

Warner Pacific's Humanities Core Curriculum
takes on life's big questions.



CORE KNOWLEDGE

Story and Photos by Scott A. Thompson

When Sarah Martin '02 arrived at Warner Pacific as a freshman in 1998, she figured she had the smarts to handle anything the college could offer. Then her sophomore year arrived and the room started spinning, due in part to a certain humanities course by the name of War and Peace. With its integration of philosophy, literature, history, and ethics, the course was unlike any Martin had ever seen. And as the first step in the College's Humanities Core Curriculum, it pushed her to rethink the purpose of her college education.

"It knocked my socks off," said Martin, who is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Kentucky, in Lexington. "I remember doing a three-piece assignment looking at a situation of war and peace in your own life, putting [in] information about strategies of warfare, as well as the study of philosophy, and starting to look at your own story within that lens...It made me rebuild who I was as a person of depth."

The bigger picture

Beginning with the Culture of Western Man curriculum in the mid-1970s and continuing today with courses like War and Peace, Science and Technology, and Faith, Living, and Learning, the Humanities core curriculum has served as Warner Pacific's moral and educational spine for over thirty years. It's a curriculum that swims upstream in an age of specialization and that asks students from all disciplines to wrestle with age-old questions, forge trust among strangers, and—for most students—explore what it means to be Christians in the larger society.

"We need to ask ourselves why it is important that we have what is considered traditionally a well-rounded education," said Humanities professor Heidi Owsley. "We are going to go to [voting] booths all of

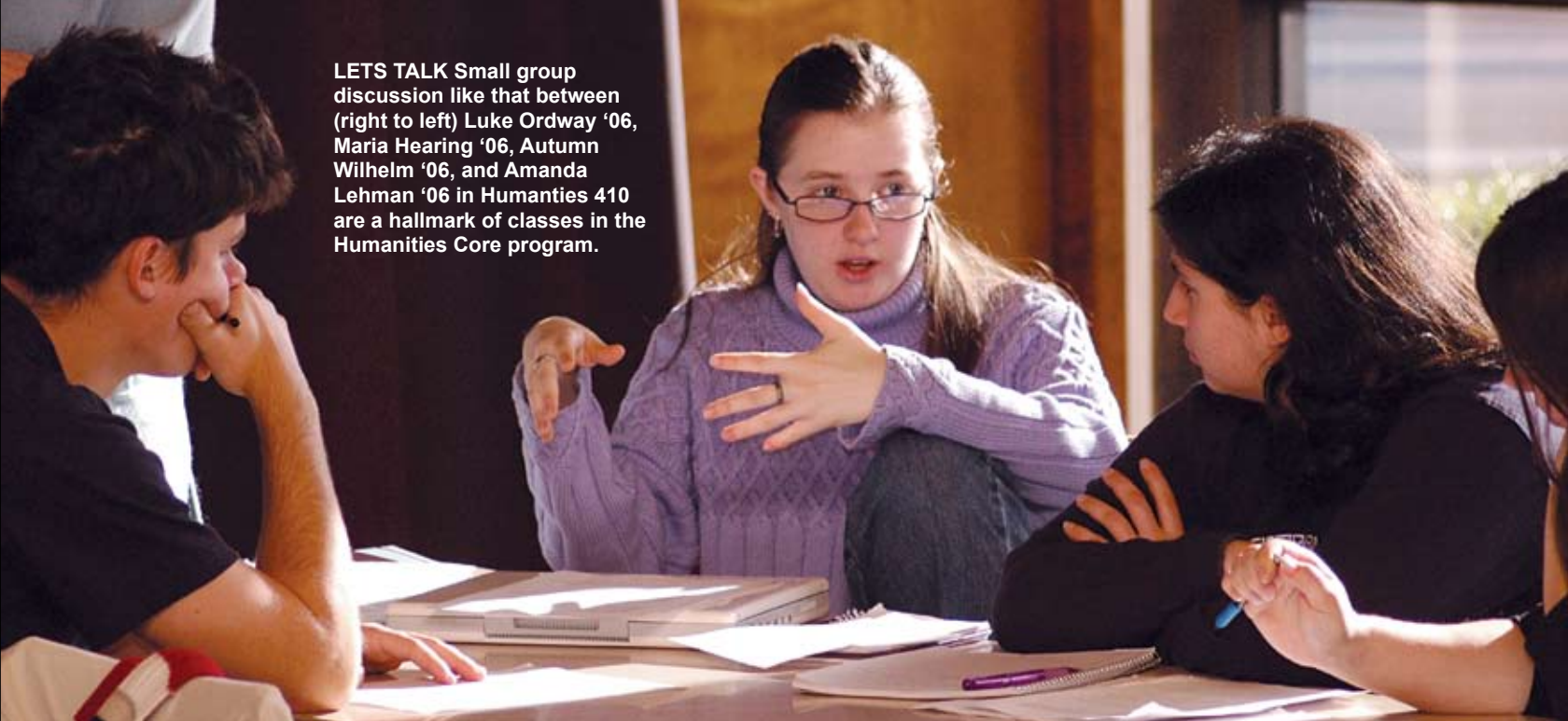
our lives. We are going to be deciding questions of the environment, questions concerning war and peace, questions considering taxation and governmental policy, foreign policy, local property taxes, etc. And all of these have to be engaged on a level broader than simply what my personal interests are. So we are asking what it means to be a citizen of a community and what it means to be a citizen of the world."

