Dear alumni and friends of UW philosophy,

I hope this newsletter finds you well, as our fall shifts from colorful leaves to wintery scenes. Though the state and university are still struggling with the recession (and it sounds like will be for some time to come), the good news is that it hasn’t had a detrimental impact on the quality of UW Philosophy. One of the reasons is that we’re a low tech/low overhead discipline by nature. This certainly doesn’t mean that we don’t appreciate and depend on your support for travel, visiting speakers and student awards, but we are faring relatively well in this lean time. On the other hand, we have seen a decline in the number of philosophy majors, and this trend is probably due in part to the economic downturn, which tends to discourage students from pursuing majors that are not pre-professional.

The irony of this assumption is that philosophy has a bad rap when it comes to earning potential. The American Philosophical Association website recently highlighted new data which shows that the philosophy major is a prudential choice. Here I quote. “PayScale.com’s current data on “Best Undergrad College Degrees By Salary (www.payscale.com/2008-best-colleges/degrees.asp) lists starting median salary and mid-career (15.5 years after graduation) median salary for 50 different university majors. Of the fifty, the philosophy major ranks sixteenth in mid-career median salary. (Seven of the majors ranking above philosophy are various engineering fields). Of particular interest is the comparison with Business Management. The starting median salary for Business Management majors is $43,000, while the starting median salary for Philosophy majors is $39,900. By mid-career, however, the median salary for Business Management majors has risen to $72,100, while the median salary for Philosophy majors has jumped to $81,200.” For more on this, see http://www.apaonline.org/.

Despite the fact that economic downturns typically have a detrimental impact on humanities programs, our fall course numbers were strong. All three of our introductory courses were full or nearly so, which is great news for recruiting future majors and encouraging students to take more philosophy. And our graduate seminar enrollments were also very strong, which indicates a number of majors and minors nearing completion of their degrees. Though our midrange course enrollments were slightly weaker than normal, our courses were all well above the university minimum enrollment numbers.

Faculty news. I’d like to give a long overdue update on recent news and accomplishments in the department, starting with our faculty members. Without a doubt the biggest news is that Marc Moffett received tenure and promotion to Associate Professor. Congratulations, Marc! He sailed through the process, and his external letters were glowing. He is co-editing (with John Bengson) a very important anthology, Know- how: Essays on Knowledge, Mind and Action (Oxford University Press). This volume contains two substantive research essays by Marc and John. And his paper, “Against a priori functionalism,” will be published by the Canadian Journal of Philosophy.

Susanna Goodin is back from a year-long sabbatical in Seattle doing research for a project on alchemy and 17th century philosophy. Joe Ulatowski, Ph.D. Utah, filled in very well for her while she was away. He is now a visiting assistant professor at UNLV, and we wish him well.

Franz-Peter Griesmaier should be recognized for his outstanding teaching. Last year he had spectacular teaching evaluations for five courses, including our essential service course, Introduction to
Philosophical Foundations for the Practices of Ecology, which has just been published by Cambridge University Press. His book Six Legged Soldiers: Using Insects as Weapons of War (Oxford University Press, 2008) received broad recognition, and Jeff gave a number of presentations, interviews, and editorials on it (including an Op-Ed piece for the New York Times). His publications have ranged widely, from technical pieces in entomology to scholarly work in environmental ethics to popular and literary pieces.

Carlos Mellizo received a most prestigious honor by being invited to present on the Spanish Edition by Sintesis Editorial of Mill’s Autobiography at the Royal Spanish Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in Madrid. He also published new editions of a number of his previous translations of important works in the history of moral and political thought. His major introduction to a translated volume of George Berkeley’s work was published in Spring 09, as well as a new prologue to his translation of Mill’s The Utility of Religion. Professor Mellizo presented some of his work for this prologue in a paper, “Mill on Religion, A New Look” to the department last April. The Spanish version of this paper has just been published in Caracas by the Universidad Central de Venezuela. He also completed a new translation of Mill’s The Subjection of Women, with an introduction and notes, which will be published in January 2010.

