A Note from the Chair

BY GLEN BREWSTER

The Westfield State Department of English had another remarkable year in 2008-2009, once again as the most active academic department on campus. We were the primary sponsor of two Guest Lecture Series speakers, children’s literature critic Debbie Reese and poet Hershman R. John, both Native-American writers brought to campus in conjunction with Professor Vanessa Diana’s courses in Native-American literature. The Department also co-sponsored a presentation by historical novelist M.T. Anderson and a luncheon at the Faculty Center with biographer Debby Applegate, both guests in the Speaker Series. Professor Beth Rothermel organized a collaborative writing project with her students in Issues in Teaching Writing and Erin Smith’s ninth-grade class at Putnam Vocational High School in Springfield, and Professor Elizabeth Starr coordinated a “pen-pal” exercise between English honor society students and English alumna Shawna Meehan’s students at South Middle School in Westfield. The Events Committee, chaired by Leah Nielsen, organized a Fall Campus Poetry Slam; “Fallen Pieces,” a December reading of new works by Westfield State faculty, staff and students; a Black History Month reading of works by African-American writers; the “Spring New Works” reading by Westfield State faculty, staff and students; a Spring Poetry Slam; and a reading by nationally-known poets J.D. Scrimgeour and Cody Walker.

Our largest group ever, 15 students and two faculty advisors (Elizabeth Starr and Glen Brewster), participated in the annual convention of Sigma Tau Delta, the international English Honor Society, in Minneapolis in March 2009: Amanda Beck, Brittany Blake, Meaghan Brennan, Heather Bulis, Arianne Choquette, Michelle do Vale, Ryan Duffy, Jeffrey Johnston, Caley Mackenzie, Emma Mackie, Andrew Martin, Christine Pacuta, Gina Petrone, Danielle Rice, and Edmund St. Laurent presented their critical and creative work. Brittany Blake helped to plan the 2009 conference as the Associate Student Representative for the Eastern Region. In that role this year, she also helped edit the Sigma Tau Delta Eastern Region Newsletter and created and edited the first Eastern Region creative writing journal, Mind Murals.

Because of our chapter’s many fundraising and service projects – including collecting books for Springfield Shriners Hospital and a bowling event to raise money to contribute toward a heart transplant for Ardazan Dennis, Jr., son of a Westfield State staff member – it was once again asked to highlight its activities at the national convention as “one of the most active and vital chapters in the country.” Thirteen of our students received Westfield State Student Travel Grants to support their presentations at the conference; Sigma Tau Delta students also raked leaves in the community last fall as part of their efforts to raise funds to attend their national convention. Two of our alumni and current MA in English students, Ania Saj and Ashley Savola, received prestigious Sigma Tau Delta Graduate Scholarships. At our spring initiation ceremony, we welcomed 31 new members.

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By the end of the fall 2007 semester, Professor Vanessa Diana was feeling burnt out. One sure sign of this, she noted, was the amount of coffee and candy bars that had made their way into her daily routine. But more significantly, after seven and a half years of teaching, she felt her classes were beginning to be repetitive. As she planned her spring 2008 sabbatical, then, Professor Diana envisioned a semester that would allow her to reconnect with her field and to plan new courses in Native American literature. In preparation, she developed an annotated bibliography of primary and secondary sources which came to 40 pages, and planned to think about new texts that would work well in classes at many different levels, from first-year students to graduate students.

During that sabbatical semester, Professor Diana ended up developing four completely new courses, including a thematic section of a first-year composition course, an upper-level literature course, a graduate seminar, and an interdisciplinary honors class on film and the visual arts. Part of her work also involved writing a conference presentation on teaching Sioux author Susan Power’s *Grass Dancer*, which she presented that semester at the Native American Literature Symposium in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. To her delight, Professor Diana found that attending a conference when she wasn’t also trying to balance her typical teaching load of four classes was a very different experience. With time to think more deeply and prepare her presentation, she was able to attend more sessions and meet writers she has always admired, including Louise Erdrich and Eric Gansworth. As a bonus, she also was able to spend time with other scholars in Native American studies, including the poet Hershman John and children’s literature specialist Debbie Reese.

Professor Diana’s pedagogical project on *Grass Dancer* also, she notes, amply illustrated the value of having a semester away from teaching and service responsibilities to focus on academic work. Set in the 1980s and 1860s, Power’s novel represents Sioux spiritual beliefs and ceremonial and storytelling traditions, and engages these traditions in its structure as well as its content. The danger in not being familiar with these beliefs and traditions, Diana argues, is that many critics have been too quick to identify *Grass Dancer* as an example of magical realism at work. Diana notes that Power herself takes issue with this assessment; rather than being a form of magical realism or fantasy, her subject and methods are instead shaped by the world view she was raised with. Being willing to meet authors on their own ground, Diana firmly believes, is crucial to reading and teaching Native American literature.

After receiving valuable feedback at the symposium, Diana was able to revise and have her project accepted for publication in the academic journal *Studies in American Indian Literature*. But Diana’s participation in the symposium resulted in more than a publication. Thrilled at the prospect of sharing their work with her classes, Debbie Reese and Hershman John accepted Diana’s invitation to speak to Westfield State students. In addition to giving a well-attended reading, Hershman John visited with students in her sections of Native American literature and first-year composition. Like John, Debbie Reese spoke as part of the...
Westfield State Guest Lecture Series for students across campus, and she also had dinner with graduate students in Diana’s graduate seminar on contemporary Native American literature, giving them a chance to get to know her and ask questions one-on-one.

