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## Owning What You Know

Mardi Mileham  
*Linfield College*

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*Faculty such as Nick Buccola, assistant professor of political science, teach students to collect evidence, articulate their views and appreciate the complexity of issues. During in-class debates, students are asked to play roles and defend or argue an issue, regardless of their personal beliefs.*

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'OWNING WHAT

YOU KNOW'

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The 2012 election year has been marked by attacks, falsehoods and innuendo. Separating fact from fiction is daunting, even to the most avid news consumer and political junkie. What role does an undergraduate college have in educating students to become informed and discerning citizens? In a world dominated by sound bites and endless sources of information from blogs, tweets and traditional media, how can students separate fact from opinion and truth from falsehood?

How do faculty teach students to "own what you know?"

The search for truth lies at the heart of higher education, reaching back before Plato's Academy. At Linfield, it starts in the freshman Inquiry Seminar where collaborative investigation of a compelling subject deepens the relationship between thinking and communication. Students learn how to evaluate information sources for credibility, authenticity and the authority of the source. They investigate material on the Internet, in scholarly journals and the media. The emphasis on developing the ability to identify credible information and build arguments by verifying facts carries through courses across all disciplines and departments.

*Linfield Magazine* met with faculty in two departments for roundtable discussions on their approaches to developing critical

inquiry skills in students. Election year or not, the Departments of Mass Communication and Political Science focus on preparing students to be informed citizens and pursue careers in government, law, education, media or public relations.

Mass communication teaches students how to assess the media critically and to produce content responsibly. Students learn the vital role of communication as they adapt to and challenge their environments, both locally and globally. Political science students learn to think critically, systematically and creatively about political issues and gain understanding of the central political problems in local, national and global contexts. They hone their communication skills so they can write and speak in a clear and logical fashion to a range of audiences.

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## “Owning what you know”

Students and faculty in political science and mass communication were able to listen and spend time with Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Leonard Pitts Jr. when he visited Linfield in February. Pitts also spoke to a packed audience in Ice Auditorium where he challenged the audience to “own what you know.”

Pitts encouraged those attending to ask two simple questions: What do you know and how do you know it? What do you regard as an incontrovertible, absolute, swear on a stack of holy books, fact?

With the decline of newspapers and other traditional news sources, the explosion of social media and the blending of news and opinion in the online and broadcast world, finding credible sources of information presents challenges. But Professor Brad Thompson, paraphrasing philosopher John Dewey, said there is an even more critical implication that is exposed by the semantic relationship of the words *communication* and *community*.

“When you have fractured communication, you have fractured community,” he said. “We are being pulled apart by

the nature of a media industry that no longer ties us together. In the long term, that has serious consequences. People only expose themselves to the things that they already agree with. The polarization we see in Washington is a direct reflection of that.”

In order for citizens to be informed, they must be capable – and unafraid – to rethink what they know about history, about their faith, about any issue.

“Our role is to get students to reconsider what they think they know about politics, their beliefs, and how power operates in the world. Such reflection is vital to an informed and critical citizenry,” Professor Nick Buccola said. “In politics, you are going to make choices and you are going to disagree with others. The challenge we have as faculty is to create situations in which students can learn how to disagree with one another without tearing each other down. Because politicians aren’t always going to be truthful when discussing the issues, we have to provide students with tools to find the fundamental and complex questions behind the noise. If students can think through those questions in a deliberative manner, it will contribute to the common good.”



*The Internet, providing anonymity and global reach, has proven to be a boon to those who have an interest in manipulating the American electorate, according to Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Leonard Pitts Jr. He challenged students and the public to build arguments based on fact and to not be afraid to have opinions and beliefs challenged. An Emory University study shows that most U.S. citizens ignore facts that do not fit with preconceived beliefs.*

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“We need to take responsibility for the things we believe. You need to make it your business to choose your sources of information, not by how often they confirm what you already believe, but by how often they are willing to challenge it. If we don’t, we as a nation will continue swallowing this intellectual junk food to which we have become addicted and then we wonder why as a nation we seem so sick. We talk past one another, we scream past one another, and then we wonder why nobody ever seems to hear. We use facts of expedience, facts of convenience, facts designed to win the argument, not build the truth.”