The grand experiment

The Humanities Core Curriculum traces its roots to an ambitious experiment in general studies called the Culture of Western Man, which began in 1974 as part of a \$350,000 grant from the Lilly Endowment. Then-president Dr. E. Joe Gilliam '50 had sought out key advisors, including former U.S. secretary of education Dr. Earl McGrath, to help him explore ways to incorporate Christian thought into more academic disciplines.

"I was trying to go from the perspective that we needed to integrate the Christian world view with everything from philosophy, history, social sciences, to the natural sciences," said Dr. Gilliam.

Gilliam developed a relationship with the Indiana-based Lilly Endowment, which wanted to support interdisciplinary education. In the spring of 1972, Gilliam tapped his Vice President for Academic



LETS TALK Small group discussion like that between (right to left) Luke Ordway '06, Maria Hearing '06, Autumn Wilhelm '06, and Amanda Lehman '06 in Humanities 410 are a hallmark of classes in the Humanities Core program.

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affairs, Dr. Marshall Christensen '65, to pull together some faculty and write a proposal for a new model of integrated general education.

“Eight of us spent most of the summer hammering out the proposal and the outline to a new approach to general education,” said Christensen, who later served as Warner Pacific’s president from 1981 to 1996. “We were fashioning a world view, and a Christian world view at that, because—and this is critical—we always wanted to know...how the Christian faith relates to these huge issues about what it means to be a person, what it means to be a citizen and the problems of our culture.”

When it finally debuted in the fall of 1974, CWM offered a “great questions” approach to general studies. Eight faculty members from different departments taught as a team, lecturing and leading discussions on such questions as, “Can humans opt out of their responsibility to the earth?” or, “How do leaders obtain and hold on to power?” CWM absorbed all previous general education classes into a single 36-credit course that spanned the freshman and sophomore years.

“In a given week, students might be reading something from the Bible, something from a novel, something from Kierkegaard, that kind of thing,” said former English professor Arthur Kelly '65. “It was probably the most formative teaching and learning experience I have ever had. It was an incredible experience. It changed us all.”

Remodeling

As innovative as CWM was, faculty realized it required a level of writing and critical thinking that many incoming freshman had yet to develop. The program also proved a frustration for students attempting to transfer to schools that had nothing like an all-in-one CWM program. During the 1980s, faculty reintroduced lower division writing and communications classes, and eventually phased out CWM altogether—save for a remnant that became the Humanities core curriculum of today.

“I think we all began to realize [CWM] demanded a great deal of time and that there were probably some subjects that were not being

adequately dealt with at the general studies level that probably needed a little more attention,” said Kelly. “It was a grand experiment. I would say it achieved what it meant to achieve.”

Why ask the big questions?

While CMW has come and gone, today’s Humanities core curriculum retains the rigor of its forbearer. It continues to take a “big questions” approach involving faith, morality, and civil responsibility. Faculty argue that it is essential for the College to retain a centerpiece curriculum that expressly engages all students in these broader philosophical questions, in the face of trends that might consider such courses as irrelevant in terms of career preparation.

“Much of the social surroundings that students come from shove them in a direction contrary to where we are trying to take them,” said Humanities professor Terry Baker '81. “I think society is basically saying, ‘How is this going to cash out?’ And we’re saying that’s not the primary question...The liberal arts college that gets it right has cohesiveness in the sense that those larger, ongoing, philosophical questions of humanity are never far from the surface.”

