

Humanities Newsletter

December | 2017

In this issue: Dean's Message; Linguistics Chair Scott Jarvis; Featured Alumni Deborah Lee Prescott; History Student Caroline Felton; and Philosophy Chair Matt Haber Featured in Science News

DEAN'S MESSAGE



Barry Weller

As the season of good will approaches, we're thankful that the University still supplies a space in which to come together in civil conversation and respectful disagreement, challenging each other to forge a common vision and find productive ways to pursue it. The Humanities offer no easy or comfortable answers—they wouldn't be the Humanities if they did—but, true to their collective name, they still ask us to explore the basis, social, environmental and instinctive, of our shared connections.

If the Humanities are still able to participate in—and guide—aspirations toward a better world, it's because we have supporters of public education like you. Whether you're a donor, teacher, student, faculty or staff member or friend, we are extremely grateful for your sustained commitment and generosity. We hope that the end of the year brings you time for repose and reflection and the opportunity to renew the energy that the new year will require.

Barry Weller

Co-Interim Dean, College of Humanities



FACULTY FEATURE

Scott Jarvis

Chair | Linguistics



Professor Scott Jarvis, newly appointed Chair of the Linguistics Department, began working at the University of Utah in July 2017. However, this is not his first go-round as Department Chair. He served in the same position in the Department of Linguistics at Ohio University from 2004 to 2009.

Since completing his PhD in Linguistics at Indiana University in 1997, Professor Jarvis has investigated second language acquisition phenomena in two primary areas of research: crosslinguistic influence and lexical diversity. Crosslinguistic influence has to do with how a language learner's knowledge of one language can affect his or her knowledge, use, and acquisition of another language. Professor Jarvis has contributed to this area of research in a number of ways: By developing a widely used methodological framework for confirming whether people's language behavior reflects the influence of other languages, by pioneering work on a phenomenon known as conceptual transfer (or crosslinguistic influence arising from language-specific patterns of attention, perception, conceptualization, and memory), and by developing computer-automated methods for analyzing texts and identifying the native languages of the people who produced those texts.

His work on lexical diversity has concentrated on both modeling and measuring the multiple ways in which people's language knowledge is reflected in the variety of words they choose when speaking and writing. Among other things, he has found that people are surprisingly consistent in how they judge the levels of lexical diversity in texts they have never seen before, even when the words in those texts have been scrambled, and even when those texts are written in a language they do not know. Professor Jarvis has also found that computer-automated measures of lexical diversity that examine just the right combination of word-related characteristics of texts produce essentially the

same ratings as human judges do. Importantly, both types of ratings correlate strongly with the language proficiency of the people who produced those texts. The models and measures of lexical diversity that Professor Jarvis has developed are therefore useful for measuring people's language abilities, stages of language acquisition, and even stages of language decline. He is currently working with a graduate student at Ohio University in an investigation designed to pinpoint the onset of dementia in authors (e.g., Agatha Christie, Iris Murdoch) suspected to have begun suffering from this condition while they were still actively publishing books. The study does this by identifying abrupt changes in the authors' levels and patterns of lexical diversity from one book to the next (within the same genre).

Professor Jarvis has always enjoyed teaching students, and has found it to be a real treat to teach University of Utah students. Many of them already speak more than one language. "Having students who know a variety of languages and who have experience acquiring a second or later language means that there is almost always at least one student in the class who is able to offer personal experiences that illustrate the theoretical principles and empirical findings we have been reading about and discussing in class," he said. "Being able to relate to the course content through their own and one another's personal experiences really makes the course come alive for students. I therefore try to take advantage of their rich experiences and backgrounds as much as possible." He also sees students' knowledge of other languages as giving them a leg up in their training as linguists, not to mention the benefits it brings them in their daily lives as it expands their ability to "interpret, represent, and express life experiences." He firmly believes that learning additional languages to high levels of proficiency leads students "to more flexible ways of thinking" and develops in them "a stronger capacity for creative problem solving."

ALUMNI FEATURE

Deborah Lee Prescott

BA | MA in English

Professor of English | Palm Beach Atlantic University
West Palm Beach, Florida



As a young adult driving cross-country, Deborah Lee Prescott's car broke down in Park City, Utah, and she decided to stay for a while. She enrolled at the University of Utah, and building upon her life-long love of reading and writing, she became an English major who eventually earned a bachelor's and master's degree in English.

Prescott believes that earning her English degrees at the U

gave her the solid foundation she needed for additional graduate work and her scholarly career, where she is currently Professor of English at Palm Beach Atlantic University. Before earning her Ph.D. in English at Oklahoma State University, she studied graduate-level film courses at UCLA and theology at Southern Methodist University. She now draws upon all of those interests in the classroom.

