

Everything Old is New Again

Antiquity Reigns in Classical Studies Department



Mention classical studies and the concept will conjure a variety of images, from monks chanting morning mass in a dark, austere monastery to brooding, toga-clad Greek philosophers. But how about images of college students forming Greek and Latin reading groups outside of class, winning national Greek and Latin translation competitions and gathering for social and cultural events with other classics majors on a regular basis, all in an age when many schools view the study of antiquity as useless? Under Hillsdale College professors David Jones, Lorna Holmes, Joseph Garnjobst and Gavin Weaire, these activities and many others contribute to a thriving Classical Studies Department that considers the study of classics as relevant today as it has ever been.

Long a staple of college curricula, the study of Greek and Latin language and culture added prestige to a degree and, until the middle of the 20th century, was considered necessary to become truly educated. In 1942, however, Hillsdale's Classical Studies Department was disbanded, and it remained absent from Hillsdale's academic program until 1987. Since its reinstatement that year,

Classics Department

- Reinstated in 1987
- Four full-time professors
- Language, history, literature and culture classes
- Has one of the most visible honoraries on campus, Eta Sigma Phi

the Department has grown from a staff of two to four, and from a handful of students to over 100 enrolled this year in beginning Latin and Greek. It also now boasts one of the most visible honoraries on campus.

Associate Professor of Classical Studies Dr. Lorna Holmes was one of two professors hired following the reinstatement. While those early days posed many challenges, such as trying to refine course offerings to meet students' interests, "students have always been very responsive and willing to work hard," she said. "There's a strong intellectual culture among Hillsdale students," added Department Chairman Dr. David Jones. Such an atmosphere, coupled with students' willingness to put in the time and discipline required by the rigorous classics curriculum, creates an environment that allows the study of classics to thrive.

And thrive it has. "Hillsdale has probably as large a classics department as any small liberal arts college in the country," said Jones. Holmes echoed this, citing her 30 students enrolled in beginning Greek. "Ours is likely the largest proportional Greek program in the country," she said. "We have twice as many students as at larger schools like the University of Michigan."

What is the appeal of studying classics? "There's a resurgence of classical learning," Jones said, "because people are realizing that the new learning and educational methods are failing. There's a desire to return to the rigor and formality of strong language training." "We teach the discipline to read, study and memorize daily," added Holmes, "skills that are valuable in all areas. Plus, we read the most wonderful literature."

"I came to Hillsdale knowing I wanted to study classical languages," said senior Ben Rogers of Olive Branch, Mississippi, "because I believed it to be good preparation for a logical, critical mind. I have a better understanding of vocabulary and syntax, and have learned how to analyze literature and poetry and to slow down when reading, to pay close attention to the content."

In other cases, the classics lure unsuspecting students into their grasp. Senior classics majors Andrew Beer of Ft. Wayne, Indiana, and Aaron Pelttari of Terre Haute, Indiana, both started out as English majors, but got hooked after taking Latin. "I liked the language and grammar and the reading we did so much," recalled Pelttari. "I am a better writer and a more critical thinker because of studying classics." "The classics keep you coming back for more," added senior Keturah Kiehl of Stover, Missouri. "Reading in Greek and Latin requires a lot of time and effort, but it's worth it."

Co-curricular activities within the Classical Studies Department keep students interested and eager as well. Visiting Assistant Professor of Classical Studies Joseph Garnjobst advises Eta Sigma Phi, the classical studies honorary, which started on campus in the mid-1990s and boasts over 60 members. Members enjoy visits to regional museums and social events like a fall picnic. But Eta Sigma Phi is best known for two of its philanthropic activities—Honorama and the Dictionary Project.

Honorama started out as a bowlathon between the classics and history honoraries, but soon opened up to include all campus honoraries. "Bowling is a fun activity everyone can do," said Garnjobst, "and I thought we should do something constructive that would benefit another campus project." All money from pledges raised through Honorama goes toward the College's Spring Break Alternative program, in which college students build homes with Habitat for Humanity over their spring break.

Through the Dictionary Project, Eta Sigma Phi students give dictionaries to all third graders in the Hillsdale public school



Classics professors Joseph Garnjobst, Gavin Weaire, Lorna Holmes and David Jones garner high praise from their many students.

system to promote a love of language and literature. Garnjobst hopes to expand this service project throughout the county and enlist the help of other campus honoraries. Eta Sigma Phi students also raise money for their philanthropic projects throughout the year with such activities as bake sales and yard work.

Another popular event in the Department is the annual *Floralia*, a feast that Holmes hosts at her home at the end of the spring semester. Classics students dine on foods prepared by Holmes that are representative of what was likely eaten in ancient times—grilled sausages and chicken, fennel, artichokes, homemade bread with olive oil, honey, fruit and cheese. In keeping with the ancient theme, "we eat everything with our fingers," Holmes added.

Classics students have distinguished themselves on a national level through the Maurine Dallas Watkins National Translation Contests. Last year, Hillsdale students took one of the top

three places in four of the six contests and won more awards than any other college or university in the country. Kiehl, Pelttari, and seniors Mary Leet of Rockdale, Texas, and Chris Neuendorf of Aurora, Indiana, all placed, while 2003 graduate Ethan Torretta won first place in Advanced Latin. Torretta received a full-tuition scholarship to study classics at the graduate level at the University of Michigan. Jones hopes to develop additional connections with graduate schools as more classics majors are choosing to pursue advanced degrees.

Accolades, social events and service projects aside, it's the people at the heart of the program that make it tick. A warm camaraderie exists among students and professors within the Classical Studies Department, which stems from the faculty's dedication to their work, both academic and social. "The professors are excellent in their knowledge of the material and in their willingness to help students," said Pelttari. "They get you excited about learning," added Kiehl.

As more and more students discover each year, classical texts have as much relevance today as they did centuries ago. At Hillsdale, they are seen as a vital part of "modern man's intellectual and spiritual inheritance from the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman culture," in the words of the College Mission Statement. At Hillsdale, antiquity reigns!