A Note from the Chair

BY GLEN BREWSTER

Among the many accomplishments of the Department of English in 2007-2008 was the presentation of an impressive array of literary performances, from Pulitzer-prize winner Tracy Kidder’s guest lecture to the student poetry slam team’s competitions to theatrical productions employing faculty and students.

The English department was the primary sponsor of three of the College Guest Lecture Series speakers: acclaimed African-American poets Ruth Ellen Kocher and Patricia Smith and Tracy Kidder, whose best-selling work Mountains Beyond Mountains was last year’s Campus Book. We also co-sponsored Peter Balakian, who discussed his book on the Armenian genocide.

The WSC chapter of the English honor society, Sigma Tau Delta, was recognized as “one of the most active, vital chapters in the country” at last year’s International Convention in Louisville, KY, March 5–8, 2008. Students Brittany Blake, Ashlee Hazeltine, Jeff Johnston, Jennifer Ledbury, Karen Miele, Megan Padden, Danielle Rice, Ania Saj, Ashley Savola, Edmund St Laurent, and Jessica Torone presented critical and creative work. Ashlee Hazeltine, elected as one of six national Student Representatives, helped plan the convention and was recognized for her work; Brittany Blake was elected as Eastern Region Associate Student Representative. We initiated 27 new members into our Sigma Tau Delta chapter in April 2008.

The fall 2007 and spring 2008 productions of Georg Buchner’s Danton’s Death and William Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream had four students nominated for the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival’s (KCACTF) Irene Ryan Acting Scholarship. In addition, four other students were chosen as alternates. The Theatre Program’s student club, the Student Theatre Association, in its third year staged Jean-Claude van Italie’s Interview in spring 2008. The club used its funding to send students to the Region I festival of the KCACTF at Fitchburg State College in February 2008. STA also produced the Program’s year-end Gala in early May, a celebration of the year’s accomplishments.

WSKB, the Westfield State College campus radio station, which has been advised by English department faculty for the last dozen years, again took students from the executive board, ten this year, of various majors, to the College Music Journalism music and film conference in New York City.

We held the 2nd Annual First-year Writers Reading for composition students and teachers (organized by Joyce Hayden); a reading for faculty and staff women last March as part of a Month Celebrating Women; the Spring New Works Reading, in which 30 WSC students and faculty members participated; and a Sigma Tau Delta-sponsored “Bad Poetry” Contest in April. The Events Committee co-organized, with students from Urban Education, a campus-wide Poetry Slam in September 2007. Additionally, the WSC Slam Team competed in and won a four-college event held at American International College in October. The team competed in a regional slam at Boston University in February and performed at the Soul Food...
When Jess Torone ('08) was searching for colleges, she had an interview with an admissions representative from Harvard. At the time, Jess was delving into stage musicals for the first time, playing the role of Hope Harcourt in her high school’s production of Anything Goes. The admissions representative told her at Harvard students write their own musicals. Fortunately, Jess chose Westfield, and she came here knowing she wanted to write a musical. She just didn’t know how it would happen.

What began as parts of scenes and melodies written during the summers after her first and second years at Westfield, developed into Jess’ Honors Project, a complete book and musical score for Guys Don’t Talk About Love. The play, directed by Jess, ran as a production of our college’s Musical Theatre Guild in early November 2007. As a result of the show’s success, Jess was invited to bring members of the cast to perform at the opening dinner for the Undergraduate Conference, held at UMASS this past May. The event served as a celebratory ending to a project that was more challenging and more rewarding than Jess imagined.

Jess grew up writing stories and songs. “I like projects during the summer,” Jess says, noting that when she was in grammar school, she’d write books. Her parents, particularly her mother, encouraged this. Jess recalled one day when they were driving and came upon a tree that had been struck by lightning, “My mother pulled over, and we wrote stories about the tree down on napkins.” As an adult,
Jess has maintained this custom, keeping a notebook with her in her car so she can jot down notes at any time.

Jess said the most challenging component of her honors project was learning to notate music. She’d been writing songs at the piano for years, but memorizing what she composed rather than noting it. She took composition lessons from Dr. Andrew Bonacci for a year and a half prior to officially beginning her honors project. An additional challenge was creating “the piano vocal scores – because I just don’t think that way,” Jess says. She worked closely with Prof. Dan Kennedy, writing the vocal score measure by measure. The rest of the scoring was easier, Jess notes, because once she understood the process, she could score on the computer.

Writing the script was equally daunting at times. Though she knew she wanted the story to center on a pair of mismatched young couples during the 1950’s, Jess went through multiple drafts to perfect the plot. “I don’t remember how many revisions I did or how many drafts

Leah Nielsen and Jack Shea read,” she says, “but I couldn’t have done it without them.” Jess is effusive in her praise of the support she received at Westfield. “There’s no way I could have done this without the professors. It was the freedom I had at Westfield and the dedication of the faculty that made the project possible. It was a collaborative process.”

Jess is currently writing another musical, Toxic. “I have the main character, Michael. It’s the story of the last 24 hours of his life. I hope the story moves toward compassion, but I want him to die in the end,” she says. Adding with a slightly devious smile, “Thank you, Jack Shea,” a reference to the WSC professor’s penchant for serious drama.