While her sabbatical was productive, Professor Diana is quick to note that it is easy to try to do too much in one semester. In fact, the word sabbatical has roots in the word “Sabbath,” which is supposed to be a time of rest and freedom. For Professor Diana, this meant having a little more time to devote to crafting jewelry (a favorite hobby), getting to enjoy more leisurely dinners with her family, and taking up running. Though she had never been a runner before, once on her sabbatical, she found that reading on the treadmill at the gym just wasn’t satisfying enough. Now, she runs up to 25-30 miles a week.

Describing a sabbatical semester as being “like graduate school without the poverty,” Professor Diana says she continues to feel its benefits two years later. She’s more productive, her classes have been more successful, and her students love the assigned reading in the new Native American literature classes now offered at Westfield State. “Your knowledge transfers to students,” she says. And while not all faculty may come out of their sabbaticals clocking in 25-30 miles per week, they are more likely to hit the ground running.

English education students in Professor Delia Fisher’s Literature and the Adolescent course enjoyed an excursion into the world of real adolescent readers last spring, when they initiated a pen-pal exchange with eighth-grade students in Ms. Jess Torone’s (’08) class at Powdermill Middle School in Southwick. Since many students in the Westfield State course will soon be certified to teach middle or high school English, one goal of the letter exchange was to introduce Westfield State teacher candidates to the preferences and attitudes of students like those they will meet in their own classrooms. Eighth-graders were asked about favorite books, their feelings about reading, and their “advice to English teachers.”

Some of the college students were initially skeptical about correspondence with “immature” eighth-graders. One Westfield State student wrote in her reflection, “I did not know anything about this boy. I assumed he had no interest in reading and found myself … using very simple language and ideas.” Another wrote, “Even though I always loved reading, I think I still embraced the stereotype that students, especially in middle school, would be opposed to reading.”

Then the letters from Ms. Torone’s class arrived, and the college pen-pals were impressed: “He was great! We held great conversations about the books they had read in class and the book he was reading for his lit circle.” “I was immediately proven wrong. [My pen pal] really loved to read; she was … even reading ahead of the rest of her group, and she was reading books on her own.” “It was
The English Department welcomed two new assistant professors this past fall: Catherine Savini (Ph.D. New York University) and Chalet Seidel (Ph.D. Case Western Reserve University). With their arrival, the English Department’s already robust writing concentration has gotten yet a further boost.

Catherine is coordinating writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives on campus, and Chalet is not only teaching the much in-demand business and technical writing courses but also is working on developing our department’s professional writing offerings.

Catherine Savini’s previous work in higher education prepared her well for the writing-across-the-curriculum work she is charged with at Westfield. At NYU, where she wrote her dissertation on “the novelization of 20th-century autobiography and the role of minority literature in the evolution of the genre,” Professor Savini taught writing informative to hear straight from a middle school student… what he liked and didn’t like….”

These exclamations of surprise and appreciation continued throughout the exchange, not only because of the eighth-graders’ maturity, but also because of their insights into the books they were reading: “I like the way two of the boys said that they liked debating the meaning of different things in the books that they read, because… that is the beginning of literary analysis and discussion. I never really thought that this age group would do this, but I was wrong about that too.”

One of the most interesting questions Westfield State students put to their pen-pals was “What advice would you give to English teachers?” The eighth-graders responded eagerly to this opportunity to offer handy tips “to the college kids” who might someday be their teachers. A single theme ran through all the replies: one reflection noted that the eighth-graders “all seemed to agree that the key to teaching literature was to give the students a little bit of freedom as to what they are reading.” Another remarked that her pen pal “reiterated what is being stressed in [the adolescent lit] class and the text book – have students read something that interests them.” Another pen pal “advised me to find a balance in my classroom, giving students freedom, but not allowing them to control the classroom either.” This refrain, freedom and choice, reminded teacher candidates that middle-school students are more like than unlike them, despite the difference in their ages.

The highlight of the exchange for both college and eighth-grade students was a visit to the Powdermill class itself, where Westfield State students met and chatted with their pen pals and listened to literature circle groups discuss the novels they were reading. One student observed the inviting atmosphere in Ms. Torone’s classroom: “The bookcases across the back of the room were beautiful and I liked how students could sign out books at their leisure. It reminded me of the importance of gathering a class library to ensure students always have access to appealing literature.” The evening culminated in shared laughter, email address exchanges, and the consumption of large quantities of pizza.

This pen-pal project, fun and enlightening for all participants, complemented another Westfield State collaboration organized by Professor Beth Rothermel and ninth-grade English teacher Erin Smith, in which pre-service teachers and students at the Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical High School in Springfield exchanged letters and creative pieces. These projects served another goal of the English Education Program at Westfield State, fostering ties and rapport between college and community.
for six years. After NYU, she stayed on in New York and became the co-director of Columbia University’s writing program and the coordinator of the university’s writing center. In this capacity, she worked with both undergraduate and graduate students (including many international students), and she also consulted with faculty from several disciplines.

