Ella Fox

“This summer I did research with Prof. Sango. I worked on tracing the concept of inter-connectedness specifically in sources like systems theory and Buddhist-Christian dialogues. It was fascinating to see how people have attempted to make (or have made) connections between seemingly incompatible philosophies and ideas.”

Kelly Banker

“I spent the summer on a Jewish farm in rural Connecticut living in a pluralistic community with 12 other Jewish young adults. This farm is a part of the growing Jewish food, farming and sustainability movement. I had a beautiful summer of growing with, from, and through the work of planting, tending and harvesting the veggies and berries on the farm. It was incredibly hard work, but deeply rewarding and fulfilling. We spent our days praying, singing, farming, pickling and being in deep connection to ourselves, our bodies and the earth.”

Nathaniel VanWienen

“This summer I volunteered with the Outreach Department at CAIR-Chicago, our Illinois chapter of the national Muslim American civil rights and advocacy group. I worked with another intern to organize an interfaith text-study group open to all religious communities of Chicago, starting by reaching out to students and staff at campus ministries and religious life offices on local university campuses. It was exciting to share ideas with other young people about the text-study, as well as learn about all the existing interfaith projects in different parts of the city!”

K. Tudor Silva Visits Campus!

On Thursday, October 16th, K. Tudor Silva, the director of the ISLE program and a professor of sociology at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka, visited campus to deliver a lecture on ethnicity in postwar Sri Lanka. On Friday, he spent time talking with students about studying off campus in Sri Lanka. His visit was sponsored by the Religion Department and Asian Studies.

During their fifth reunion, Carleton religion alums Rikka Womack ’09, Sarah Hashmall ’09, Jackie Perlow ’09, and Carolyn Schulte ’09 stopped by Religion Department Chair Lori Pearson’s house for a fun gathering!
Professor McNally’s year of leave was supported by a supplemental grant from the Mellon Foundation to equip sustained period of writing up the results of the targeted legal studies training he had completed under the Mellon New Directions Fellowship on his last research leave. The larger project, entitled Law, “Religion,” and Native Traditions, looks at the difficult fit between land based Native American traditions and the legal category of religion as it has been cooked up in the law. Specifically, McNally’s legal training, activism, and writing examines the legal arenas, including but extending beyond First Amendment law, where Native communities have asserted rights to sacred places, practices, museum objects, and ancestral remains. These include the fields of treaty-based federal Indian law, historic preservation and environmental law, international human rights law, and statutory law preserving and protecting Native American cultures, languages, and religions.

This year, he completed two law review articles related to this work, in an effort to draw on religious studies sensibilities to help judges, clerks, and lawyers understand the distinctive contours of Native religions in such matters. He also made four public presentations of the work at Harvard, Princeton, the American Academy of Religion annual meeting, and at the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, each of which comprises a chapter of a book he will complete this year, entitled, Native American Religious Freedom Beyond the First Amendment. He also drafted a book, under contract with Columbia University Press, that approaches related issues but for a broader audience, that introduces the contemporary vitality of Native American Religious Traditions by looking at a series of contemporary assertions of religious and cultural sovereignty: protection of sacred lands like the Black Hills, protection of sacred foods like wild rice from environmental and genetic engineering threats, and the assertion of indigenous "group" cultural rights in arena of international law.

The research has drawn deeply on the work of McNally’s courses in the department, and in particular on the academic civic engagement projects he incorporates into his courses on Native American religions. The Law, "Religion," and Native American Traditions project began through his course RELG 243 Native American Religious Freedom and through a realization that the First Amendment was only one of many places to which indigenous activists turned to assert religious rights. One of his book chapters relies on civic engagement projects students in two installments of that course undertook with Suzan Harjo (Cheyenne/Muscogee), a Washington D.C. based advocate who drew on Carleton student work in her effort to strengthen the case for federal co-management with tribes sacred sites on National Park Service lands.

He returns fired up about the importance of these issues and the urgency of more refined ways of speaking in public and in law about religion and about Native American religions. In this Winter Term’s version of Native American Religious Freedom, he plans to engage students again in collaborations with Harjo.

What is your focus within the realm of religious studies?

As a scholar, I am a bit eclectic. While I do things more broadly in Ethics/Moral Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion, and Modern Religious Thought, I spend the most time in nineteenth and twentieth century German and American moral philosophy, and African American Religious and Political Thought.

What are you most excited to bring to your students?

Perhaps the main things I hope students “catch” from me are: 1) An excitement to balance breadth and depth. For instance, one has to be willing to put in the work to do both well, to be able to tell a compelling story, let’s say, about how Nietzsche's response to Schopenhauer in The Birth of Tragedy pertains to how we might make sense of African American "Sorrow Songs."; and 2) to become more critical as thinkers. As students become more critical as thinkers you find that they become better readers and writers. Who doesn't want their students to say brilliant things and write them well?

