Preparing Our Students for Life After Carleton: Religion Major Career Event

On Tuesday, February 12th, the religion department invited prospective and current majors to a meeting to discuss questions and concerns related to life after Carleton. Asuka Sango, who has been working as a liaison between the religion majors and the Career Center, organized the meeting, which featured advice and suggestions from career adviser Deb Olien as well as a student panel. The meeting also continued the conversation about how the religion department can best reach out to students preparing for post-graduation lives. One idea has been an “Ask an Alum” page on the department website, putting current students in touch with alums willing to answer questions they may have about life after Carleton.

From the student panel, Lauren Alexander, ‘13, emphasized the importance of talking to peers, especially those with similar interests, citing her experience interning at the Washburn Center in the cities the previous summer – an opportunity she first heard of from a friend at Carleton. Matthew Fitzgerald, ‘14, highlighted the usefulness and versatility of a liberal arts degree, with his experience writing for CNN in London as an example of liberal arts “critical thinking skills” preparing him to quickly learn the ropes of an unfamiliar position. Danny Ulman, ’13, pointed out the usefulness of the Career Center, which has resources for students in all stages of the job search – from their “strong interest test” to the Engagement Wanted program to connecting students with opportunities at the Selective Liberal Arts Consortium.

Career adviser Deb Olien stressed that the Career Center is a bridge between campus and all these places “that want people like you.” She argued that religion students can be confident in the skills they’ve practiced in the department: religion majors embody the liberal arts, are required to digest extremely complex and diverse materials in class, and, as Michael McNally also pointed out, are frequently drawn to religion because they feel there is “more to the story”—all qualities which set them apart.

Winter Term Events in the Religion Department

Kristin Bloomer and Roger Jackson, Carleton Religion Department (February 5th)

“Understanding the Religious Mind: Meditating Monks, Mother Mary, and the Limits of Inquiry”

Owen Flanagan, Jr., James B. Duke Professor and Professor of Neurobiology at Duke University (February 7th)

“What Do Cognitive Science and Comparative Philosophy Teach Us about Human Flourishing?”

Sudharshan Seneviratne, Professor and Chair of Archaeology at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka (February 21st)

“Material Culture, Social Representations, and the Study of Buddhism” — page 2

Tim Graf, Filmmaker and Research Associate at Heidelberg University (February 22nd)

“Buddhism after the Tsunami: The Souls of Zen 3/11 Japan Special” — page 4

Carleton’s 2012-13 Forkosh Lecture in Judaic Studies: Naomi Seidman, Professor in Jewish Studies at UC-Berkeley (February 27th)

“The Marriage Plot: Sexuality, Secularization and the Emergence of Modern Jewish Literature”

— To be featured in our spring issue!
Why I Study Religion: An Occasional Series
Featuring Faculty, Alumni, and Student Voices

Graham Schneider, ‘12:

I arrived at Carleton torn between a philosophy and history major. It quickly became clear, however, that the religion major would let me study both, in addition to sociology/anthropology, political science, and more. I studied religion in order to understand the world around me through a variety of lenses. Religion's interdisciplinary nature allows it to investigate an astonishing breadth of relevant issues: metaphysical questions, history of thought, the effects of these ideas on society and vice-versa. Carleton’s religion department relentlessly attacks the basic suppositions of life, with important (if confusing) results. I took classes on Buddhism and Christianity simultaneously, so toggling between rebirth and single lifetimes, between God and Dharma, became a daily task. By the end of the term, I realized that cosmology and theology are only two of the multifarious factors that shape people’s philosophies and relationships.

From a quality of life perspective, few degrees are more practical than religion. This major helped me to develop my own opinions on a range of subjects, as well as make me a more thoughtful, informed citizen. The religion department, particularly Roger Jackson and his classes on South Asian religion, lit a fire under me to understand that part of the world. Since declaring my major, I am currently in Asia for the third time. As I teach my Thai students, religion has helped me on the ground because I am able to more effectively bridge cultural gaps. The rigor and diversity of Carleton’s religion curriculum provided me with the tools to meaningfully engage foreign cultures, recognize my shortcomings, and continue to improve my understanding of a large, large world.

A TALK BY PROFESSOR SUDHARSHAN SENEVIRATNE: “MATERIAL CULTURE, SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS, AND THE STUDY OF BUDDHISM”

Prof. Sudharshan Seneviratne, who has taught at Carleton in the past and visited most recently to deliver the 2011 Lindesmith Lecture, returned to Carleton on February 21st to discuss social archaeology in Sri Lanka. While he focused on artifacts of Buddhist material culture, he stressed that many of the sites in question were places where Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim traditions converge, such as at Sri Pada, “Adam’s Peak.” One cannot consider any one of these in isolation, he argued, pointing out evidence of Buddhist and Hindu shrines coexisting alongside Nestorian churches in ancient monastic cities. For Seneviratne, at a moment when ideologies seek to define Sri Lankan cultural heritage in exclusive terms, this material culture can be tool for conflict resolution.