Taking the job at Westfield has been a kind of homecoming for Catherine. Having grown up south of Boston and having earned her B.A. at UMass-Amherst, she was drawn back to the area and to “the friendly faculty . . . [who] continue to be supportive and kind—it wasn’t just an act!” Already she has met faculty from many departments, led writing workshops for faculty, and planned campus-wide events in celebration of the National Day of Writing in October 2009 (including 6-word memoir writing stations around campus). “Westfielders are open to new ideas,” she commented, and she is excited “to help others cultivate a culture of writing across campus in any way I can.”

Like Professor Savini, Chalet Seidel brings an extensive background in writing to her new position at Westfield. In fact, her interest in professional writing developed when she was an undergraduate at Youngstown State University and majored in Professional Writing and Editing, a course of study she put to use immediately as the editor of Youngstown State’s newspaper. For her M.A. in English, also at Youngstown, Professor Seidel specialized in Teaching Writing and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Her dissertation work continued her interest in professional writing through a study that looked at how journalists began to define themselves as professional writers in the late nineteenth century, a time when “journalists tried to represent their work as a profession deserving of social status and respect.” Chalet reflects, now is “an exciting time to look at the birth of the profession because many are predicting the death of print journalism. So I’m looking back at a time of transition when the profession is again undergoing a radical transformation.” She is hoping to combine her interests in teaching composition and in the profession of journalism through designing a composition course that integrates journalistic practices.

After just one semester, both Catherine and Chalet have already contributed in many ways to the life of the department and the college. They have also begun to settle into their new lives in western Massachusetts. “I am so happy to live near the bike trail where I can jog for miles without having to run in place at a red light,” remarks Catherine. And Chalet is eager to take up cross-country skiing: “My limited downhill experience was absolutely disastrous, but I think I might do better on flat land.” We hope they will both continue to discover the many pleasures of the area and the possibilities afforded by their new positions in the English Department at Westfield State.

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**Travis Searles: Law and Literature**

**BY BETH ROTHERMEL**

“No law case is as hard to interpret as *Hamlet*,” reported Westfield State English Department alum Travis Searles when he spoke at the 2009 English Department Spring Gathering. A 2007 graduate with a concentration in literature, Travis is currently in his third year of law school at neighboring Western New England College.

During his talk, Travis shared with us some of the challenges and satisfactions of being a law student as well as reflecting on how his time at Westfield State prepared him. While working with Professor Glen Brewster on his senior honors project, which he wrote on the poet William Blake, Travis contemplated graduate school in English, but opted instead for the rigors of law school where he is preparing for a career in corporate law. He had worked closely with...
his father in the family welding business since the age of twelve, gaining exposure to and a knack for interpreting business contracts. He chose WNEC in part because the educational atmosphere resembled that of Westfield State, having professors who are “accessible, easy to talk to and willing to teach.”

His training in English has also been an asset, preparing him for the “in-depth research and writing” he frequently has to do. While there were “no classes that he doesn’t remember fondly,” he remarked that his work in literary criticism trained him well for reading and interpreting case law. The writing skills he gained at Westfield State have also come in handy, especially during the second year, when students work on the Law Review, an entirely student-run journal. For the Law Review, Travis helps to select and edit papers by local lawyers. But the second year of law school is also very much about preparing for the job market, which means writing “perfect cover letters and resumes” and “sharpening your oral skills” for interviews so that you “choose your words well” and successfully convince interviewers that you “should be working for their firm.” “You will not be interviewed if you make a single mistake.” Travis was fortunate to have obtained a summer 2009 internship at Robinson and Cole, a crucial step in preparing for his third and final year and the ultimate job search (in fact, we learned recently that this internship led to a full-time job offer for Travis). In ending his talk, Travis assured Westfield State students in the audience that Westfield prepares students well for graduate school or law school.

A few weeks after his talk, I had a chance to talk a little more with Travis. I asked him which aspect of law he found most fascinating. He noted his interest in “how law and government interact,” and in studying the Constitution and how it has been interpreted. The courts have made it “a living document.” Law school does not teach you “a body of law.” Since the law is always changing, you “learn how to interpret and argue.”

I also asked Travis if he was still finding ways to put his creative energies to work, either in or out of law school. He noted that sometimes he is able to share an “original take on a case,” but finds his literary outlet mostly in his free time. He still has a “passion

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“Never Left the Front Yard”

BY MEAGHAN BRENNAN

First Place Poetry Winner, Persona 2009

for Alice Paul

shirtwaist suites, sweetmeats
and counting, counting weevils
you pushed away your plate and,
in turn, got pushed down, neck up.

did your voice die then?
as the tube, purposely phallic
attacked your aching throat?
The jailhouse egg-white semen of
conformity, rehabilitation
of prison food
would have spewed back out your mouth
if it wasn’t stuffed shut.

did your voice die then?
surely now, shirtwaist, suit jacket
no bustle, thinking cap.
your voice, never hoarse, still sounding at the
gate

the spit on your cheek
(not your own, but rather propelled faster
lewd and violent
by thick meat mustached lips)

the hands on your chest
the hot grill of the gate on your shirtwaist nape

did you see stars then?
or did you see white houses
and the trim of hems polling booth
curtains?

I should have heard your name twelve years
ago
before less noble heroes for us
kin-starved children
clamored to stand in your stead.

iron-jawed and iron-blooded
shirtwaisted, counting, counting weevils
Being a woman is the lesser of two evils.
And the greater? Being spineless.