Though she was accepted into the MFA program in Musical Theater Writing at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, Jess has elected to teach instead. She began teaching full time this fall at Southwick’s Powder Mill Middle School. She already has a project in mind for the students — writing a musical. She explains that some of the students could write the proposal for the project, some could work on the script, some could write the music, and in math class students could prepare the budget. A true collaboration.
Recovering the Life of the Pioneering German Playwright and Actress Frederike Caroline Neuber: A Conversation with Sabine Klein

Denise Flaim sat down with Professor Sabine Klein to talk about the project she conducted during a spring 2007 Semester Time Award for Research and Scholarship.

What got you interested in Frederike Caroline Neuber? She has always intrigued me because she was one of the pioneers in eighteenth-century theater; the available information on her work seemed limited, so I investigated further. When I was looking at German theater history, there’s very little about the 18th century before Goethe, Lessing, and Schiller.

What made her special? Neuber was part of the effort in the eighteenth century to encourage native German drama. It was very hard to start, as audiences weren’t used to literary plays. Theater in the early eighteenth century had no playwright tradition. They used the commedia dell’arte tradition, and they developed plays from the Renaissance. Actors weren’t used to memorizing long scripts or speaking in verse. It was a mix of legendary heroic figures and stories of love interrupted by a crude clownish character called Hanswurst, who would periodically pop in and satirize. It was all improvised, and there were no texts. This was a completely working-class theater; the nobility didn’t watch at all. They imported French troupes, and the court spoke French. German was considered inferior. Neuber was part of a movement to prove that native German theater could be taken seriously.

Did the research go as you had planned? Yes—I found a lot of material to write about, and there’s so much more that I can do with it. One thing that didn’t go as planned was that I had said that I would present a paper for a specific conference as my culminating piece, but their theme that year was “America.” I did end up presenting a paper where I looked at the images of Americans in German theater, which involved a play about a Native American visiting Germany that Neuber had produced. This paper examined the way in which Neuber and Gottsched were seen as partners in pioneering. My argument is that Gottsched gets more credit for their work than maybe he should. He translated a lot of plays into German, but she took on all the financial risk, and she introduced many of the innovations for which he is given credit. A lot of books, for example, divide German theater into the period before Gottsched and the period after Gottsched. I argue that it should be periodized around her instead. Neuber, of course, was not an academic; she was a woman from the lower class and an actress. This may be why she is overlooked.

What was your biggest surprise during your research? How much stuff was available in this country! I did go to Germany, though, to the house where she was born, which is currently a museum. It’s in a beautiful little village, and they had a lot of material. I got to see the theater where she staged her first professional theater production. The woman who is the curator of the museum took me on a tour of the region, showed me where she eloped, where her grandparents lived, and where she summered. It was the kind of research that I wouldn’t have had otherwise.

How will your research be used in your classes at Westfield State? I taught a special topics course in fall 2008 on German theater and drama, and for spring 2009, a special topics course

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Voices from the English Education Program

BY DELIA FISHER

For the third year, the English Education Scholarship funded two students’ attendance at the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) Annual Convention, held in November 2007 in New York City. The two scholarship recipients, Jessica Torone and Nancy Hopkins, and Dr. Delia Fisher, Coordinator of English Education, spent two days in the Big Apple absorbing pedagogies from panels and speakers. As in the past, the students and Dr. Fisher came away filled with new ideas and inspirations. Ms. Hopkins remarked in a post-convention reflection, “Being immersed in the culture of teaching reinforced my desire to become part of the community of educators. Learning that even experienced teachers continue to evolve their craft was particularly inspiring: teaching is learning.”

Back in Western Massachusetts, this past year was a full one for WSC student teachers. The English Education program supervised a total of thirteen students as they completed the final requirement for licensure certification. In addition to the demands of daily planning and adjusting to high school and middle school students, our student teachers develop a comprehensive portfolio of materials that confirm their competence in lesson and unit development, assessment, establishing relations with parents and administrations, and demonstrating appropriate “dispositions” for the profession they are entering. This latter takes the form of an assessment required for all teachers in WSC programs toward licensure, but the students themselves are the clearest and most persuasive evidence that they will be successful in the classroom. They are “practical idealists” in the fullest sense, committed to the challenges and hard work of the classroom teacher; at the same time, they approach their students with open hearts, creativity, and a genuine belief that teaching can transform lives.

Pages from a Teacher’s Journal

For this column in English at Westfield, we let the students speak for themselves. The following are excerpts from student reflections as they grow into the profession of teaching.

“I will admit I had a favorite class, my period 6 class—the last class of the day. They were the first group of students that I taught in my placement. Of course they tested me; who wouldn’t test a brand new teacher? Since I didn’t react negatively to my students’ jabs, they really began to warm up to me…. I can confidently say that I was close to every single one of my students.” (Michael Duffy, Southwick High School)

“I decided to try to have some fun with my students today by letting them listen to a song in class and pick figurative language out of the lyrics to show me that they had mastered some of the skills I was trying to teach in the poetry unit. Throughout the day, I had 100 thirteen-year-olds laugh at my song choice. If I ever do this activity again, I’ll make sure that I don’t select a Dave Matthews Band song!” (Karen Miele, West Springfield Middle School)

“Teaching a group of sixth-graders is exhilarating. Their enthusiasm is contagious and class participation is never a problem. They surprise me often with how much they know about the world, the upcoming election, our economy. There wasn’t a single morning that I did not look forward to the day ahead.” (Ania Saj, West Springfield Middle School)

