

Gaudino Scholar's Report, Spring '98
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My first year as Gaudino Scholar has been educational, rewarding – and very busy. I have worked on three projects, and proposed two more for next year. Throughout, I have been greatly aided by the advice and encouragement of Bill Darrow and Jennifer Bloxam, as well as by the patience and hard work of my student assistant, Dan Kray, '98.

The three projects that concerned me this year were the new "Gaudino Forum," the exploration of a long-term Williams-in-India program, and an attempt to continue and extend Jennifer Bloxam's wonderful initiatives to promote service-learning at Williams.

The Gaudino Forum was launched as a means by which faculty could address students on issues of public concern, that might be close to their hearts but that they would have little opportunity to discuss in the classroom. I hoped that the forum would help enrich the political dialogue among students, provide a place for responses to campus crises, and demonstrate to students how academics can have valuable things to say on public matters. The structure of the forum is as follows: every Monday night, a faculty member talks for about half an hour on some controversial topic, after which he or she takes questions from the audience for an hour. Refreshments are served, and people often stand around for a while afterwards, continuing the conversation with the speaker or with each other. Topics have included: "Morality and Higher Education", a "Critique of Identity Politics," a broad discussion of how we might improve America's public schools, a session on Williams's alcohol policy led by the Dean of the College, a session on whether the U.S. should bomb Iraq, when that seemed imminent, and three sessions that, by coincidence, have all addressed aspects of the environmental movement.

I have received a heart-warmingly positive response to this initiative, and, while it has in some ways worked out differently from what I had expected, many of those differences have brought rewards rather than disappointments. For instance: by holding the Forum every week, I thought I could enable practically every member of the faculty and student body to attend at least once. The attendance has not in fact brought in such a wide array of people, but it has brought in a number of the same people, both among students and among the faculty, again and again. This surprised me: I did not think people would be willing to give over many of their Monday nights to such an activity. The fact that people do come back in this way has meant that the Gaudino Forum, unexpectedly, is building a small, warm community of students and faculty interested in political discussion – which, as far as I know, has not existed during my previous 6 years at Williams.

To take another example: because faculty members are a bit removed from the "front lines" of the political fray, I expected from the beginning that they might be able to speak more honestly and thoughtfully about public issues than can the well-known journalists and politicians who more commonly address such matters at Williams. In fact, the presentations have been rather *more* nuanced, more low-key than I expected. A small part of me is disappointed – I think I had hoped for fireworks, for flashy arguments that would reverberate across the campus. Insofar as I hoped to inspire a deeper treatment of political issues on campus, however, I am gratified: discussions at the Gaudino Forum have,

in my opinion, been consistently more open and more thought-provoking than discussions of the same issues in other public venues at Williams.

The second project I have been working on, which has occupied most of my time, is the effort to launch a Williams-in-India program. I take the Gaudino mission of promoting experience-learning to apply with particular importance to learning about the workings and significance of cultures. Such learning *cannot*, I believe, be conducted by way of the classroom alone; yet, for all the talk about “multiculturalism,” we do little at Williams to encourage students to immerse themselves in ways of life very different from their own – and especially little to encourage experience of ways of life in poor, non-Western, and non-Christian societies. So a regular Williams-in-India program, alongside our Williams-in-Oxford and Williams-in-Mystic programs, could fill an important need. As an exploratory step in that direction, my colleague Rachana Kamtekar and I led Winter Study trips to India this year, taking 33 students to study, respectively, “Women’s Issues in Contemporary India” and “Modernist Architecture in India.” The trips were preceded by a series of six lectures, entitled “The New India.” The trips themselves were not ideal examples of Gaudino-esque learning – neither one made use of homestays, for instance – but they do seem to have been of considerable educational value to the students who went on them. I was impressed by how quickly students who were originally afraid of practically everything warmed up to India; I was delighted and moved by the way in which many students developed a more respectful and much more nuanced appreciation of life in the developing world than they had when we started out.

Arranging and leading these trips taught me a great deal about the logistics of working with a group of students in India, and in addition afforded me an opportunity to make site visits to places where Williams may consider establishing a semester-long program. After I returned, I spoke further with faculty interested in participating in such a program, and have now written up my recommendations in a formal proposal to the administration. I’ll let you know in the next newsletter how that proposal goes over!

Progress on the third initiative, service-learning, has moved rather more slowly. My role has been mostly to co-ordinate existing efforts in this area. I have met, individually and as a group, with most of the ten or so faculty members with an interest in service-learning, talked with the Northern Berkshire Community Coalition about how they could help Williams in this area, and, just recently, hired Deb Zucker, ’97, to begin putting together a computer data base, with as much information as possible about service-learning at Williams and in the Berkshires, so as to lower the “start-up costs” for faculty who might like to try running such a course.

The India initiative now needs to be taken over by the administration, if it is to continue at all. The Gaudino Forum will continue next year, and I plan to increase my work on service-learning. I plan in addition two new initiatives – one, an “uncomfortable-learning” retreat before classes start for sophomores, juniors, and seniors; the other, a way of encouraging cultural immersion during Winter Study – on which I will report next time. I’d be delighted to receive feedback (positive and negative) from all of you on anything I’ve done, omitted, or planned for the future.