

Winter 2009

Educating the Whole Student

Laura Davis
Linfield College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine

Recommended Citation

Davis, Laura (2009) "Educating the Whole Student," *Linfield Magazine*: Vol. 5 : No. 3 , Article 9.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/linfield_magazine/vol5/iss3/9

This article is brought to you for free via open access, courtesy of DigitalCommons@Linfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@linfield.edu.

Educating the whole student



As a young college student, Peter Richardson lost his heart high in the eastern Swiss Alps – twice.

Not only did he fall in love with his future wife, Beverly, but also Richardson became enamored with Swiss German culture. Richardson, professor of German and this year's Edith Green Distinguished Professor Award winner, has spent the years since sharing his knowledge of Switzerland with his Linfield College students.

Some four decades later, he and Beverly regularly return to the Swiss Alps, and Richardson's current sabbatical research is based on the region (see sidebar). Self-described polyglots, they share a love of language, speaking German, Swiss German, French and Spanish, and some Italian and Rhaeto-Romansh as well. Richardson also teaches Latin at Linfield. Beverly, a local defense attorney, earned a Ph.D. in romance philology with a concentration in Spanish.

At Linfield, Richardson's contagious enthusiasm and sincerity have gone hand-in-glove with his desire to educate the whole student, sometimes in unorthodox ways.

Each year at the beginning of fall semester, Rich-

ardson tells his students, "Welcome to Linfield. I hope I don't see you next year."

Students should not take offense, he's quick to say. "I hope they're in Austria or some other country. It's a profoundly enriching experience to be able to melt into another culture, live life and see your own culture through other eyes."

Richardson arrived at Linfield in 1980, after a decade of experience on the Yale faculty. He was drawn to Linfield both for its Northwest location and the modern languages position it offered.

"I can't imagine going anywhere else, and that was so in my first year," said Richardson, who has relished satisfying relationships with colleagues and students.

Over the years, his interests have moved toward advising, and generations of students have sunk into a worn, wooden rocker that sits prominently in his office. He has served as a colloquium advisor every year since the program's inception in 1985, and he was a member of the committee that devised it in an effort to increase retention. He works so closely with the Counseling Center that its staff members jokingly offer to get him his own coffee mug.

"I've had the opportunity to exercise the kind of care



Peter Richardson has been named the Edith Green Distinguished Professor for the second time, having first earned the honor in 1987. The Edith Green Award is given to a faculty member who demonstrates sustained excellence in the classroom and who contributes in important ways to the intellectual growth and academic success of students.

I feel is essential to the education of students,” he said. “The rocking chair stuff. There is a lot that stands between students and learning. Dealing with a broad range of human experience and emotion is fascinating.”

Daniel Clausen '08, a language teaching assistant at a high school in Kematen, Austria, took at least one course each semester from Richardson while completing a double major in English and German. He remembers singing German folk songs at the beginning of class.

“When we got to the one about Bergvagabunden or ‘mountain vagabonds,’ I began to see how the Alpine culture meshed with my Idaho background,” Clausen said. “Peter notices such things immediately, and I remember him winking conspiratorially at the shared passion.”

Richardson intersperses his classes with great literature, probing discussions and props. To better describe the lives of Swiss and Tyrolean farmers, he brings in cow bells and hand-carved butter churns.

“In my last semester I spent two hours a week sitting in that famous rocking chair, talking through several great 19th century German novels,” said Clausen. “I learned just as much about life as I did about the German language. I wish I could continue his classes indefinitely.”

Richardson also teaches “Language Matters,” an Inquiry Seminar about language use in America. Although Lily Niland '10 has taken only that one course from Richardson, he made a big impression.

“He came into the first class with a heavy Southern accent and incorrect grammar,” she said. “I thought, ‘Am I really going to learn language from this guy?’ Then he dropped the accent and asked the class about our assumptions. That was a dramatic way for him to introduce himself and pull out vices we have about different types of American English.”

Richardson has become one of Niland’s most influential professors, she said, introducing her to the intercultural communication major during a lunch in Dillin. Niland speaks Spanish and Japanese and, at Richardson’s prompting, she is considering applying for a Fulbright grant to study the linguistic patterns of descendants of Japanese immigrants in Peru, which would use both languages.

Richardson’s passion for Linfield, for its students, and for the purpose of a liberal arts education helped convince Barbara Seidman, professor of English, during her job interview that Linfield was where she should spend her own career.

“We’ve shared many students over the years, and from them I have heard again and again how he has inspired them to explore and test their own potential in life-changing ways,” Seidman said. “Peter is an invaluable colleague and a gifted educator – the impact he has had on Linfield is beyond measure.”

The son of a geologist, Richardson nurtures a strong connection to the land and nature. He and Beverly raise lavender and garden on 23 heavily wooded acres outside McMinnville, “our own little paradise.” He plays the banjo, operates a 1913 Chandler and Price printing press, and is a woodworker, recently crafting ornate rafter tails inscribed with a Swiss saying for his wife’s new spinning room.

“Life is too short not to have fun,” he said. “That’s why I do what I do. Teaching is just such colossal fun. And when it stops being fun, I’ll wander off.”

Peter Richardson file:

B.A., Stanford University; M.A., Ohio State University;
M.Phil, Ph.D., Yale University
Edith Green Professor, 1987–88, 2008–09
Colloquium advisor since 1985
Favorite writer: John McPhee

– Laura Davis



Linguistic vacation

During 1969, while Peter Richardson completed his dissertation in Switzerland, he and his wife, Beverly, discovered Beverly’s family name inscribed on a cabin in a Sapün Valley village.

“We just fell in love with the place,” Richardson said.

Once a self-sustaining farm community of 250, the village had been slowly vacated and its culture lost as residents moved down to the valley. Now, some of the buildings have been transformed into a museum portraying the life of a 19th century farming family.

The Richardsons are among a dozen people who live there each summer. “We turn off the English and speak only Swiss German for a month,” said Richardson, who studied old Germanic languages during a Fulbright at the University of Marburg’s German Dialect Institute.

That training has uniquely prepared him for his current research project – studying old documents from the village museum.

Richardson is spending his spring sabbatical deciphering and transcribing more than 1,800 documents entrusted to him by local Sapün residents, most of whom cannot read the old handwriting.

“Some word forms are 400 to 600 years old,” he said. “They can’t read it, so this is a gift to them. It’s their own patrimony, their culture.”

Ultimately, Richardson plans to write a German language Heimatbuch, a “home book” or cultural history of the valley. He also hopes to write a historical novel in German based on the material.

“I’m getting to know some of these people from their letters,” he said. “I can hardly wait to get to it.”