From these comments, it’s easy to see why local schools are happy to welcome WSC English Education students into their classrooms. We are very proud of their efforts and their achievements, and the communities they will eventually serve are fortunate indeed.
Jeff Mucciarone arrived at Westfield State as an English major in the fall of 2000, intending to become an English teacher someday. In spring 2008, he returned. This time he was 26 years old and one of the English department’s featured alumni at the annual Spring Gathering. Over those eight years, Jeff had accomplished much: a 2004 Westfield State degree in English and communication, a 2006 master’s degree from the Perley Isaac Reed School of Journalism at West Virginia University, and, now, a job as a reporter for the Canton Journal and Stoughton Journal, two weekly publications owned by the Community Newspaper Company. Originally from Franklin, Massachusetts, Jeff had started to make a name for himself even before graduating: he was one of the English department’s essay contest winners as a freshman, was a member of the department’s honor society, Sigma Tau Delta, and wrote for the student newspaper, The Campus Voice. As a follow-up to his Spring Gathering visit, we thought it would be revealing, and fun, to turn the tables on Jeff and ask him the questions. The interview below was conducted via e-mail during the summer of 2008 by Professor George Layng.

**What brought you to Westfield State?**

I wanted to go to a smaller school, where I could get to know my instructors, and vice-versa. There’s a more intimate setting at the campus that was less intimidating and more welcoming than bigger schools. I also liked that the school was right by the Berkshires, which made for some nice weekend adventures.

**Did you plan on becoming a journalist when you first began at Westfield State? What were key factors in leading you toward journalism?**

I entered WSC planning to become an English teacher. To fill a requirement, I took an introductory journalism course with Professor Layng and I guess I never looked back. I decided to pick up a second major in communication to get even more into the media world. When reporting, you get to find out the key details and then put them together in a creative, yet structured way. I always enjoyed writing, really in any capacity, but journalism gives me a more structured outlet. There’s also a nice sense of impact, when you realize people are reading your stories and commenting on them—not that comments are always pleasant, but even the negative ones tell you someone cares about what you are writing.

**How did your Westfield State education prepare you for graduate school?**

I think WSC prepared me quite well. In fact, in many instances, I felt I was better prepared than many of the other students. Again, that intimate setting helped me work one-on-one with instructors to better develop my own writing style. I felt like I had a strong grasp of the fundamentals of news writing and interviewing when I left Westfield. During grad school, I worked on a long-term reporting project, rather than a thesis, so the writing and interviewing skills were extremely helpful.
What’s a typical day like at work? What is most satisfying? What is least satisfying?

What’s kind of nice about the profession—depending on how you look at it—is that there isn’t necessarily a typical day. I work for weekly newspapers, so one day a week I am officially on deadline, and that’s when I’m kind of scrambling a little bit finishing up stories and making last-minute phone calls. You get into a rhythm where you try to set things up for certain days. One day I’ll try to pick up the police log and take care of any stories from that. I have certain days where there are typically local government meetings, which aren’t always the most intriguing items to cover, but they almost always provide several potential stories. I try to set up longer interviews for right after deadline so I have a head start for the following week. Despite being a weekly paper, we try to do at least one story per day—that certainly doesn’t always happen though. I’m typically writing 8-10 stories per week.

I’ve really gotten the most satisfaction out of some of the longer pieces I’ve written where my editor, who is really reasonable, has given me extra time to do research and interviewing. That way, you can get all the bases covered and feel like the finished product provides the reader with just about everything they are wondering about.

On the other end, time is a big factor. And sometimes, you simply don’t have the time to make a story as compelling or interesting as it should be. That’s frustrating, especially when you think a story is particularly important. But deadlines are hard and fast, and sometimes people don’t get back to you quick enough or at all. Also, being a weekly paper, it’s frustrating when something big happens right after deadline. You can always get it online, but it’s tough when the print edition comes out and there’s no mention of some significant happening.

What has been your most satisfying story to date?

I wrote a piece about the Massachusetts cod and haddock fishing industry, specifically with the South Shore and Cape Cod, though I did talk to some fishermen in the big ports of Gloucester and New Bedford. It was definitely, at least in my mind, the most interesting story I’ve done. The dangers of fishing are well documented in movies and television shows, like The Deadliest Catch, so my office had me focus more on the complicated restrictions local fishermen deal with. They have a certain number of “days at sea” and fish-catch limits that are so restrictive they are putting lots of fishermen out of business. In many cases, it seemed like restrictions may have been counterproductive. There also seem to be some interesting issues about just how much cod and haddock is out there. Some fishermen said there was plenty of fish, while others were in support of some form of restrictions. Both sides say the government should look at developing more effective limitations.

Where would you like to be in your career in 15 or 20 years?

I would hope to be working on longer-term projects, where I can get deeper into issues and write longer, more in-depth pieces. That’s probably more likely to happen at a magazine or a specialty publication, so we’ll see how that goes. I’d also like to get into teaching at some point.

There’s a lot of talk in and around journalism—and in print journalism, in particular—that the future of journalism is uncertain at best and bleak at worst. Do you think so?

What does the profession of journalism look like from the perspective of a young journalist such as yourself?