Critical thinking for 200

The first step in the Humanities Core for traditional, four-year students is a choice between three sophomore-level courses: War and Peace, Science and Technology, or Earthkeeping. While each has its distinct application, the courses share the goal of understanding classic Western views on human nature by studying philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine, as well as more modern writers like Marx, and Freud. Students then incorporate the ideas of these thinkers—along with works of fiction like Remarque’s “All Quiet on the Western Front” and Shelly’s “Frankenstein”—into discussions about globalization, armed revolution, protection of endangered species, or cloning, depending on the course.

“The 200 level is really about logic and critical thinking,” said Dawson. “Whether we are talking about war and peace, science and

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the content is slightly secondary to this primary focus on critical thinking. How do you read comprehensively? How do you sort out arguments? How do you find synthetic possibilities, weaving together disparate sources? Those [are] hard, critical thinking edges.”

To clone or not to clone?

In Science and Technology, for example, students not only research the debate surrounding cloning, but they must also write a paper arguing for or against the practice. Dr. Pam Plimpton, who co-teaches the course with religion professor Dr. Bryan Williams, says that having to take a stand forces students to dig more deeply into the research in order to support their position.

“What we hope they will find is that it is difficult to be on one side or the other, because they will have discovered through their research that there are certainly reasons not to [clone cells] and there are certainly reasons to go ahead and do it,” said Plimpton. “They have to explore those.”

Williams says that, like it or not, science is forcing these ethical dilemmas upon society more and more. If Christians, in particular,

through it, and you thought, ‘What am I going to learn from this?’ But religion and Bible and theology only go so far. If I want to step outside of this campus, step outside of my own world, outside of my church, I’m going to need to know how to answer [people’s] questions, and I’m not going to be able to do that without taking classes like [those in] the Humanities core.”

The heart of the matter

While the 200-level courses wrestle with philosophy and contemporary topics like stem cells and global warming, Humanities 310—Faith, Living, and Learning—turns the discussion inward, looking expressly at personal ethics and morality. It’s heavy on small and large group discussion and reflection, and for many students, it is one of the most memorable and life-changing classes offered at Warner Pacific. Students read a mixture of fiction and nonfiction texts—including Chaim Potok’s “The Chosen,” Madeline L’Engle’s “A Circle of Quiet,” and Diogenes Allen’s “The Traces of God in a Frequently Hostile World”—and journal extensively. Much of the work is never turned in. It’s a class that essentially pulls over to the

“Where is my place in the suffering of the world? What is my obligation to the world? And if that’s my obligation, then how do I live my life?”

want a voice in the public debate, they need to understand the language and the ethical dynamics involved.

“[Cloning] becomes the touchstone that we keep coming back to [in order] to help us understand who we are and how we should react to difficult problems,” said Williams. “We just want them to fall off the fence and say, ‘I can articulate a stance that will shape this policy and because I am engaged in this policy, I will act into it and make it better.’”

In recalling his experience in Science and Technology, senior Aaron Walton ‘06, a Religion and Christian Studies major, described how his initial reticence toward cloning gave way to a greater appreciation for the complexity of the issue.

“Looking at it through the eyes of different historical figures, it really gave me a lot of respect for it,” Walton said. “That is, in essence, what it gave the whole class. It was hard at first, and it was hard going

side of the road and asks students to examine their faith in light of what they’ve learned thus far, and to explore what it really means to see and appreciate the differences in others.

“I’m teaching responsibility in that class,” said music professor Dr. Dennis Plies, who has taught the course since the mid-1990s. “When they can find safety and swim past defenses and they want to share who they are, [they realize] people have passions. It has also taught me about multiple perspectives. I would have thought that, in general, there is not diversity here. Now I have a new understanding. Diversity is everywhere. We have to see it.”

Diversity all around

Potok’s “The Chosen,” which has been a staple in Humanities 310 for years, serves as a symbol for the diversity that can exist within the same culture. It tells the story of the unlikely friendship between two Jewish teenagers who live in the same Brooklyn neighborhood at the end of the 1940s, but who come from two completely different worlds. One is from a strictly Orthodox Hasidic family, and the other from a more liberal Jewish family.

