middle East discussed the relationship between fundamentalism and Sufism in modern Islam and explored new perspectives and avenues of research.

Bella Mukonyora, assistant professor, has been appointed to the Task Force on Sustainability of the American Academy of Religion.