I don’t think journalism’s future is by any means bleak, but I do think it looks like it’s changing in a lot of ways, mainly moving toward the web. Even in my own office, management has instructed us to write a story or two less per week, and instead focus on alternative ways of telling stories that work well on a web site. That means creating photo slide shows with audio, and putting together short videos. That’s just started happening regularly for us in the last six months. I think newspapers in particular are really going to start looking to hire candidates who can not only write but also work with multimedia to tell stories in creative ways. The web allows information to get displayed as it’s happening instead of waiting until production. That really drives that angle, but there’s still, and I think there always will be, something to sitting down and flipping through the pages. We’ll see.

Based on your experiences so far, what advice would you give to high school students about picking a college and a career?

Try not to stress about the whole college application process. I don’t have any friends who are unhappy with the college experience. It’s cliché, but college just ends up working out.

As far as choosing a career, definitely don’t stress if you are unsure of which field to enter. If you aren’t sure, just make sure you keep avenues open.
Dinner as part of Black History Month and at Putnam Middle School in Springfield also in February.

At the annual Spring Gathering, Katie Ann Loth ‘05, a teacher, and Jeff Mucciarone ‘04, a journalist, were our alumni speakers. We also announced at that event the Senior Honors for the English Department: the Celeste Loughman Award to Karen Miele, the Bette B. Roberts Award to David Plante, the Barbara A. Welch Award to Ania Saj, and the Stephen Sossaman Award to Jessica Torone. The Department also gave Special Recognition to Elizabeth “Lizz” Tebeau, President of the WSC chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the International English honor society, and Ashlee Hazeltine, Eastern Region Student Representative for Sigma Tau Delta for 2007-2008 and Editor-In-Chief of Persona, the WSC literature and arts journal, which was rolled out at the gathering. Persona advisors and staff were asked by the WSC Foundation to provide 800 additional copies for recruitment and fundraising for 2008 and gave us a $5000 grant to support an increase in quality as well as quantity. The staff were able to double the number of pages and to increase the amount of artwork. Editor-in-Chief Hazeltine also initiated the first “winter sneak peek” issue to promote the growth and visibility of Persona. Our largest staff so far included Hazeltine, special editors Dena Fitton, Zach Bartlett, Jennifer Ledbury, and others.

At the annual Massachusetts Undergraduate Conference, English majors Jessica Torone, Karen Miele, Elizabeth Tebeau, and Erica Forish presented their research projects. As her WSC Honors Program thesis, Jessica wrote, composed, orchestrated, and directed Westfield State College’s first original musical, Guys Don’t Talk About Love, which was produced by the Musical Theatre Guild in fall 2007. In spring 2008 she described her creation at the Honors Program gathering; selections from Guys Don’t Talk About Love were featured at the annual Massachusetts Undergraduate Conference’s special showcase in May 2008. Ashley Savola was one of two WSC students who received scholarships from Kappa Delta Pi, the international education honor society, for international travel.

English faculty revived the Massachusetts State College Graduate Conference in 2006 at WSC. The 2007 conference was held at Bridgewater State College, and in 2008 it was held again on our campus. Graduate students Michelle Abbott, Christine Bousquet, Vanessa Brown, Tina Daponde, Michael Furey, Ben Gaines, Andrew Kozikowski, Adam Lafield, Rebecca Rees, and Laura Shepard read from their research and had their work published in the proceedings. Our Graduate English Program, advised by Marilyn Sandidge, continues to grow: the number of active students has gone from about 25 to more than 50 in the last few years. At the DGCE’s special “hooding” ceremony for graduate students in May 2008, eight students were recognized for receiving the M.A. in English degree, what I believe to be the largest number in the history of the program.

Karen Miele was also honored at the undergraduate commencement ceremony as the co-winner of the President’s Award, for the WSC graduate with the highest GPA in her career at WSC, an extraordinary 4.0. Karen was also one of only 3 WSC graduating seniors who received the Commonwealth Honors Scholar Distinction. At commencement, Theatre Arts Program Coordinator Jack Shea, as Chair of the All-College Committee, gave the faculty address.

We also had an English major reunion at fall 2007 Homecoming weekend, coordinated by Delia Fisher, that brought several dozen alumni back to campus. Many of you came back to share your latest adventures, personal and professional, and we want to hear from more of you. So I will conclude by asking you to get in touch using the enclosed form, via e-mail, or via phone (413-572-5332). You know we love to hear from you, so tell us what you are up to now.
When Ben Gaines was casting about for master’s programs in English—as a “prelude” to a Ph.D.—he did not at first apply to Westfield. He had completed his bachelor’s at the college in 2005 and thought he would go elsewhere for his postgraduate work. But after a semester somewhere else, he returned to Westfield because he missed classes that were “smaller, more personal” and where it was easier to fall into meaningful conversation with one’s classmates and professors. Tina Daponde, a 1997 graduate of Westfield, also came back to the college almost a decade later because she says, “I was really comfortable there and felt a personal connection.” Once in the graduate program, though, both Ben and Tina found that their courses were quite different from their undergraduate ones: they encountered new books, new kinds of questions, and a new level of difficulty.