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It’s rare for me to come to class on a Monday morning, ask students if they saw a live concert or downloaded a new song over the weekend, and feel like I’m actually teaching. However, when I teach my thematic 102 course, “Reading and Writing about Rock ‘n’ Roll,” this type of conversation plays an important role in our classroom discourse, and it’s one that both my students and I eagerly engage in. Mine was one of a dozen thematic 102 courses offered in the spring of 2009, offerings that ranged from dance to Dr. Seuss, from detective work to the decade of the 60’s. The excitement about the courses has been palpable among both first-year students and English Department faculty. Composition Coordinator Jennifer DiGrazia believes that themed sections allow for “more sustained and in-depth exploration of a topic” and that they are a “great way to help students hone the critical thinking and academic skills that they will use in their other classrooms.” Based on feedback collected from students and professors, it appears that they too feel the same way.

English 102 was traditionally a “writing about literature” course, but has recently evolved into a course that focuses more broadly on “writing about texts.” This new definition has enabled professors to be innovative in creating themed courses that would catch students’ interests. Thus, the philosophy of using thematic classes to teach English 102 is that they will more fully engage in critical thinking and writing when genuinely interested or knowledgeable about the topics they’re writing about.

Former Composition Coordinator Beth Ann Rothermel encouraged composition professors to pilot thematic classes in the spring of 2008, and the experience yielded positive experiences for both faculty and students. Rothermel believes that effective writing involves a two step process: first, a student must understand the subject matter; and second, once the subject matter is understood, students can focus on their rhetorical moves when writing about it. That said, a benefit to a thematic 102 course is that many students begin the course with some prior knowledge about the subject matter; thus, they’re able to focus more on the rhetorical component in their writing, allowing them, as Rothermel puts it, “to deepen their work.” And true to this idea, a review of students’ assessments of the spring 2009 thematic courses revealed that most students favor their thematic class because they’re able to study something that they care about. Similarly, many professors who teach a thematic class have observed that their students have shown a more active engagement in the subject matter than some of their peers in non-thematic courses.

Not only do thematic classes appear to benefit students, but they’re beneficial to professors as well. Like students, professors are enthusiastic about engaging in topics about which they’re passionate. Joyce Hayden, who teaches two thematic 102 courses, “Writing about Nature” and “Writing about Art,” comments, “I find it fun and exciting to research my course theme and try to find textual work that I think will engage and interest the students. I also thoroughly enjoy asking the students to share with me in class what they know about the theme of the course. I always learn something new and I love that exchange between teacher and student.” In addition to allowing professors to teach about topics that they’re excited about,
Our internship program was once again lauded by employers for the quality of our English interns, including those at the Westfield Athenaeum, the Daily Hampshire Gazette, Cooley Dickinson Hospital, the Majestic Theater, and the Valley Advocate. The Department once again sponsored the Westfield State literary journal, Persona, and received a generous grant from the Office of Advancement and College Relations to publish copies to send to all alumni. Arianne Choquette was the Editor-In-Chief of Persona for 2008-09, leading one of our largest staffs ever. WSKB, the Westfield State campus radio station, which has been advised by English department faculty for the last dozen years, again took students from the executive board, 10 this year, of various majors, to the College Music Journalism Music and Film Conference in New York City.

The Performance Poetry Team, advised by Leah Nielsen, performed for Beth Rothermel’s students and the Putnam High students who had been engaged in a semester-long pen pal exchange. In spring 2009, the team visited student teacher Lauren Cooper’s third-grade class at Russell Elementary School to perform and to talk about writing and publishing; they also performed at a Cancer House of Hope Benefit in April 2009. The Poetry Slam Team, also advised by Leah Nielsen, won for the second year in a row the intercollegiate Poetry Slam held at American International College.

The Theatre Arts Program put on two well-received productions: Voyage: The Coast of Utopia, Part 1 by Tom Stoppard, in November 2008, and Three Sisters by Anton Chekhov in April 2009. The production of Voyage was entered in the Participating Category in Region I of the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival (KCACTF); four students were nominated for the KCACTF Irene Ryan Acting Award, and four other students were chosen as alternates. Two of our majors won regional awards at the Region I Festival: Megan DeSimone won first prize in the sound design category, and Rachel Baril won second prize in the costume design category. The Student Theatre Association produced William Saroyan’s one-act play Hello Out There in February 2009. At its year-end Gala, the Program recognized a number of students for their distinguished achievements in various areas of theatre: Josh Raymond received the Frank Mello Award for Performance, Panagiota Kanavaros won the Joan Mento Award for Critical Studies, Tim Lesniak won the Robert R. Lehan Award for Design, and Jenna Cicerone won the Christopher R. Slaughter Award for Theatre Management. Senior Panagiota Kanavaros was accepted by the MFA Acting Program at the New School in New York.

English faculty sponsored 9 student presentations (most, but not all, by English majors) at the annual Massachusetts Undergraduate Research Symposium, more than any other department. Danielle Rice was one of only nine Westfield State students to receive a President’s Award for Excellence in Leadership in November 2008. Derek Strahan had two poems accepted for publication in the nationally distributed undergraduate literary journal Prairie Margins.

At the departmental Spring Gathering last April, Debra Lewis Poirer ’00, a high school teacher and department chair, and Travis Searles ’07, a second-year law school student, were our alumni speakers. Four graduating seniors were recognized with our English major awards: the Celeste Loughman Award went to Amanda Beck, the Bette B. Roberts Award to Edmund St. Laurent, the Barbara A. Welch Award to Michelle do Vale, and the Stephen Sossaman Award to Arianne Choquette. We also recognized the contributions to the department of Brittany Blake, President of our chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, and Danielle Rice, President of the 15 students and two faculty advisors participated in the annual convention of Sigma Tau Delta in Minneapolis.
Academic Pursuits Club and Vice President of Sigma Tau Delta.