– Leonard Pitts Jr.

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Buccola uses in-class debates where students play roles and defend or argue an issue, regardless of their personal beliefs. Students in his Great Political Thinkers class are split into groups and assigned debate topics randomly, covering Plato’s critique of democracy, whether Locke’s or Rousseau’s political philosophy is more compelling, whether allowing members of the Westboro Baptist Church to speak freely promotes a just society, and whether the realism of Machiavelli and Hobbes should guide our political decision making. The teams are expected to offer clear, persuasive and thoughtful arguments and to be able to substantiate their claims. Once the teams face off, the floor is open to questions from the class, before a class vote on which team made the most compelling argument.

Developing skills to find information, analyze and respectfully convey it is the first step in persuading others of the merits of an argument.

“It’s not our job to tell students what strands of thought are appropriate for them,” Professor Patrick Cottrell said. “It is our job to equip people with the knowledge and skills so they are capable of making their own decisions, not in a cookie cutter fashion.”

Nelly Evans ’12, a political science and German double major, said her college education hasn’t changed her world view, but she now has the information to back up her perspective.

“I knew what I thought was right, but I didn’t know why,” she said. “Over the course of my four years here, I have learned about the importance of community and the public good.”

She’s disheartened at how early election campaigning begins, the massive amount of money that is spent on elections, and the divisiveness of the campaigns.

“I would like people to want to resolve issues by communicating and by being open to changing their mind, listening to other views and backing off their stance in order to find a compromise,” she said. “Compromise is the number one thing. Money should not determine who the candidates are.”

Evans sees a disconnect on issues that Linfield students care about and the dialogue in Washington, D.C. The debate about women’s health struck a chord with students on campus, as do issues relating to the environment. “I feel like the things that students here are talking about aren’t what people in Washington are talking about,” she said. “And Washington sets the agenda.”

## Stepping into the fray

Aaron Good ’13 stepped into the political fray this spring when he spoke out on the issue of church-state separation in an opinion piece that was published in *The Oregonian*.

Good, a political science major, had a front row seat to some political discussions on the issue while studying at American University in Washington, D.C., and completing an internship with Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU), a nonprofit dedicated to defending the constitutional principle of church-state separation.

Although long interested in the topic, Good said he didn’t understand what “separation of church and state” really meant until he took classes in history, politics and religion at Linfield. The most significant was Religion and Politics taught by Professor Dawn Nowacki, which compared the church-state separation policies of the U.S., France and Turkey.

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You begin with a base theory and as you add in different viewpoints, the kaleidoscope turns, giving different lights and shape. As students grapple with hard issues this election season, faculty will continue to turn the kaleidoscope, educating students to be both informed and skeptical citizens.

– Patrick Cottrell

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“Every politics class I’ve taken has really challenged my views to the core,” he said. He studied a range of schools of thought and debated how they apply to modern issues, with professors challenging assumptions and encouraging critical thinking.

“The most valuable thing that I’ve learned is that there are no easy answers,” he said. “When we talk about whether politicians should follow what the people want or if they should do what they think is correct, we’re dealing with questions that philosophers have grappled with for more than 2,000 years. If Plato had trouble answering that question, I can guarantee that I won’t be able to.”

One of the most practical things Good has learned is how to state his opinions, and back them up orally and in writing. “You have to be willing to engage in class,” Good said. “Discussions can be intimidating, confusing and divisive at times, but you can only get the full experience of a class from throwing yourself into the verbal fray.”

One of the issues Good finds most troubling is the current strain of anti-intellectualism among Americans. He attributes it, in part, to how college campuses are mocked as “liberal indoctrination camps,” but it goes deeper.

“I think there is a social stigma against inquiry, knowledge and nuance that is really deep-rooted in our society,” he said. “I can place some blame on the habit that public figures have of associating ‘elitism’ with education and government. ‘Elites’ are teachers, college professors, research scientists and public sector workers. Never mind their significant, positive contributions to society. Their legitimate intellectual authority is somehow translated to power, and people find that scary.”

Good said the questioning of credible experts takes place without scientific inquiry and people tend to look only for information that confirms what they already believe.

