From the Department Head’s Desk

How exciting to be in the midst of another academic year!

For folks who follow such matters, news about higher education often seems bleak. State budget cuts contribute to steady tuition increases—shifting an incredible financial burden from the public to individual students and their families. Relatedly, the student debt crisis threatens the future of an entire generation, and potentially undermines the higher education enterprise. On top of all this are various sensational stories about major college athletics—coaches paid millions as libraries struggle to buy needed books, athletes exploited for the financial gain of the institutions, and much more. In short, news about higher education often is not good.

But for those of us who work in higher education and know the joy of working with students, we know the millions of other stories that never make the news. We know the delight of hearing a student summarize a difficult philosophical argument, and seeing the light of understanding pop up over his or her head. We know the satisfaction of reading the student paper in which he or she grapples critically and sensitively with religious traditions very different from his or her own. We rejoice in those moments when students not only learn new ideas and encounter different cultures, but when these experiences provide them with the opportunity to learn something about themselves and their own culture.

In short, the start of the new academic year is good news indeed!

Eric Bain-Selbo, Department Head

Chinese Scholar Teaching Course in the Spring

For several years, the Department of Philosophy and Religion has had a faculty exchange program with Wuhan University in China. This academic year, Dr. Li Yong will be visiting in the spring and teaching a second bi-term course on Chinese philosophy (PHIL/RELS 401).

Dr. Li is not a stranger to working in the United States. As a graduate student at Wuhan, he spent a year studying philosophy at Calvin College in Michigan. He then enrolled at St. Louis University in Missouri, where he earned a Ph.D. in 2012 with a dissertation entitled Moral Partiality. His area of specialization is ethics, with additional expertise in Chinese philosophy and philosophy of religion.

Dr. Li has a long list of publications and presentations, and undoubtedly will provide students with a unique and fruitful educational experience.

As part of the exchange program, Dr. Eric Bain-Selbo, Department Head in Philosophy and Religion, will be teaching a four-week course at Wuhan in June 2015.
Welcome to Our New Faculty Member

The department is thrilled to welcome Dr. Michael Reno for the 2014/15 academic year. Dr. Reno comes to WKU as a sabbatical year replacement for Dr. Michael Seidler, who is in Germany conducting research (see May newsletter for full story).

Dr. Reno earned his doctorate at Michigan State University. His dissertation was entitled “Adorno and the Possibility of Practical Reason.” He specializes in social and political philosophy, 20th century European philosophy, and critical social theory. He brings a wealth of teaching experience, having offered courses at Grand Valley State University, Eastern Michigan University, Central Michigan University, Lansing Community College, and Michigan State University.

During the year, Dr. Reno will teach a number of introductory level courses as well as Ethical Theory (PHIL 350) in the fall and Kant and Idealism (PHIL 346) in the spring.

Department Sponsors Symposium on Islam

The Department of Philosophy and Religion continues an impressive sponsorship of regional, national, and even international conferences with this fall’s Symposium on Peace, Islam, and Counter-narratives. The conference will be held at the Augenstein Alumni Center, September 29-October 1.

This conference, organized by Dr. Nahed Zehr, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, brings together academics, practitioners, policy influencers, and Muslim thought leaders to discuss the potential strategic role of Islam in American security policy and initiatives. It focuses on the role of “counter-narratives” or the attempt to respond to the ideology of militant groups, and is especially interested in how this may apply in the war against al-Qaeda. The overarching aims of this conference are two-fold:

• To bring together an interdisciplinary group of experts, along with an interested public, to share their work, build partnerships, and construct “next steps.”
• To examine both the strengths and shortcomings of the counter-narrative initiative, as well as the ethical questions that are involved.

For more information, visit the symposium’s website at http://www.wku.edu/eps/counter-narrative/index.php.
Dr. Anton Offering Course on Bad People on Campus and in Prison

Last year, Dr. Audrey Anton was awarded a highly-competitive grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop a new course titled “Why Are Bad People Bad?” (PHIL 211). This fall, Dr. Anton is teaching the course for the first time, and she will offer two sections in the spring.

One of the sections in the spring will be quite unique. The course will be taught as part of a special educational program at the Lois M. DeBerry Special Needs Facility in Nashville, TN. The course will be limited to 10 WKU students who will accompany Dr. Anton to the facility to meet with inmates who also will be taking the class. Fortunately, students who cannot make the commitment for this special section of the course can sign up for the section offered here on the main campus.

Much of Dr. Anton’s recent work has focused on this course and issues related to it. This summer she participated in “Evil Incarnate: Manifestations of Villains and Villainy,” an interdisciplinary conference and workshop held at Case Western Reserve University. Her participation was supported by the NEH grant that she received. Dr. Anton also studied Criminology and Law with WKU’s Assistant Professor of Criminology, Dr. Carrie Trojan, in a graduate course offered this summer. This fall, Dr. Anton joined the Inside Out Prison Think Tank at the DeBerry facility, headed by WKU's Professor of Criminology, Dr. Kate King. The think tank, comprised members of the WKU community and volunteer inmates at the maximum security prison, aims to identify specific needs in the community and offer assistance whenever possible. Dr. Anton intends to employ what she has learned from all three endeavors in the implementation of PHIL 211.

Students interested in PHIL 211, either on the main campus or at the prison, are encouraged to contact Dr. Anton (audrey.anton@wku.edu) if they have questions or would like further information.
Dr. Audrey Anton, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, published her entry, "Causality," in the Encyclopedia of Criminal Justice Ethics, published by SAGE Publications, Inc.


Dr. Bella Mukonyora, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, spent part of her summer in South Africa. After 12 months of consulting with the organizers of the African Association for the Study of Religion (AASR) and the International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture (ISSRNC), she attended their co-sponsored conference at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. She presented a paper based on her current research titled, “Displacement and the Search for a Green Africa.” Dr. Mukonyora also went to Stellenbosch University where the Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics (Calvin College, Michigan) co-sponsored a workshop with Stellenbosch University’s own Beyers Naude Center for Public Theology. The workshop was entitled Citizen Mobilization in Africa: A Role for Christian Organizations. Workshop members enjoyed the beautiful scenery of the famous Cape of Good Hope, but also came face to face with the hidden world of South Africa’s shanty towns, poverty and reminders of the spread of the AIDS pandemic on the continent of Africa. A summary of Dr. Mukonyora’s paper presented for discussion at the workshop will soon be published on behalf of The Henry Institute.

Dr. Nahed Zehr, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, published “Confessional Thinking and International Relations” in a special issue of the interdisciplinary journal Soundings. During the summer, she attended a working group of just war ethicists and international lawyers on issues related to international law, just war thinking, and the war on al Qaeda. She also recently gave a lecture on Islam to a class of seniors at Russellville High School to promote awareness and discussion about the religion.

Contributions made to WKU and dedicated to the Department of Philosophy and Religion help us to provide important learning opportunities for our students. For example, last year we provided nearly $3,000 to support student travel to conferences and to participate in study abroad programs. Please consider making a gift to benefit our young scholars. Click on “Make a Gift” on our webpage for further information.

PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION NEWS

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