How have you liked Carleton so far?

So far, this place is fantastic. The students are bright, engaged, and good natured. The faculty and staff is top notch. It’s a good space within which to be. Even the weather has been good to me so far.

What has been one of the most impactful academic experiences in your career?

Oh, wow. I’ve had so many. One of most formative begins badly. When I was a first-year undergraduate student, I had a contentious interaction with a professor who said in a class of about 25 students (with just two black students) that black students have to work harder than their white counterparts "to prove to her that we belong in her class." Not knowing how else to deal with the issue, I confronted her, telling her that the comment was racist. Subsequently, that was the worst semester of my life. I recount the story though, because of what happens next. The following semester, a new professor arrives on campus, and while I felt defeated and was contemplating dropping out of school, because of this professor’s dynamism, and care for us and the work, I decided to stay. It was also because of him--his dynamism and care for us and the work--that I decided to become an academic. I figured if I can play a similar role in at least one student’s life one day, I can say I achieved something.
Why I Study Religion: An Occasional Series featuring Faculty, Alumni, and Student Voices

Kalena Miller ’15 Religion major/Women’s and Gender Studies concentrator
Dallas, Texas.

In my A&I seminar on Religion and Media, we spent days problematizing dichotomies. Tradition and Modernity. Spiritual and Religious. Sacred and Secular. By the end of class each day, after talking ourselves in circles about a particular dichotomy, we inevitably concluded that the boundary was blurred, that lines were not so easily drawn. On the day we analyzed the dichotomy between sacred and secular, I could already predict how our discussion would unfold: the line would be erased and we would decide that trying to distinguish between these ideas was a huge, intellectual mess. Yet complicating that particular dichotomy meant more to me than the others. Erasing that boundary meant that the sacred and secular were intertwined, and that anything could be understood in terms of religious studies. On that day, I found a wholly different lens both for seeing the world and engaging in academia.

By that point in my Carleton career, I was still attempting to convince myself that majoring in Political Science or Economics would be a good, practical decision. But with every religion class I took, I became more enamored with the field of religious studies. In any conversation about religion, I could expect to think about power dynamics, social hierarchies, or human agency. In a way, studying religion was like studying philosophy, economics, history, and psychology all wrapped into one daunting, yet immensely rewarding, field of study.

Needless to say, I dropped my plans to major in Political Science shortly after that class discussion about dichotomies. I became fascinated with Evangelical Christianity and Islam. I quickly became obsessed with the relationship between gender and religion. Yet I like to think that I never fully abandoned my interest in economics or any of the other majors I thought would be "useful" enough. If that class discussion three years ago was correct and the sacred and secular are hopelessly intertwined, then the field of religious studies is much more than learning about religious traditions. Rather, studying religion provides a lens to investigate important questions, think critically about any number of subjects, and engage fully with the world.
In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy famously wrote, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” This was the axiom of my youth—be unhappy and interesting rather than happy and boring! The historian Darrin McMahon thinks that we humanities scholars tend to be “temperamentally critical, often pessimistic, [and] frequently cynical,” while teaching and writing about war, racism, oppression, or death (171). However, my new A&I seminar, “Global Pursuits of Happiness,” offered in the fall term of 2014, challenges Tolstoy’s maxim and shakes my petty pride in being a scholar of human sufferings for it reveals that “happiness” is, in fact, a uniquely interesting and intellectually rigorous subject of study.

Our first assignment was to study the etymology of the English word “happiness”—the term originally meant a good luck or fortune, something that happens to you, and not a mental state of well-being or contentment, as is often understood today. We also looked up “happiness” in foreign language dictionaries, and to our surprise, learned that most languages in the world do not have a word corresponding in meaning to the English “happiness.”

Having thus critically reexamined our own conceptions of “happiness,” we grappled with various philosophical questions. Is happiness achieved only by maximizing pleasure? What is the meaning of life and suffering? How does the Buddha Śākyamuni answer this question? How does Albert Camus address this in his discussion of the Greek myth of Sisyphus? How can “Cool Hand Luke” be seen as a modern Sisyphus, or perhaps as Nietzsche’s *superman*? Directly facing the cosmic indifference to human sufferings, do we desperately try to make sense of life, like Pi in *Life of Pi*, or do we join the Daoist mystics in suspending our search for meanings and enjoying the state of “flow” (complete absorption and deep engagement in what we do)?

We courageously grappled with these big life questions without simple, clear-cut answers. I consider this to be the hallmark of liberal arts education. While the Declaration of Independence promises the *pursuit of happiness* as an unalienable right, this course inspires the *happiness of pursuit*—the joy of intellectual exploration for its own sake.