From the Chair

Dr. Matt Altman

Hello, fellow wisdom-lovers! For my second newsletter as chair, I want to talk about the value of our disciplines, something that is often called into question by the uninitiated.

Philosophy and religious studies are good for many things. The recent trend is to emphasize the “transferable skills” that students develop in philosophy and religious studies classes — that is, skills that are valuable across a range of possible careers. Students in our courses learn to comprehend and analyze difficult texts, to express themselves clearly in writing, and to speak intelligently and argue forcefully for a position. All of these are important aptitudes to have, and there is plenty of evidence to show that people develop these skills especially well in philosophy and religious studies courses.

We must be careful not to overemphasize the merely instrumental power of these disciplines, however. Philosophy and religious studies are most important because they get students to reflect critically on their values, or what they are using their transferable skills to do. These fields have a transformative power that other disciplines do not.

Kant said that the motto of the Enlightenment is Sapere aude, “dare to be wise.” He understood it to mean that we must have the courage to think for ourselves. The shared aim of the faculty in the Philosophy and Religious Studies Department is to foster a sense of wonder and a spirit of inquiry, so that students emerge from our classes different and, hopefully, better people. If you are reading this, I hope that you are striving for this goal in your own life. Let us know what we can do to help you along this path.

Introducing the New Ethics Minor

This year the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies unveiled a new minor in Ethics. This new program allows students more interdisciplinary options than our previous Ethics minor and will appeal to students across the university. The minor is particularly aimed at students pursuing pre-professional majors who would like to enrich that education with a background in ethical reasoning, critical thinking, and analytical writing.

Under the new program, students take one lower-division philosophy course and two upper-division courses, chosen from several offerings, in philosophical ethics. They then augment this philosophical education with two electives chosen from a variety of fields. This course of study allows students to customize the minor to fit their academic and professional goals. A required capstone project, completed one-on-one with a faculty member, allows students to bring all of this knowledge together through an internship or a research paper.

Unique to this program is the flexibility and control it gives students over their own education. Students pursuing a career in medicine, for example, may choose to take courses in philosophy and psychology, while those aiming to work in public policy may take courses in philosophy, business, and communications. We hope to add more offerings to our list of pre-approved electives, and students currently are able to have electives approved on a case-by-case basis.

We hope that this program will help to demonstrate the applicability of an education in philosophy to many professions. We also believe that it will give interested students the ability to pursue the study of philosophy in a way that directly contributes to their career goals.

Interested students are encouraged to visit our program website at www.cwu.edu/philosophy/minors or to talk to a faculty adviser.
A spotlight on . . . Professor Nathan Carpenter

Where did you get your degree(s), and when? I got my Ph.D. in Philosophy from Duquesne University in 2002.

Where are you from originally? I was born on the shores of Lake Chargoggagoggmanchauggagoggchubunagungamaugg (longest name of a lake in the world), in Webster, Massachusetts.

Tell us something about yourself. I have nearly all my teeth.

What classes are you teaching now? I am now teaching Introduction to Philosophy and also Introduction to Logic.

What do you love most about teaching? I love teaching philosophy because its emphasis on reasoned argument and truth seeking provides students with the tools not only to discover the truth about vitally important matters, but to arm themselves with arguments so that they don't later lose these truths when challenged by other views. What I teach allows them to search for, and then to both grasp and hold on to answers about life's fundamental questions.

What do you do outside of teaching? Outside of teaching, I read a lot of fiction, watch a lot of sports, eat much that is probably not very good for me but tastes great, try to practice some of the sports I watch instead of just watching them, and practice my faith.

What is your most embarrassing moment while teaching? My most embarrassing moment while teaching was when I once made a joke about my teeth and nobody laughed, no one. I vowed then to never make jokes about teeth again -- never!

Film Showcase

“Hannah Arendt”
February 26, 2014
6:30 p.m.
SURC Theatre

After a showing of the film, Dr. Goerger and Dr. Coe will lead a discussion of the 2012 film “Hannah Arendt.” Arendt was one of the most important political philosophers of the twentieth century, and she is also well-known as one of the faces on the wall of our third floor common area. Of German-Jewish descent, Arendt studied with Husserl and Heidegger but fled Germany in 1933 and Paris in 1941, finally settling in New York and teaching at the New School for Social Research. In 1960, one of the engineers of the Final Solution, Adolf Eichmann, was tracked down by Israeli intelligence and brought to Jerusalem to stand trial for crimes against humanity. Arendt observed the trial and wrote a series of essays about it, eventually published as Eichmann in Jerusalem. Arendt’s famous and much-misinterpreted phrase “the banality of evil,” a description of bureaucratic, unthinking evil, caused and continues to cause controversy. The film represents this tumultuous period in Arendt’s life, with archival footage from the Eichmann trial.