In 2008-09, our two searches for faculty to strengthen our varied writing courses were successful: Catherine Savini (PhD, New York University) was hired as a Writing Across the Curriculum specialist and will co-direct the Reading and Writing Center; and Chalet Seidel (PhD, Case Western Reserve University) was hired as a specialist in Business and Technical Writing. Sabine Klein and Elinor Parker received tenure, well-deserved recognition of their varied work for the college.

At commencement, Theatre Arts Program Coordinator Jack Shea gave the faculty address in his role as Chair of the All-College Committee, and Joyce Hayden and Leah Nielsen were among the six people honored with the annual “Outstanding Faculty Awards” given by the Student Government Association.

But we all know that numbers such as those listed above do not “count” as much as the relationships that you began with your fellow English and Theatre Arts majors, your teachers, and your advisors (both students and faculty). So I will conclude by asking you to continue those relationships, to get in touch with the students or teachers mentioned in this newsletter. 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.

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thematic courses also allow for professional growth. Jennifer DiGrazia states, “For instructors, it is a form of faculty development. Those of us who teach themed sections meet and discuss our courses. It is a way to re-think and re-envision the writing we assign, the audience we ask students to envision, and the ways we evaluate the texts students produce.” Professors who teach thematic courses are able to learn from their research for the course, their interaction with students in it, and their discussions with colleagues about it, a process that can foster better teaching, an important goal for the English Department.

Professors of thematic courses also report that they allow for creative writing assignments and forms of evaluation. Beverly Williams, who teaches a class entitled “War: What is it Good For?,” had her students write narrative essays in the form of graphic novels. Being able to literally see the ideas that they were expressing via this assignment, the students, as Williams puts it, “got to the heart of their arguments.” Bridget Matthew-Kane’s students ended their semester by creating collages based on their assigned readings and writings throughout the semester, allowing them to reflect on their accomplishments. And Joyce Hayden’s students engaged in a hands-on project when creating “Assemblage Art”; they created 3D objects to be displayed in a cigar box and later wrote a reflective essay about the theme of their respective piece. Creative projects such as these have become a hallmark of thematic 102’s, again helping to draw in and bolster excitement for writing among students.

As far as the future is concerned, DiGrazia hopes that more thematic courses will be proposed and eventually offered. When asked where she envisioned thematic courses heading in the years to come, she replied, “That is still up for discussion, but personally, I would like to see most, if not all sections of 102, have a specific focus.”

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for writing,” working on poetry or short stories “when the mood strikes.” Most recently, drawing on his knowledge of Christian theology, he’s begun working on a novel set in the medieval era around the time of Saint Thomas.

My last question to Travis was whether he had any advice for first-year Westfield State students taking English Composition courses. He responded: “Writing is more important than you realize. In every profession I looked into, the ability to communicate in writing was central.” Travis also gave some advice to all students at Westfield State, especially those who initially may have preferred a big-city school, suggesting that “being in a quiet environment” has many advantages. “It gives you a chance to concentrate on what you are studying.” He also urged students to get out and explore, as the “area around Westfield is beautiful.” Finally, he commented: “Enjoy life now. As tough as it is, things just become more fast paced and hectic as you graduate and move forward.”
Faculty News

Stephen Adams, professor, presented a creative non-fiction piece titled “Days and Nights at Denny’s” at the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature in East Lansing, Michigan. He was a Senior Contributor for The Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature and volunteered at the Strawberry Festival in Stanley Park, a benefit for community organizations.

Glen Brewster, professor, chairs the Department of English. He continues to serve as an advisor for many campus organizations, including the Campus Voice newspaper, Persona literary journal, the Academic Pursuits Club, the Study Abroad Program, and Sigma Tau Delta English honor society. His most recent travels took him to Venice, Italy, where he presented a paper on Henry Crabb Robinson, and Paris, France, where he attended the International Media Seminar.


Lou Caton, associate professor, oversaw a new version of the booklet What Can I Do with an English Degree? Last year, he visited colleges in Dublin, Ireland, in an effort to create a faculty exchange program.

Lori Desrosiers, visiting assistant professor, facilitated the Westfield State Women Write poetry night on campus. She publishes a literary journal of narrative poetry, Naugatuck River Review, now in its second issue. Three Vanities, a volume of her own poems, was published by Pudding House Press (2009).

Vanessa Holford Diana, associate professor, organized two Guest Lecture Series events at Westfield State during the spring 2009 semester: Debbie Reese’s presentation on “American Indians in Children’s Literature,” and “An Evening of Poetry with Hershman John.” Her most recent article, “I am not a fairy tale: Contextualizing Sioux Spirituality and Story Traditions for Non-Sioux Readers of Susan Power’s The Grass Dancer,” was published in the August 2009 issue of Studies in American Indian Literature.

Jennifer DiGrazia, assistant professor, continues to serve as the English Department’s Composition Coordinator. Building on her experiences teaching “The Writer and The Detectives,” a learning community that links second semester composition and Criminal Justice 121: Theories of Crime, Professor DiGrazia presented a paper at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, “‘Strangers in Strange Lands’: From Linked to Integrated to Transformation.”