Over the past few years, the English department’s master’s program has grown enormously and the qualities that Ben and Tina single out—personal attention and academic rigor and innovation—are the ones that define the program’s success. As Marilyn Sandidge, who has been Graduate Program Advisor and Director for eight years, says, “We have a wonderful full-time, tenure-track faculty—a stable faculty, active in research but noted for teaching as well. We work with students and care about our students, but we’re also active in our respective fields and well-respected as scholars.” This combination of a small, attentive program with new courses has attracted many students from around the area. In particular, the program has a reputation for meeting needs of teachers. Paula Sorensen, of South Hadley, who teaches middle school in Chicopee and is working on her capstone now, comments, “I find [the program] to be very well-organized and very much attuned to the Department of Education Requirements, which is really important. I appreciate knowing that the program has that aspect under control, so I don’t have to call the DoE to make sure that I am doing the right thing.”

Behind the program’s recent growth (we now have over 50 students) is a requirement in Massachusetts that teachers must earn a master’s in their discipline within five years of beginning their teaching careers. Many of our master’s students, then, come to Westfield to fulfill this requirement for graduate work, whereas others come to get licensed in the first place. With various degree options, the program serves these teachers well but also serves students such as Ben Gaines who are considering further graduate studies or who simply want the intellectual challenge of graduate work in English. Each semester, the department offers two evening graduate-level courses, as well as an upper-level undergraduate course that graduate students can take for graduate-level credit. In the summer, there are an additional two courses.

Growth in the program, as well as among the department’s own faculty, has inspired changes in the graduate curriculum. Professor Sandidge points especially to the greater variety of topics our courses now cover. Recent course titles include Seventeenth-Century Carpe Diem Poetry; Authors, Readers, and Publishers in Nineteenth-Century America; and Writing and Rhetoric: Queer Cultures. Courses scheduled for coming semesters also offer diverse perspectives on literary studies: Contemporary Native American Literature; The Forms of Modernism; and the Whitman Tradition. These courses stretch students and make the program exciting and quite different from what they encountered in their undergraduate degree programs—and the students seem to like the opportunity to read new and sometimes unfamiliar texts. As Tom Hardcastle, a Springfield resident and teacher, comments about his degree coursework here, “It has given me appreciation for authors I had never heard of, as well as authors and works that I perhaps knew of but wasn’t familiar with.” Paula Sorensen agrees, “I am an avid reader, but the majority of books I’ve read in graduate school I hadn’t read before. I appreciate professors’
Faculty News

Stephen Adams, professor, remains active in the Commonwealth Honors Program. He was the CHP Site Visit Reviewer for Springfield Technical Community College last October. He also served as a creative nonfiction reader for the 2008 Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature conference in East Lansing, MI.

Kathleen M. Baldwin, visiting assistant professor, has been a valued member of the composition program, the RISE program, and an active participant in campus Faculty Center programs. This fall, she began pursuing her Ph.D. in the Graduate Program in Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Massachusetts.

Glen Brewster, professor, continues to serve as department chair, webmaster, and advisor to the English honor society Sigma Tau Delta, The Campus Voice, and the literary journal Persona. In addition to presenting papers at the joint conference of the British Association of Romantic Studies and the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism and the 33rd annual conference on Literature and Film, he and Professor Marilyn Sandidge organized the 2008 Massachusetts State Colleges Graduate Symposium, which was held at WSC.


Janet Crosier, visiting assistant professor, designed and taught the thematic English 102 course “Writing Your Life: Memoir, Journal, and Autobiography.” She also acted in the Wilbraham United Players 2008 production of Steel Magnolias.

Vanessa Holford Diana, associate professor, is a contributor to the collection Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds, co-edited by Kristin B. Waters and Carol B. Conaway (University Press of New England, 2007), which received the Letitia Woods Brown Award from the Association of Black Women Historians for best anthology of 2007.

Jennifer DiGrazia, assistant professor, is the new coordinator of the English department Composition Program. In March, she presented a paper entitled “The Writers, The Detectives and The Feminists” at the 2008 University of Connecticut Women’s Studies conference: Transnational Feminism, Community Activism and the Politics of Empowerment.

Michael Filas, associate professor, was the Chair of Technology Division for the May 2008 conference of the Cultural Studies Association at NYU, where he organized and chaired four sessions as well as presenting a paper entitled “Post-Evolutionary Hybrids After WWI: Amazing Stories Meets Dada Photomontage.” He serves as an advisor to Persona and WSC’s radio station WSKB, and continues to accompany students to the College Music Journal Conference, Music Marathon, and Film Festival in New York City each year.

Delia Fisher, associate professor, continues to serve as Coordinator of the English Education Program. She organized an open house for student teachers, practitioners, and college supervisors in March, and initiated a pilot partnership with Putnam Vocational High School in Springfield which will begin this fall. As part of the pilot program, pre-practicum students from WSC English, Science, and History departments will participate in their 30-hour field experience at Putnam.

What We’re Reading

COMPILED BY DENISE FLAIM

Marilyn Sandidge
Since I love history and biography, I recently enjoyed The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: a Woman in World History, by Linda Colley. Although it is officially a biography of Elizabeth Marsh, the 18th-century woman who published The Female Captive about her own experiences traveling around the world, the work presents wonderfully detailed descriptions of common life in various parts of the world, of travel on boats or foot, of institutions such as the East India Company, of commercial smuggling, and of the African slave trade. Marsh herself undergoes a number of extraordinary experiences, such as barely escaping being made a member of the Moroccan Sultan’s harem, being deserted in England with her children by her bankrupt husband who flees to India, and undergoing a mastectomy in Calcutta a few months before her death in 1785, to name just a few. Colley, a history professor at Princeton, has put together a book that works wonderfully as a romance, a history, a biography, and an economic analysis all at once.