“This all trickles down to a culture where we have the luxury of making serious day-to-day decisions without the burden of serious thought,” he added. For instance, people will easily purchase a Mac or PC based on gut feeling and anecdotal evidence, despite the fact that a bad decision could cost them \$1,000 or more.

This isn’t new or unique to the U.S., he added. Although people have the freedom to form their own opinions, “I hope we can agree that attacking the people who support rational, evidence-based decision-making based on an unbiased set of criteria, is maybe not such a good idea.”

## Information gathering

All students are taught to be critical of the sources they encounter in whatever their discipline, but never as intensely as in mass communication. Information Gathering, a required course for all mass communication majors, has taken on legendary status – as the most feared, most intense, most difficult class students will encounter. It’s a love-hate relationship, but nearly everyone who perseveres will tell you it’s the best class they took.

Ian Rapport ’12 remembers cringing each Thursday morning when his paper – often bleeding red ink edits – was projected onto a screen.

“I dreaded it,” said Rapport, who earned a degree in mass communication, “but it was helpful because we all learned from our mistakes.”

In Information Gathering there are no lectures or textbooks. Instead, students choose a public policy issue and research it through and through. They identify sources, conduct field and phone interviews, hone research strategies and write a weekly assignment, often 10-15 pages, which is projected for class critique. By semester’s end, each student has turned in around 200 pages of work.

“We have high standards and we require rigorous work from our students,” said Thompson, who teaches the course with Susan Barnes Whyte, library director. “Learning to survive in a high-pressure environment, which the communications industry inherently is, is a valuable skill.”

The small class size – seven during this spring semester – enables Thompson and Barnes Whyte to offer instantaneous advice, feedback and editorial comments.

“We teach things as they come up, as mistakes are made,” Thompson said. “We let students’ need for knowledge emerge.”

“We are giving them a core liberal arts education,” Barnes Whyte said, “which is a lot of writing, a lot of thinking, developing skepticism about sources, and an ability to pierce through to the essence of an argument and gain evidence to support a position.”

Past papers have focused on guns on campus, autism and factory farming, to list a few. Students go on-site to observe and



*Susan Currie Sivek, assistant professor of mass communication, uses Facebook, Twitter and blogs to give students first-hand experience in new media. She encourages her students to be skeptical of the information they receive before passing it on.*

conduct interviews. For many, the process is transforming as they connect with experts in the field.

Rapport tackled the question, "Should the FDA regulate energy drinks?" He spent weeks researching the topic inside out. He studied buyer habits in local grocery stores, researched Food and Drug Administration regulations in journals and books, and sought out experts on the topic, including a sports journalist from the *Los Angeles Times* and a woman who lobbied to ban Four Loko energy drinks.

Rapport was surprised to learn energy drinks are FDA regulated as a dietary supplement with few ingredient restrictions. "They contain a lot of ingredients that have not been tested on people in large quantities so no one really knows what the long term effects are," Rapport said. "Now I don't drink them at all."

Information Gathering gives students a sense that these issues are real, Thompson said. "These are real people with real problems, and this is what journalists do. They don't go to the library spending weeks doing research."

When Kate McMahon '98 took the course, she learned to dig deeper and cross-check facts until they're bulletproof, skills

that are invaluable to her work as a producer for *FRONTLINE*, an investigative documentary series on PBS.

"Investigative reporting lives and dies by credibility," she said. "To make a compelling film, it's essential to get great access to great stories, but it's also imperative to substantiate the truth of what you are reporting. You've got to question everything."

## Real-world experience

There are many other examples of how students get real-world experience learning how to assess information. Cottrell's students met with local Vietnam veterans and then traveled to Southeast Asia for an in-depth look at the complexities of the Vietnam War. Professor Susan Currie Sivek uses Twitter, blogs and Facebook to explore the power of new media, and also help students understand the moral and ethical choices of passing on unverified information. She uses examples of incorrect and inflammatory information that was passed on via Twitter in Florida's Trayvon Martin case, which captured the attention of the media and the nation. Professor Lisa Weidman has collaborated with students on research into national