Michael Filas, associate professor, coordinates the internship program. After teaching a graduate course in American postmodernism during the fall 2008 semester, he was on sabbatical in spring 2009. This year, he serves as book review editor for the national journal The Information Society. He is also advisor for Persona literary journal and WSKB radio station.

Delia Fisher, associate professor, is coordinator of the English Education Program. She returned from her fall 2008 sabbatical to supervise eleven student teachers in the spring semester. She organized the second English/English education reunion for homecoming 2009.

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Joyce Hayden, visiting assistant professor, recently opened her art gallery, “Blue Angel Studios,” with an exhibit of new work titled “Inner Rivers and Lace Curtains.” She was voted one of the “Outstanding Faculty” by the 2009 Westfield State graduating class.

Sabine Macris Klein, associate professor, taught a January 2009 term study abroad course, “The Theatre of London, Past and Present,” in London, England. She also serves as Vice Chair of Dramaturgy for the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival (Region 1).

George W. Layng, associate professor, directs the campus Reading and Writing Center. In 2008 – 2009, he taught courses in composition, journalism, and creative nonfiction.

Kevin R. Meek, visiting assistant professor, in addition to teaching in the English Department, serves as a Athletic Student-Athlete Advisor and Westfield State Women’s Assistant Soccer Coach.

Gregg Neikirk, professor, is the president of the Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society, and co-directed the 11th Annual Elizabeth Madox Roberts Conference. He also both directed and performed original songs at the Annual Kentucky Writers Day Event, at Penn’s Historic Store, Forkland, KY.

Leah Nielsen, assistant professor, serves as a co-advisor for Persona, the campus literary magazine, and continues to organize many events on campus, including poetry slams, readings of new works by Westfield State faculty, staff and students, and a student reading of works by African-American writers for Black History Month. She was voted one of the “Outstanding Faculty” by the 2009 Westfield State graduating class.

Sean O’Connell, visiting assistant professor, teaches composition classes in the English Department and for the RISE First-Year Experience Program. He also served as an e-tutor for the Reading and Writing Center last fall.

Elinor L. Parker, associate professor, designed costumes and scenery for the fall and spring theatre productions at Westfield State, Tom Stoppard’s Voyage: Coast of Utopia, Part I and Anton Chekhov’s Three Sisters. She teaches courses in costume design, theatre production, speech, and scenography.

Susan Doran Quandt, visiting assistant professor, worked with the composition committee to update grading standards for the composition program. She also serves as an editorial advisor for the Historical Journal of Massachusetts.

Beth Ann Rothermel, professor, presented a paper titled “Rhetorical Invention and the Commonplace Books of Late Eighteenth-Century American Quaker Women” at the International Society for the History of Rhetoric 2009 Conference in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Chivas Sandage, visiting assistant professor, is the editor of Open Studio: A Cross-Genre Blog (http://csandage.wordpress.com). Last spring, she presented a lecture on “The Real Sylvia Plath” for Westfield State’s Month Celebrating Women.

Deborah Savage, visiting assistant professor, serves on the English Department’s Composition Committee.

Marilyn Sandidge, professor, directs the English Department Graduate Program. She also continues to teaches courses in Shakespeare, Medieval Poetry, History of the English Language, English Literature to 1603, and Principles of Grammar.

John J. (“Jack”) Shea, professor, is Coordinator of the Theatre Arts Program. He directed productions both on and off-campus, including The Coast of Utopia: Voyage, Part I by Tom Stoppard, Three Sisters by Anton Chekhov, in a version by Brian Friel, and The Belle of Amherst by William Luce, and A Tuna Christmas by Jaston Williams, Joe Sears, and Ed Howard for Actors & Company, Theatre Downtown.


Russell Swift, assistant professor, was the Lighting Design Portfolio Review reviewer for the United States Institute of Theatre Technology Conference in Cincinnati, OH. He did lighting and sound design for the fall and spring theatre productions at Westfield State, Tom Stoppard’s Voyage: Coast of Utopia, Part I and Anton Chekhov’s Three Sisters.

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


Beverly Army Williams, visiting assistant professor, served as a judge for the 2008-09 Composition Program Freshman Essay Contest.
Debra Lewis-Poirier (B.A. 2000) addresses the English Department 2009 Spring Gathering

BY VANESSA HOLFORD DIANA

Debra Lewis-Poirier (B.A. ’00) addressed a gathering of English students, faculty, administrators, friends, and the winners of various English Department academic and writing awards at the April 2009 English Department Spring Gathering. Debra has for the last 3 years been Chair of the Department of English at the Gilbert School, where she began teaching a year after graduating from Westfield State. Referring to herself as the “first and favorite Sigma Tau Delta President,” Debra told current members of the English honor society that she was one of the earliest members of our chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, which began in 1999. Debra remembered fondly her days in Westfield State classes studying Old English with Marilyn Sandidge and Milton with Gregg Neikirk. Reflecting on what she learned as an undergraduate English major that directly shaped her teaching and administrative work, Debra described her growth from a high-school student prone to procrastination to an organized and efficient college student, developing the time management skills essential to her professional life: “As an English major, doubling in Secondary Education, I had such an enormous workload that I really had to learn to manage the work I was required to do and to really train myself to complete them with ample time to spare. . . . The rigorous program at Westfield forced me to change my ways and become more productive and prioritize.”