Elizabeth Starr
Getting Mother’s Body by Suzan-Lori Parks

Suzan-Lori Parks is primarily known as a talented dramatist; her play Topdog/
Denise Flaim, visiting assistant professor, has contributed richly to the English department, especially in her work for the composition committee and English at Westfield. This fall, Professor Flaim accepted a tenure-track teaching position at Springfield Technical Community College.

Joyce Hayden, visiting assistant professor, continues to organize popular poetry readings on campus including “Westfield Women Write,” part of WSC’s Month Celebrating Women, and the second annual “First Year Writers’ Reading.” Two of her pieces, the watercolor “Midnight Owl” and mixed media “Blackbirds and Lace,” were part of the Hill Institute Art Gallery Showing in June.

Sabine Macris Klein, assistant professor, directed the English department’s spring 2008 production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. She serves on the Board of Directors for the New England Theatre Conference, and, along with Professor Elinor Parker, accompanied students from the Westfield State Theatre Arts Program to the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival last year.

George W. Layng, associate professor, won a Westfield State College Foundation grant to develop a peer writing tutor course and writing tutor program at the Reading and Writing Center. He continues to direct the RWC and act as advisor for The Campus Voice. This past year he led the Campus Book Committee that brought Pulitzer-Prize winning author Tracy Kidder to campus.

Gregg Neikirk, professor, was director for the Kentucky Writers Day Conference in April 2008. He presented a paper entitled “The Old Man and the 4C’s: Teaching Hemingway in the Composition Classroom” at the 2008 International Hemingway Conference in Kansas City, MO.

Leah Nielsen, assistant professor, is an advisor for Persona and accompanied the WSC Poetry Slam Team to several events last year. In spring 2008, she co-taught, with Professor Christina Swaidan of the art department, a course that covered the history, theory, literature, art and music of the Harlem Renaissance, which also served as a forum on cross-cultural concerns on campus. As part of the course, she accompanied her students, along with a handful of WSC Ambassadors, to Harlem for a 3-day field trip where the group visited historic sites including the Apollo Theater, the Cotton Club, and the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

Sean O’Connell, visiting assistant professor, was the WSC representative to e-Tutoring’s Northeast Consortium, where he worked as an online tutor, giving students feedback on their writing via the e-Tutoring website.

Elinor L. Parker, assistant professor, was Costume Designer and Technician for the Theatre Program’s fall 2007 production of Danton’s Death and spring 2008 production of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. She also served as the 2nd Co-Vice Chair of Design and Technology for the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival.

Beth Ann Rothermel, professor, after serving as Composition Coordinator for the department from 1996-2008 returns to teaching full time in the English department. She published an essay entitled “Our Life’s Work: Rhetorical Preparation and Teacher Training at a Massachusetts State Normal School, 1877-1929,” in Local Histories: Alternative Histories (Ed. Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Moon, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007). With other Westfield faculty, she won a grant from the BRITE (Brown’s Response to Improving Teacher Education) Working Group to support professional development work geared at helping to improve the preparation of pre-service secondary school teachers to work with English language learners in the content areas.

Marilyn Sandidge, professor, was Co-director, with Professor Glen Brewster, for the 2008 Massachusetts State Colleges’ Graduate Student Research Symposium. She published “Forty Years of Plague: Attitudes toward Old Age in the Tales of Boccaccio and Chaucer” in Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Beginning of a New Research Discipline. (Ed. Albrecht Classen, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007).

Jack Shea, professor and coordinator of the department’s Theatre Arts Program, directed the fall 2007 production of Danton’s Death by Georg Buchner and performed in staged readings of Duck Variations by David Mamet and Ashes by Robert R. Lehan, at the Westfield Athenaeum, in February 2008. This fall, he directed the department’s production of Tom Stoppard’s Voyage: The Coast of Utopia Part I, the first of Stoppard’s trilogy which was previously produced by the Royal National Theatre in London in 2002 and by Lincoln Theatre in New York in 2006-07, when the trilogy won the Tony award. The Theatre Arts Program was the first theatre in the region to produce one of these plays.

Elizabeth Starr, associate professor, won a Westfield State College Foundation grant, which helped fund student travel to the Sigma Tau Delta 2008 International Convention in Louisville, Kentucky, where, with Professor Glen Brewster, she accompanied eleven students last March.

Harry Stessel, professor, continues to teach world literature and film classes.

Emily B. Todd, associate professor, continues to coordinate the internship program. She presented “American Readers and British Writers in the 1820s” at the Fifteenth Annual Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing conference in Minneapolis, MN.
Katie Ann Loth: Connecting with Students

At the last Spring Gathering, Professor Delia Fisher spoke with Katie Ann Loth (class of 2005):

Tell me a little about your life as a teacher in Pepperell, Massachusetts.
This is my third year at Nissitissit Middle School. I teach four blocks of English Language Arts, but this year I had to teach three blocks of ELA and one block of Social Studies to help with the budget … but it is only temporarily. I have about 70 seventh-graders this year. We have a wonderful community at our school, a very friendly and positive atmosphere for students as well as faculty. I am so lucky to have found such a great school.

