



Freshman Studies, Interdisciplinary Cornerstone

By Elizabeth Carlson, associate professor of art history and
Scott Corry, associate professor of mathematics



ABOVE: Scott Corry, associate professor of mathematics and director of the *Freshman Studies* program

In 1945, then-President Nathan Pusey introduced *Freshman Studies* to the Lawrence curriculum in the following way: “[Students] need to know that they can read great books and enjoy them. They need to read different kinds of books to learn that one reads differently in different fields, they need to learn that these books have significance for them in their own lives.” Though the course has changed in its 70-year history, it has remained true to its original mission of fostering intellectual curiosity through reading, discussion and writing. In 2016, it’s worth pausing to consider what exactly we mean by intellectual curiosity, and to ask why *Freshman Studies* is still the starting point for a Lawrence education.

In order to be truly curious, one needs something to be curious about. And so we fill our course with challenging works from a variety of disciplines and traditions, created by authors and artists with diverse voices and identities. This year we began with *Native Guard*, Natasha Trethewey’s stunning collection of poetry exploring her identity as a biracial Southerner and confronting the complex legacy of slavery and the Civil War. At the other end of fall term we read Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, a meticulously crafted graphic memoir detailing the formation of her lesbian identity against the backdrop of her father’s struggles and the development of the gay-rights movement in the United States. These deeply personal works served as bookends for three others: a work of economics by Thomas Schelling, a play by Bertolt Brecht and (of course) Plato’s *Republic*. The winter kicked off with the sacred Hindu scripture *The Bhagavad-Gita* before moving on to Richard

Feynman’s *The Character of Physical Law*, the iconic physicist’s series of Messenger Lectures delivered at Cornell in 1964. After marveling at the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges and taking a close look at Gillo Pontecorvo’s film *The Battle of Algiers*, we’ll end with a new work for *Freshman Studies*: Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue*, a landmark jazz recording by one of the most innovative musicians in American history.

If that isn’t a list to be curious about, we’re not sure what is. But we want our students to go beyond well-meaning interest, to be deeply curious. We are asking students (and ourselves) to constantly wonder: Have I understood this text? What else could it mean? Should I reject my initial ideas in favor of richer ones? Why does this text matter? Most importantly, while eager engagement is necessary for all the works, different types of work require different sorts of evaluation. This makes *Freshman Studies* an especially challenging course, to take and to teach.

Reading diligently requires that one continually ask questions. This is harder than it sounds, since different types of works invite different sorts of questions. Why does Trethewey write so many sonnets, and why is she so sneaky in the way that she plays with the sonnet form? How can it possibly be, Mr. Feynman, that the arrow of time is a statistical phenomenon rather than something baked into the fundamental physical laws? How do Socrates’ analogies drive Plato’s argument, and how much light does “the friction of comparison” really provide? These different types of questions, in turn, suggest different sorts of answers: largely interpretive for Trethewey’s poetry, focused on clear understanding for Feynman’s physics and a heady mixture of both for Plato’s philosophy. We also ask students to make connections between works, helping them think creatively by finding links between, for example, the beauty of physical laws and Plato’s forms. We want them to experience firsthand the rewards of attentive reading, as they continually question and provisionally answer, drawing on their powers of understanding and interpretation in an intricate intellectual dance.

Dancing is more fun with others, and so we teach *Freshman Studies* in small seminars of 15 students. Discussion exposes us to alternate viewpoints and allows practice in the difficult skills of persuading others, being convinced by others and agreeing to disagree after a reasonable, even emotionally charged, conversation. Like close reading, serious discussion takes work, and the ability to contribute develops over time. *Freshman Studies* lays the groundwork for future conversations by modeling the possibility of satisfying and improvisational intellectual work by a community of peers,



ABOVE: Chemistry major and art history minor Caren Sullivan '16, left, uses a confocal Raman microscope to determine which pigments are present in a 15th-century manuscript, while Assistant Professor of Art History Benjamin C. Tilghman '99 and Assistant Professor of Chemistry Allison M. M. Freshman look on. The work is part of Sullivan’s *Senior Experience* project.

something which isn’t so easy to accomplish and isn’t always so easy to find in the world at large.

After testing out ideas in conversations, we ask students to substantiate their claims in thesis-driven essays. The path to good writing is long and arduous and there is no real shortcut. The careful feedback we provide helps draw attention to the many areas that need work: grammar, tone, quality of prose, organization, etc. But above all, good writing comes from having something to say, and that is the focus of *Freshman Studies*. We want our students to discover writing as a tool for thinking, at which point the notion of revision becomes more natural: as we write more, we uncover new insights and confusions, and we have more and different things to say.

So why is *Freshman Studies* such a good starting point for the Lawrence education? The course not only provides important instruction in reading, discussing and writing but also encourages comfort with ambiguity and controversy. It fosters an intellectual community amongst students and faculty and demonstrates that there really are questions worth asking, questions whose exploration requires prolonged study—even the work of a lifetime. To truly engage with Trethewey’s poetry, one should study poetics and literature in general, going far beyond the basic structure of the sonnet as introduced in *Freshman Studies*. To truly understand Feynman’s statements about time (and much more!) one should study thermodynamics in the physics or chemistry departments, as

well as other subjects such as mathematics. By the time they are seniors, our students can apply what they have learned in their major(s) and minor(s) to truly interesting questions of their own devising, thereby satisfying the curiosity they have been cultivating since freshman year.

All Lawrentians will go on to major in at least one subject, and they will acquire specific disciplinary knowledge and effective methodologies through substantial coursework in that area. Moreover, many will continue to cross disciplinary boundaries through the questions they ask. Take, for example, the *Senior Experience* project of **Caren Sullivan '16**. Majoring in chemistry and minoring in art history, she utilizes Raman spectroscopy to examine the pigments used in a 15th-century Book of Hours. The project began after a student who had previously worked on the manuscript noticed the first 12 pages appeared to be incongruous with the rest of the text. Through the recreation of medieval pigment recipes, Caren compares the pigments used in the beginning of the book with the other pages to verify whether the pigments are the same between the two sections. Caren says, “Whatever your major, you can utilize it to think about the new subject in front of you.”

Freshman Studies sets the stage for such projects by exposing students to multiple and diverse ways of thinking and by encouraging them to ask questions continuously. Once they start, we hope they will never stop. ■