After nearly a decade of teaching secondary English, Debra offered her sense of some of the challenges of the profession related to students’ reading and writing skills, challenges shared at the college level. One struggle is that students’ writing skills have weakened while teachers face the pressure of increased class size. At the same time, Debra worries the national emphasis on high-stakes testing risks turning students into “virtual test-robots,” who enter college prepared to answer test questions well but without other skills, including writing, needed in higher education. Debra described this frustrating trend: “Personally, as my class roster rises, I see my own ability to instruct the very distinct needs of each student in the very specialized areas of writing and literary analysis as virtually impossible. It becomes an uphill battle all year, being under the demands of total class loads of one-hundred plus, making it that much harder to evaluate the writing and return it in a timely, efficient manner to maximize student learning.” Clearly, while it is true that more and more college freshmen need remedial writing instruction, this is not for lack of effort on their high school teachers’ part.

Despite these real frustrations and challenges, Debra nevertheless expressed a continued love for teaching and learning. In her ongoing educational and professional pursuits, Debra has completed her Masters in Education from Cambridge College, has received her CAGS in Educational Administration from Westfield State two years ago, and is now aiming to become a high-school principal in the near future. Debra communicated a sense of enthusiasm for teaching and commitment to her students, encouraging her audience to remember that teaching will be a rewarding career offering the opportunity to make a difference in young people’s lives. In her remarks, Debra especially targeted the future teachers preparing to graduate, offering some survival tips for their teaching careers. Her advice included “always stay at least one chapter ahead of your students,” and “remember you and your stack of papers will always be attached, so enjoy your free time now!”

Quoting a tag line from Capturing Kids’ Hearts, Debra offered future teachers some “words to live by: Before you capture a kid’s head, you have to capture his heart.” ■
When I decided to attend the Sigma Tau Delta convention (“Reflections”) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, I did not know what to expect. A piece of creative non-fiction that I had written was selected for presentation, and I knew that several of my classmates would be presenting as well; other than that, I was clueless.

Becoming a member of Sigma Tau Delta was one of the best decisions I have ever made. Previously, I had quit every club I had ever been a part of: attending meetings and discussing issues had not appealed to me. While a member of Sigma, I became exceptionally involved: I almost never missed a meeting, I became the secretary, and I helped motivate others to remain involved as well. My passion for Sigma helped me decide to attend the convention.

Playing the part of a tourist also influenced me to be present at “Reflections.” I wanted to see a city with which I was not familiar. Though I did spend some time touring, I was at the convention for the majority of our four days there. I saw almost every presentation given by a member of our chapter. Also, I listened to authors, such as Michael Perry, speak. I attended book signings and a very entertaining open mic night. The convention afforded me the ability to see a variety of work presented in many formats, both formal and informal. Also, I attended workshops on publication and fundraising. The information I gained has helped to enrich my chapter.

The main reason I attended the convention, however, was to read my work and listen to the presentations of others. At a pre-convention meeting of our Alpha Eta Sigma chapter, we informally presented our work and provided each other with advice. This was an exceptionally valuable experience. When I stood in front of my audience, I was confident and prepared.

My piece was titled “Who Am I From? A Reflection on Experiences as a Child of Immigrants.” I wrote about my family and my heritage as a bilingual student. My goal was to...

“Before attending Westfield State, I never had teachers that identified my heritage as an advantage.”

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this character who never stops being cranky but, as the chapters unfold, also surprises the reader with her insight, intelligence, and even compassion. I came to admire her greatly. The stories focused on Olive delve into her relationships with her family, which includes her affable husband, Henry (a retired pharmacist), and her only son, Chris, who leaves Maine first for California and then New York, a loss so painful to Olive that she cannot even drive by the house she and Henry had built for him in Crosby. A couple of these stories feature high drama, but it was not so much the drama but rather the stories’ portraits of aging and of marriage and of all that is unsaid in families that struck me as most powerful.

Even if at first you feel alienated by Olive’s peremptoriness, by the end I imagine you’ll feel as a I did that there is something affirming and hopeful about this character and her life in Crosby, Maine. And, although I picked up the collection as summer escape reading, by the end I had begun scheming a way to work Olive Kitteridge into a future American literature syllabus, perhaps paired with The Country of the Pointed Firs.


BY LOU CATON

While preparing for a course that included Nietzsche, I kept tripping over references to the book Nietzsche & Philosophy. I actually had noted it myself briefly in one of my own articles years ago and had always wanted to come back to it. Teaching Nietzsche gave me the excuse I needed. As a bonus, when I opened the book, I remembered that Michael Hardt gives a terrific short introduction in his “Foreword.” Hardt resonates with Deleuze when he pulls out the existential qualities of this 19th-century thinker. After all, Nietzsche is the perfect source for gauging how modernism (existentialism) moves into postmodernism (Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche). Picture yourself reading Hardt reading Deleuze reading Nietzsche and you’ll be dancing around three concepts: multiplicity, becoming, and affirmation. All of these are crucial to Deleuze, and he pulls them out of Nietzsche. If you’re interested in any of these, this book’s for you.