Prescott's publications and conference papers have generally focused on her academic specialty: Holocaust survivors' autobiographies. She is especially interested in how survivors explain their experiences through a religious lens, which resulted in her book, *Imagery from Genesis in Holocaust Memoirs: A Critical Study* (McFarland 2010). Recently, she has found inspiration in her blind dog Mitzvah's brave adjustment to life without sight, and has launched a new career as the author of children's picture books. In the first of a three-part series, *A Dog Named Mitzvah*, co-written with Ellen Felman, Prescott writes about how Mitzvah helps children understand that even though challenges occur, those obstacles can be overcome with courage, patience, and love.

Prescott's advice to students is simple: "Do what you love; love what you do! Don't try to guess what major or career might make the most money. That won't make you happy," she said. "Rather, if you study what you love, which is doubtless where your strengths are, you will find a way to incorporate that into a satisfying aspect of your life."

STUDENT FEATURE

Caroline Felton

Undergraduate | History

Caroline Felton can't point to a certain event that pushed her towards majoring in history. However, she credits her parents for discussing historical events and figures with her from an early age.

As she progressed through her education, she has learned to connect history to contemporary events. As she explains, "It only made sense to continue [studying history] upon arriving at the University of Utah."

Upon her arrival at the University of Utah, Caroline jumped into her classes feet-first. She learned quickly that discussions and probing for better understanding of course topics was essential to enjoying her classes. "I have had conversations about every topic imaginable and I always learn something new or come to appreciate a different perspective in those conversations," she said. Through these discussions, she has recognized the strengths and weaknesses of historical arguments, lines of thinking, and how to discuss important topics with generosity and clarity. She points to her professors as the source of, not only as lecturers, but as directors of conversation. Indeed, she appreciates the ways in which her professors allow her and her fellow students to learn with guidance—but not necessarily with a heavy hand. "My favorite professors spark such discussions and subtly direct them but allow the class to flow," she said.

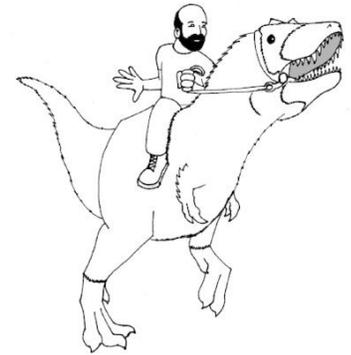
The skills that Caroline has acquired as a history major, and in those classroom discussions, are sure to serve her in her future plans—law school. We know from speaking to her adviser and professors that the future is bright—and that her education in the University of Utah's College of Humanities will give her an edge in wherever life takes her!



NEWS

Philosophy Chair Matt Haber Featured in *Science News*

At first glance, “species” is a basic vocabulary word schoolchildren can ace on a test by reciting something close to: a group of living things that create fertile offspring when mating with each other but not when mating with outsiders. Ask scientists who devote careers to designating those species, however, and there’s no typical answer. Scientists do not agree. [Read More](#)



Cynthia Stark Awarded Leadership in Ethics Education Award

Associate Professor of Philosophy Cynthia Stark was recently awarded the David Eccles School of Business Daniels Fund Leadership in Ethics Education Award. The Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative strives to reinforce the value of ethical business and personal conduct. Bill Daniels, a pioneer in cable television, founded and funded this initiative based on his personal values of business ethics and fairness. The Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative principles include: Integrity, Trust, Accountability, Transparency, Fairness, Respect, Rule of Law, and Viability. [Read More](#)



Environmental Humanities Student Wins *High Country News* Bell Prize

Brooke Larsen, a second-year master’s student in the Environmental Humanities Graduate Program, recently won the Bell Prize for her essay [What Are We Fighting For?](#) The Bell Prize honors Tom Bell, the founder of *High Country News*. Bell founded *High Country News* in 1970 and was a strong voice for conservation and environmental issues in the American West. The Bell Prize is awarded to emerging writers, aged 18 to 25, who can carry on that legacy. [Read More](#)



The Impact of Presidential Communication on the LGBT Community

As the U.S. grows increasingly diverse, it becomes ever more important to understand how presidents are talking to — and about — marginalized groups such as women, ethnic and religious minorities and LGBT individuals who have experienced a disproportionate degree of social and political inequality. A recent study published in the *Journal of Communication*, authored by Kevin Coe, Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Utah, and two graduate students, Robert Bruce and Chelsea Ratcliff, focused specifically on presidential communication about the LGBT community throughout history. [Read More](#)





Our theme for the year reflects a powerful truth: **Humanities Gives You the Edge.** Alumni of Humanities not only lead lives of extraordinary fulfillment, but they also excel at whatever they do. Our thousands of alumni unanimously tell us that **Humanities gave them the edge** that helped them succeed as excellent communicators; multi-lingual and culturally sophisticated global citizens; critical, ethical, and logical thinkers; and outstanding creative partners. And research backs this up! Studies show that Humanities students find careers that provide financial security and job satisfaction that matches those of students in nearly every other major. Employers increasingly seek employees who have strong skills learned in Humanities (writing, problem solving, listening, speaking, critical thinking, etc.). Humanities gives people the edge they need to thrive today. How does Humanities give YOU the edge?

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