What are you doing in the field of religious studies? Catching up with our professors:

I am currently revising an article to be published in the Journal of Religious Ethics on “Reconsidering Judaism’s Philosophy of Forgiveness,” which is based on a talk I gave at an interdisciplinary conference on forgiveness at Villanova University last spring. —Louis Newman

I’m working on a law review article drawing on the implications for the law of the authority of elders in Native American Communities explored in my book Honoring Elders. I’m also reading Ojibwe author Louise Erdrich’s novel, The Round House, and Robert Orsi’s Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies. —Michael McNally

I am currently working on an article about Buddhist logic in ancient and medieval Japan (its reception and its use in actual debates) while asking a question of how logic, or the use of valid reasoning, was believed to contribute to one's achievement of nirvana, which is often described as beyond words, logic and reasoning. —Asuka Sango
On January 2, Professor Louis Newman of the Department of Religion was appointed the first Associate Dean and Director of Advising, a position conceived as part of 2012’s Strategic Plan for the College. In addition to his excellent reputation as dedicated teacher and active scholar in Judaic Studies, Professor Newman has extensive experience in college service which leaves him more than prepared for the various responsibilities he will be taking on in this new role, one that will bridge offices, departments, and programs across the college.

Nume News: One of the key priorities of the Carleton Strategic Plan for the College 2012 is preparing students “more robustly for fulfilling post-graduation lives and careers.” Which of the initiatives in the Strategic Plan do you see as most important to achieving this goal?

Louis Newman: There are a number of important initiatives that are sketched in the Strategic Plan that should help prepare students more intentionally for post-Carleton lives and careers. I think one of the most important of these will be revising our advising system, especially for first and second-year students (“Liberal Arts advisers,” in the language of the Plan). These advisers could play a key role in helping students think not only about course selection and completing graduation requirements, but also about how the various elements of their Carleton experience are building on one another and how the intellectual skills they are gaining (and the interests they are developing) can be useful in the “real world.”

NN: As Associate Dean and Director of Advising, what will be your role in the implementation of these initiatives?

LN: I won’t begin this new position officially until July 1, but I am beginning to have conversations with faculty and other administrators about how we can integrate off-campus study more fully into the curriculum, perhaps through some either pre- or post-trip experience and reflection. I’m also working with Aisling Quigley, ’09, a recent Carleton grad, on developing curricular “pathways” that would give students some models for navigating our very rich curriculum in more intentional ways, as well as helping to connect students with alumni whose experiences and connections could be very instrumental in helping to chart a course for the future.

NN: What new resources and opportunities can students expect to see in the coming years?

LN: These are still being developed, so it would be premature to say just yet what sorts of resources will be available. But the Strategic Plan calls for more internship opportunities and more involvement of faculty and alumni in helping students to think about “life after Carleton,” so I think new initiatives along those lines are likely to be developed in the next year or so.

NN: Can you tell us about the new curricular “pathways” and their role in preparing students for their post-Carleton endeavors?

LN: The idea here is to provide some models or templates that would be a resource for students interested in particular issues, or who might want to explore particular sorts of careers. No one would be required to choose a pathway, but they would be available for students as a tool that they could turn to if they were looking for some guidance. I imagine that there might be a few dozen of these that could be developed with input from the Career Center, faculty, alumni, students, and staff. The sample pathways that were sketched last year by Associate Dean Nathan Grawe are just one possible model, but we’re exploring others, as well. Ultimately, we’ll also need to figure out how to package these in ways that will be optimally attractive and user-friendly for students.
BUDDHISM AFTER THE TSUNAMI—THE SOULS OF ZEN
3/11 JAPAN SPECIAL

On February 22nd, Carleton welcomed researcher and filmmaker Tim Graf to campus for a screening of his documentary, *Souls of Zen: Buddhism, Ancestors, and the 2011 Tsunami in Japan*, followed by students’ and professors’ questions for the director. The documentary presents perspectives on Buddhism in Japan in the wake of the March 11, 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disasters. With attention to Zen and Pure land Buddhism as well as Japan’s tradition of ancestor veneration, the film draws on ethnographic fieldwork to portray how religious in Japan responded to the unfamiliar institutional, doctrinal, and psychological challenges presented by the catastrophe. Filming what has been called “the greatest religious mobilization in Japan’s postwar history,” this is the only documentary to focus on the everyday lives of Buddhist professionals in the disaster zone. As research associate at Heidelberg University’s Institute of Religious Studies, Graf studies transformations of Buddhism in contemporary Japan and the relationship between religious practice and social change.