You are a fairly new teacher. What are some of the challenges you’ve encountered in your first few years?
There were many challenges I faced upon my first year and even second year of teaching. My main challenge was finding a balance with classroom management. I was very, very strict when I first started . . . maybe even too rigid because I wanted to establish a sense of authority. I realized after taking that approach that I had to find a better balance with the kids to keep a strong relationship and a trusting one with them as well. It was difficult but, now almost done my third year, I think I finally have got a hold on it.

It’s wonderful that you are loving your work. How would you describe the “perks” of being a teacher?
In teaching there are truly benefits and I am not just talking about the vacations and snow days. As a teacher, you are able to get to know so many kids and then watch them become young men and women as they move up and up. It is great when students look up to you or truly confide in you. I love feeling that I have done something to help inspire these kids.

Can you share some tips for making connections with students?
I like to connect with students on their level and teach through their thinking because that is how you reach them – I include music of their generation, television shows, and celebrities to help connect with them as much as possible.

What are some differences between your expectations of teaching and the real thing?
What advice would you offer to new teachers?
When I was a student at WSC, I thought the classroom was a much different place. There is just so much more to a classroom when you are in sole control of it. Creating engaging lessons takes time and lots of thought … a teacher makes a million decisions in one day because you constantly change your mind. The advice I would give to students now is that as a teacher you have to be flexible and willing to change plans on the spur of the moment and be ready to teach something else if need be.

Learn to communicate with your community; this means a lot to the community in which you work - it develops your reputation. Lastly, be prepared for each and every class. Lessons end early all the time and a teacher has to be ready to come up with something at the drop of a hat.

Do you feel that you were prepared for the classroom when you graduated from WSC?
Westfield State has helped me in my preparation for teaching. It played a huge role in my success now. I had great English and education classes that were current and kept me abreast of what to do. The college is a big help because of all the observation hours and student teaching the program has you do. That truly shows you how different styles work, how different kids behave and so on. When a school gives you an opportunity to look at another teacher it is a gift. It is great to learn from someone who has been doing it for a while. Also, it is important to be practicing yourself when you student teach.
course on women and theater. Neuber will be an important figure in both.

**Will you do something book-length on Neuber?**
She does deserve a biography. I'm looking at models now for how to make it logical and accessible. In Germany, there are some very informal biographies, including one children's book.

Unfortunately, there are no good images of her from her lifetime. The only one was from a publication that was attacking her. Aside from that, some were done soon after her death that might have been copied from an original.

**Will it be a scholarly biography or a general one?**
Scholarly. I don’t know that there would be an audience in America for a Neuber biography, and I'm an academic writer by nature. I want to make sure that we have an accurate picture of her life, as far as that’s possible.

book choices because they’re not afraid to go outside of the canon.”

Our graduate students are further challenged through the research and writing assignments they complete, both in their individual courses, as well as for their capstone projects (the final requirement for the degree). For Ben Gaines, writing final papers has been a highlight of his experience in graduate school: he describes “the moment when [the paper] goes from a dread, from a looming project, to a dawning realization where the paper makes sense and you finally understand what the course is about.” Our graduate students appreciate that professors give them many options when it comes to final paper topics, and this self-directed writing and research prepares them well for the independent research required of them when they write their capstone projects. For Tina Daponde, the capstone was a high point of her graduate career: “The capstone was this opportunity to work one-on-one with a professor to see how her mind worked,” she says, describing the pleasures of working closely with Professor Rothermel on her capstone last spring.

Beyond the books assigned and the research and writing experiences offered through the master’s program, students also comment on how much their graduate school work influences them as teachers. “It made me step up my rigor in the classroom,” says Tina, and Paula reflects that “being a student helps me be a better teacher—and vice versa.” The small classes, capstone presentations and celebrations throughout the year, and the opportunity to participate in the annual Graduate Symposium (see Andy Kozikowski’s first-person account of that experience on page 14) all give students many chances to form bonds with one another, and these professional connections also inform their work as teachers and scholars. Then, there is the influence of the teaching itself. Describing Professor Starr’s Victorian Literature class, Tina comments, “I love British literature, and I brought Dickens back [to my own classes] because Professor Starr was so inspiring, and I think I can say that about all the professors. Their enjoyment is contagious, and you want to take their enthusiasm and pass it on to someone else.”
Underdog won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. She has also written several screenplays, including a screen adaptation of Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God. I was intrigued, then, when at the 2007 Sigma Tau Delta convention I attended with a group of WSC students and Professor Brewster in Louisville, KY, she began describing the experience of writing her first novel. Noting her youthful affection for Harriet the Spy, Parks told us that Getting Mother’s Body is similar in that the title tells you everything you need to know: “It is what it is,” she said. No doubt, this novel tells the story of a road trip across Texas to dig up the remains of Willa Mae Beede, supposedly buried with a valuable pearl necklace and diamond ring, whose grave is about to be paved over for a new supermarket parking-lot. Along the way, chapter-monologues take turns foregrounding Willa Mae’s family, neighbors, lover, and daughter as they contemplate the future her jewelry could buy. While Getting Mother’s Body echoes the situation and experimental point of view of William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying, Parks manages an original, devastating sleight of hand with voice, race in the 1960’s, and quirky, earthy characters. Despite Parks’ claims of transparency, this novel delivers a complex, funny, and ultimately moving story. “It didn’t turn out like we planned,” Willa Mae’s daughter admits in the end. And we’re all glad of that.