*Paloma Dale '12, left, and Brinn Hovde '13 honed communication skills across a broad spectrum of media, including radio, to diversify their skillset. Dale served as news director for KSLC radio and Hovde served as music director for the station, and also wrote music reviews for The Linfield Review newspaper.*

consumer and media perceptions of Oregon's wine industry. Professor Michael Huntsberger explores the power of video messaging, with its colorful, often emotional appeal. Students get hands-on experience by shooting, editing and producing video projects in class. As part of a collaborative research project, Huntsberger and two students produced *The Pinot Chronicles: 25 Years of Oregon's International Pinot Noir Celebration*, a documentary about the first Pinot Noir celebration in the U.S. Nowacki's collaborative research with students investigates women's representation in governments around the world. She and her students frequently present papers together at academic conferences and her students often go on to advocate for empowering women in various ways locally, nationally and internationally.

Students take leadership roles in media through *The Linfield Review*, KSLC and Wildcat Productions. Political science requires an internship, and mass communication strongly encourages students to pursue them to get hands-on and behind-the-scenes work in a variety of media environments and with political and nonprofit organizations. In addition, students listen to speakers with diverse views from all sides of the political spectrum on topics such as health care, the Constitution, campaign finance reform and the Patriot Act through the Pizza and Politics forum.

Like many students, Paloma Dale '12 took advantage of a variety of experiential learning opportunities at Linfield to become more adaptable in a changing media environment. She started as a DJ at KSLC, Linfield's student-run radio station, became business manager and then news director. She developed a website for a local nonprofit, worked on the documentary film about the International Pinot Noir Celebration, worked in the library special collections area, and did an independent study project related to her mass communication major while studying abroad in Costa Rica.

"I wanted to experiment with as many different things as possible and diversify my skills to be prepared for whatever the future holds," she said. "There isn't going to be a comfortable, high profile investigative journalism position available, but if you work on a small scale in the field you choose, you will gain the tools and skills to be the best journalist you can be."

Dale doesn't believe that college will provide all the answers for a future career. What she has gained at Linfield is curiosity and a desire to make a difference. "College is about finding a passion to learn and achieve," she said. "I don't think you are ever done learning, so I don't think I have all the skills I'll need. But I am on my way."

College made her question the world and see it from a different perspective. "Four years ago, I thought I was ready to go out in the world and live my life," she added. "Now I feel like I'm ready to go out and change the world."

Brinn Hovde '13 plans to pursue a career in advertising, yet she also understands the manipulative nature of the media.

"I know advertising can be manipulative, but it is interesting to learn how people respond to images," she said. On the flip side, she is concerned about how easily the public can be manipulated.

Hovde learned through her courses to be skeptical and to verify facts before accepting information to be true. She's disappointed at the poor quality of information that is produced and posted on the web.

"Because I see this as a creative medium that can be very powerful, it's disappointing to see how poorly it's treated and how carelessly some of the content is created," she said. "Whether you are producing content for a few people on campus or for a national audience, you need to put in a quality effort."

## Educational kaleidoscope

The challenge in teaching political science is in helping students understand that politics is more than something that can be nasty and unprincipled. It's helping students find the connections between distant conflicts and situations and their own lives, beyond the political battlefield. How does it relate to their family life, their involvement in student government, in athletics, in fraternity and sorority life?

"No matter how much you don't like politics, you can't avoid it," Buccola said. "It's everywhere. It's going to have a huge impact on your life."

Cottrell uses a kaleidoscope as a metaphor for education. You begin with a base theory and as you add in different viewpoints, the kaleidoscope turns, giving different lights and shape. As students struggle to own what they know this election season and beyond, faculty will continue to turn the kaleidoscope, educating students to be both informed and skeptical citizens. 🍷

– *Mardi Mileham*

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### Department of Mass Communication:

Michael Huntsberger Ph.D., *assistant professor of mass communication*

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Lisa Weidman Ph.D., *assistant professor of mass communication*

### Department of Political Science:

Nicholas Buccola Ph.D., *assistant professor of political science*

Patrick Cottrell Ph.D., *assistant professor of political science*

Dawn Nowacki Ph.D., *professor of political science, department chair*

### Other contributors:

Laura Davis, *assistant director of communication, assistant editor, Linfield Magazine*

Bruce Wyatt, *vice president for college relations*

Susan Barnes Whyte, *library director*