“Here are two boys who are both Jewish, but who might just as well be Catholic and Protestant,” said Baker, who teaches Humanities 310. “So what do you make of that? We’re all supposedly Christians perhaps sitting in this room, but I can guarantee you that if we scratch the surface deep enough we’re going to [discover differences]. The beauty of that novel is that, indirectly, it allows our students to experience differences—religious, social, political—and then use those analogies in the novel to ask about their own differences.”

Getting personal

Humanities 310 can be a revelation for students, as it gives them permission to share concerns or doubts that may feel are too dangerous to admit in other social circles. When students let down their guard and start to share honestly, the degree of trust and candor that emerges is, for some students, unprecedented in their college experience.

Selected Humanities Core Readings

“Theories of Human Nature”
by Donald Abel, ed.

“The Chosen”
by Chaim Potok

“Life is a Miracle”
by Wendell Berry

“The Traces of God in
a Frequently Hostile
World” by Diogenes Allen

“The Lexus and the Olive Tree:
Understanding Globalization” by
Thomas L. Friedman

“A Circle of Quiet”
by Madeline L’Engle

“For the Beauty of The Earth” by
Steven Bouma-Prediger

“Frankenstein”
by Mary Shelly

LIVING THE QUESTIONS

(Right) Philosophy professor **Terry Baker '81** sees the Humanities Core as critical in helping students consider their role as citizens of the world.

(Below) Music Education major **Tiffany Radmacher '06** discusses paradox during a session in Humanities 410.



"It helped me realize that there are other Christians that think the same way I do, the kind of things you're not allowed to say in church," said Bronwynne Carlsen '07, a Human Development major from Portland, Ore. "Not bad things, but doubts you have or things that we think. It was emotional [at the end of the semester] because we got to know a lot about each other and we had that bond of sharing those burdens."

For social work major Heather Phillips '06, the course often kept her up at night pondering over issues like justice and what role she can play in addressing human suffering. Phillips is set to work with at-risk youth at a Church of God-sponsored outreach in San Francisco after she graduates in May.

"I loved the class because it was more than a class," said Phillips. "We went in to study the human condition and inherently it became a part of our lives. That class propelled me forward in this journey where I was searching for everything I could because of the questions that had been laid out before me. Where is my place in the suffering of the world? What is my obligation to the world? And if that's my obligation, then how do I live my life?"

The capstone

The Humanities Core is designed as a progression. Waiting for seniors in their final course, simply called Humanities 410, is their capstone thesis in which they must address a paradox within the human condition, using research from three separate academic disciplines. Two faculty members serve as primary and secondary readers, and offer guidance and accountability for the paper, which typically ranges between 20 and 30 pages. For Professor Baker, if the core curriculum has done its job, seniors will be up to the challenge.

"Those students who 'get it' see it as an opportunity. If we do the curriculum right, there's going to be no surprise that by the time they get to 410, this is their baby. And they're going to actually be telling me to go away."

In choosing their topics, some students select broad philosophical topics, while others use the project to explore issues more personally

relevant. Former Business Administration major Noel Bosco '96 wrote his Humanities 410 paper about affirmative action. As the Director of Application Development at Poorman-Douglas, a data processing company located in Beaverton, Ore., Bosco says he still uses his paper as a resource.

"I still talk about it," said Bosco, who studied in the Degree Completion Program. "I still use the statistics in discussions with politicians."

Fellow DCP grad T. Scott Harden '04 investigated the value of employing the learning disabled and mentally retarded. Harden's brother has a number of learning disabilities, yet lives independently and holds a job.

"He makes a pretty good contribution to society and our expectations of people with his problems are pretty low," said Harden. "I looked at it not only as a project that I had to get done in order to get my degree, but as an opportunity to look for more options for my brother, as well."

Living the questions

In a more philosophical vane, senior Anna Mahuron '06 discussed the paradox of labeling in society. Drawing from cultural anthropology, history, and religion, the Human Development and Family Studies major argued that while labeling provides belonging and recognizes diversity, it also lessens individualism. She wrote that, in spite of what stereotypes would suggest, individuals can often share more in common with people outside their own cultural or social groups than people within it. She said wrestling with the paradox is really what the Humanities 410 project—and the entire Humanities Core, for that matter—is all about. Paradox doesn't lend itself to easy answers, but, instead, more questions.

"True wisdom is realizing how much you don't know," Mahuron said. "And I think that's what [all of] this is getting at. What you think you know is thrown off because paradox exists. What Warner wants you to do [is] not find answers to the questions, but to live the questions."