Student news. This year we have our largest group of graduate students in the history of the department, with four second-year students and three first-years. Last spring Mike Farnsworth completed his M.A. thesis. We are proud of him for keeping at it. Jen Wright, one of our former M.A. students, is now an Assistant Professor of psychology at the College of Charleston in South Carolina, and shaking up the fields of experimental philosophy and moral psychology. Wilson Schersten, who is all but done with his M.A., is spending the year observing Bonobos in the Congo for the Max Planck Research Institute in Berlin. And speaking of fascinating careers, Luke Glowacki is a Ph.D. student at Harvard University in Human Evolutionary Biology. His focus is cognitive evolution and coalitionary aggression. Luke spent this past summer in the Horn of Africa between Ethiopia and South Sudan with a tribe called the Nyangatom. It was physically and psychologically trying because of the heat and remote location.

Five undergraduate majors finished their degrees last year. In the fall, Mark Cannon graduated. In the spring, Jenelle Garber, Sara Halliday, Jeri Melinkovich and Daniel Richter (inducted by the Phi Beta Kappa honor society) graduated. They are a wonderful group and we wish them well in the future.

Department news. Early in the fall, the department co-sponsored a very successful visit, along with the Kaiser Ethics Lecture, by the distinguished philosopher Thomas Pogge, Yale University (http://pantheon.yale.edu/~tp4/index.html). And Matt McGrath, Professor at University of Missouri-Columbia, who is one of the best young philosophers in this field, presented “Knowledge and the Pragmatic” in early October. You can review his work at http://web.missouri.edu/~mcgrathma/pubs.html. We post our upcoming speakers on our website, and you all are warmly invited to all of these lectures.

This fall we are experimenting with a new graduate/advanced undergrad seminar, a “pro-seminar” team taught by Marc, FP, and Ed. The aim is to work through core material that all graduate students should be familiar with, and to concentrate on argument identification and analysis as well as basic philosophical writing skills through weekly short papers.

With this newsletter I want to introduce a new and I hope regular feature, called “Hallway Debates” (I’m open to a better name). In the department there is often an impromptu and very lively debate among our faculty in the Hoyt hallway, usually on a topic related to a class or a paper. I thought you might appreciate listening in on or getting involved with some of these debates. In the newsletter we’ll provide a “teaser” to the debate, and refer you to our website where you can find a fuller statement of the issue. This idea is a work in progress, and I’m hoping that individual faculty, as well as those of you who are inspired to, will provide entries to go on the web. We start off this series with a fundamental problem that many different disciplines of philosophy worry about, that of reasonable disagreement.

Marc has written up the teaser as well as a lovely elaboration of the problem (again, you can find this on the web).
I’ll end with perhaps the most important note: my gratitude to those of you who have supported the department and the university by making financial donations. Without them our speaker series would be sputtering, graduate student and undergraduate travel to conferences would be nonexistent, and we wouldn’t be looking forward to new opportunities. Please send us a line or an email, and if at all possible, drop by the Philosophy Department during your next visit to Laramie and UW. As always, we would love to hear from you regarding your families, careers, avocations.

Best wishes,

Ed Sherline
Associate Professor and Head

HALLWAY DEBATES

Reasonable Disagreement
Marc A. Moffett

It is a near platitude of commonsense diplomacy that reasonable people can disagree. Nevertheless, the possibility of reasonable disagreement is philosophically perplexing. If you and I disagree, then I think I am right about some issue and that you are wrong about it. On the other hand, if I think that you are reasonable in coming to your conclusion, then I believe that your conclusion is sufficiently defensible to warrant belief. But these two positions of mine sit uneasily with one another. After all, if I think your conclusion is reasonable, why do I cling to mine? Conversely, if I think I am right in “sticking to my guns”, in what sense do I think your conclusion is reasonable? In a nutshell, this is the philosophical problem of reasonable disagreement.

For the full statement, please see our website: http://uwadmnweb.uwyo.edu/Philosophy/