Originally published in France in 1962, Deleuze’s interpretation performed the service of rescuing Nietzsche from a fog of being only a proto-fascist, Nazi-loving, anti-Semitic madman. Before Deleuze’s insights, many academics regarded Nietzsche as a wild poet more than a philosopher. But this book shows him to be someone announcing the twentieth century’s concern for relativity, nihilism, and strong forms of anti-dialectic. In Deleuze’s hands, Nietzsche becomes the arch-foe of Socrates (who couldn’t see his “reason” as a dictator) and the advocate of Dionysus, the God of passion, affirmation, and intoxication. Finally, for those readers intrigued by issues of identity, Nietzsche arises as a strong voice against the universalizing dialectics of Hegel, who had earned a prominence in France before this book was published. Deleuze was one of the first, if not the first, to convert Nietzsche’s poetry into the proto-postmodernism that we now accept and build upon. A tough book but terrific if taken as a slow read!

Cormac McCarthy’s Cities of the Plain, published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1998

BY STEPHEN ADAMS

People are coming to know novelist Cormac McCarthy through movie versions of No Country for Old Men and The Road. This summer I felt a hankering for his earlier work, so I went back to The Crossing and then straight on to Cities of the Plain. These are the second and third in his Border trilogy, following the National Book Award winner, All the Pretty Horses.

Cities of the Plain, a title that alludes to the Old Testament story of Sodom and Gomorrah, is set in the border towns of New Mexico and Mexico. It’s the 1950s, but twenty-something cousins John Grady and Billy Parham are still living the life of cowboys. Vanqueros. They know the world has passed them by, that there won’t be much of a call for cowboys in the coming years. But they can’t think of anything else they would rather do, that would feel natural, inevitable. Inevitability—that condition is recognized a lot in McCarthy’s novels, which is to say they tend heavily toward the tragic. Billy Parham knows that John Grady’s aim to marry a young Mexican prostitute is likely to run into trouble. John Grady knows it, too, but won’t let the odds deter him.

I like McCarthy’s style a lot, but it takes a little getting used to. He rarely uses a comma, and he omits the apostrophe in most contractions. In dialogue he disdains quotation marks and doesn’t translate Spanish speakers. So the style is spare and demanding, but it often opens up to the transcendental or apocalyptic. Here’s a specimen:

“When he crossed at the top of the draw he smelled what the horse had been smelling. A reek of carrion wafted up on some vector of the cooling evening air.”

Vintage McCarthy—the style is precise and spare, the story is of a man and a horse, and there’s a scent of trouble in the air. Maybe I’ll even re-read the most intense of his western fare, Blood Meridien, before the summer is out.

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Brian O’Connor (’06) lives in Bloomington, Indiana, where he is pursuing a Ph.D. in English and teaching freshman composition at Indiana University. Entering his third year, Brian is approaching coursework’s end and anticipating preparing for exams, writing the prospectus, and writing the dissertation—most likely focusing on the postmodern American novel. Brian is also engaged to be married to his long-time better-half, Kristin, in January 2011.

After graduation in 2006, Steve Bruso found employment as a Corporate Sales Representative at Borders for a year, and was then accepted into Clark University’s graduate program in English. Steve reports that “my education at WSC had proved invaluable to me” as he worked on his Master’s thesis, “as it had given me a very firm foundation.” He especially credits his courses in literary theory with Professor Jennifer Digrazia for helping to prepare him for graduate level work. Steve’s M.A. thesis, “Discord in Chivalry’s Ideological Discourse,” addresses the ideology and presentation of chivalry in literature as problematic in that the demands it makes upon its knights often pull them in irreconcilable directions. He explored these complexities through the works of three authors writing in three different time periods: Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s Idylls of the King, William Shakespeare’s History of Henry IV, and Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur. Steve has just recently been accepted to Fordham University, where he will pursue a Ph.D in English and Medieval Studies. “In particular,” Steve says, “I am especially interested in Arthurian literature, and I can only hope that my scholarship at the Ph.D. level will demonstrate (quite clearly) how superbly WSC’s English Department prepares its students for advanced studies in the field.”

Colleen Wimberly graduated from Westfield State College in 2006, and accepted a teaching position at Falmouth High School, located on Cape Cod. After two years enjoying Cape Cod summers, she decided to pursue a Master’s in Education. Taking “all of these experiences and skills with me,” she was admitted into Northeastern University’s Master’s in Education program, where she chose to specialize in Literacy and completed her degree with a 4.0 GPA. Colleen is currently teaching at Franklin High School in Franklin, Massachusetts. She reports, “The skills I had learned at Westfield, which were honed and developed further through my Master’s program, have more than adequately prepared me for the field, and allowed me to excel as a high school English teacher.” Steve Bruso and Colleen Wimberly are engaged to be married on June 5th, 2010.
to provide a new perspective for my listeners and to combat some misconceptions they may have about immigrants and bilingual students.

Receiving a positive response about my work did more than inflate my ego: it validated my experiences and hard work. Before attending Westfield State, I never had teachers who identified my heritage as an advantage. I always felt that I needed to separate who I was from my role as a student. My professors have continually encouraged me to integrate my background into my work, and my submission to Sigma was the culmination of this encouragement.

For me, my presentation at the convention is more than a line on my resume; it is proof that others value who I am. Unlike my professors, the judges at “Reflections” did not know me or any more of my story than what I wrote in my submission. These reviewers believed I had something valuable to say and that my heritage should be communicated to others.

Because my work was seen in a scholarly light, I see it that way also. Who I am is not an amusement; it is an asset. Without my attendance at the convention, this conclusion would have taken me much longer to reach. I am grateful for the opportunity to attend the convention and to continue my growth professionally and personally.