Michael Filas
Prey by Michael Crichton
When I taught an honors class about post-evolution last fall, a student recommended the novel Prey, by Michael Crichton. I tend to read more literary fare when I read for fun, but I have to confess that I was impressed by how effectively Crichton hooked me into the plot conflict from the get go. On one level it is a story about a stay-at-home dad suspecting his wife of having an affair at her high-tech job, then it quickly turns into an adventure book about reining in nanotechnology agents that have gone out of control and are replicating human forms. What I loved about this book, and what Crichton is so good at, is critiquing the state of the art in technology, but doing so with a dramatic human plot in the foreground most of the time. Although this fast-read is not overly saturated with dry descriptions of technology, Crichton grounds his techno-nightmare in solid research. In fact, he did so much research that he included a fairly scholarly bibliography as an appendix to the novel, which I found both charming and useful. I have always been fascinated with how technology shapes our cultural priorities and perceptions. Nanotechnology introduces a whole new set of metaphors and fears. Forget about cyborgs and test-tube babies: swarms of invisible self-replicating nano-agents are the next big scary thing.

Entering Into the Conversation at the Graduate Research Symposium

Andy Kozikowski

I can remember three years ago Professor Sandidge and Professor Brewster announcing to our graduate classes that Westfield State would be hosting the Massachusetts State College Graduate Research Symposium and we should consider submitting paper proposals in order to hopefully share in the experience. I can recall thinking, “That’s nice; why in God’s name would anyone be interested in what I had to say?” That is until I took Professor Brewster’s Literary Criticism class. When our research papers were returned to us mine had a note at the bottom suggesting that I submit it for acceptance to the Graduate Research Symposium. I was shocked; I was flattered; and my curiosity was piqued. That’s how it all started. That was three years ago.

Once I decided to actually submit my paper, the first obstacle I faced was writing the abstract that outlined my work. For me it was the toughest part of the entire process. Once my paper was accepted, I had to edit my work to the point where it could be read aloud in approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. This was another tricky assignment as I was faced with cutting out significant parts while trying to maintain the essay’s intellectual integrity. Heck, who am I kidding? I was just trying to get it to make sense!

Now came the tedious part, practicing. I never took this lightly. Since I wanted to make a good impression, I read it out loud and I read it often. It got to the point at home that whenever I had papers of any kind in my hand my wife (God bless her, she’s a saint) would seek asylum in another part of the house and my cats would run under the bed … Et tu Sydney and Penny?

The day of the actual presentation was incredible. I was excited; my mouth was dry; my palms were soaked; and my heart was running a marathon. But it all turned out great. I can remember as I read my paper I was thankful.
that I had read it so many times at home. The familiarity with the work made it go smoothly and at least for me, enjoyably. After I was done I had such a feeling of accomplishment … and it was the same with each of the other two symposia in which I participated.

When I started my graduate work almost five years ago, I decided that the experience would only have value for me if I came into it with an open mind, a desire to learn, and a willingness to be placed outside of my comfort zone. That’s what the Graduate Research Symposium was all about for me. It was an opportunity to put myself front and center and to take a risk. But beyond that it also puts its participants “into the conversation.” It allowed me to walk into the world of academia, sit down “at the table” and say, “This is the work I’ve done; this is what I’ve discovered; and this is what I believe. Are there any questions?” I was listened to. I was taken seriously. And believe me there were questions. And that was the beauty. My passion for the world of literature and literary criticism was magnified as I found myself surrounded by people who felt the same way. For me, these were the next steps in my professional and even personal development. But I never would have taken them if it weren’t for the faculty at Westfield State. It was through their encouragement that I found myself participating in not one, but three of these research symposia and my only regret now is that there will not be a fourth, at least for me, as I completed my graduate work this year.

 Alumni News

Shawna Meehan (’07) teaches 8th Grade Language Arts at Westfield Middle School South. This year she helped to organize a pen pal program between students at South Middle School and WSC college students in the Sigma Tau Delta English honor society. She lives in Easthampton, MA, and will be married in July 2009 to Daniel Stern (History Education ’08).

John Fletcher, also of the class of 2007, will be pursuing the nation’s first combined MA/MFA in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Alaska Fairbanks starting this fall. In exchange for teaching classes and helping in the reading and writing center, he will be supported by a tuition waiver and a generous stipend over the three-year program of study.

Jason Renslow (’02) received his master’s degree in special education from the University of Oregon in June of 2007. He now teaches life skills in a transition program for students age 18-21.

Send us your news!

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Year of Graduation___________

 MAIL TO:
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Vicinity  

BY RUTH ELLEN KOCHER

— for K.E.Q.

After church, the neighborhood returns to its failing. The lights come on. Children retreat to their rooms. In my driveway, ants continue to make good of the cactus wren’s dead flight while deaf Jim waters the arbor vitae. The old widow next door to him checks her car again and looks at my house, knowing blackness is up to no good, in her trunk, maybe, or at her roses when she’s sleeping. Wave hello and pass, wave hello and pass her mint-green house, ill decision, another decade’s color scheme gone wrong, even in the awnings striped white. The girl who knew me a decade earlier was right.

I am more black when I’m barefoot.
I am more black when I walk down the street, carrying my shoes like I just don’t care.

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