Life & Letters
A publication of the College of Liberal Arts of The University of Texas at Austin

AFRICAN AMERICAN BEAUTY PARLORS
DANTEWORLDS
TOYIN FALOLA
From the Dean

As always, the year is flying by. Students are finishing finals and they are looking forward to a well-deserved break.

Even though the students may be leaving campus, the university never really stops buzzing with the excitement of new ideas, and this issue of Life & Letters gives you a sample of some of our projects and people.

Dr. Robert Helmreich from our Department of Psychology is looking at issues that affect all of us at some point—safety in health care and aviation. The work he and his team are doing is proving to be vital in improving the safety processes in industry.

One of the important things we do in higher education, and in liberal arts in particular, is open the world to our students. One of our professors, Toyin Falola in the History Department, does this in an extraordinary fashion. A favorite among students, Dr. Falola is a force in teaching—admired by his peers and the recipient of numerous awards. You can read about how he helps his students broaden their vision of the world.

When it comes to a vision of the world, one of our students, Melisa Gerecci, has taken her experience and found a way to help her fellow students make the most of their education. She is one of only 18 national winners of the prestigious Beinecke Scholarship and will be building on her Plan II education in the coming years.

One of our newer faculty members, Dr. Tiffany Gill, has done some great work exploring the political and cultural influence of African American beauty salons. I think you will find her research about the activism that took place in beauty salons fascinating.

These are just a few of the people who are a part of the college community—educating students, influencing lives and being a part of the larger world. I wish you the very best in the coming year—please keep in touch.

Richard Lariviere
Dean, College of Liberal Arts
Contents

Features

Robert Helmreich ..........  3
Bruce Hunt...............  9
Tiffany Gill.................  5
Patrick Olivelle ..........  11
Guy Raffa..................  7

Departments

Students .................  13
Research .................  15
Alumni ....................  16
Faculty .....................  17
The Back Page ............  22
Patrick Olivelle wrote the book on ancient Indian culture. In fact, he’s written many books – 16, to be exact – painstakingly translating huge tomes of ancient India’s essential literature and examining various aspects of ancient Indian life.

He’s also written more than 40 articles that explore everything from ancient Indian language, religion and law to the cultural relevance of food, the social significance of hair, the role of women in ancient India and more. He’s been called one of the most productive scholarly contributors to the study of Hinduism. His acclaimed books have become “must have” resources for scholars of Indology, the study of India’s history, philosophies and cultures. He has lectured around the world and has received a multitude of awards, honors and fellowships for his books and his scholarship, including the Guggenheim Fellowship and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Fellowship.

“Outside of our differences, we have a basic connection in that we are all human, and because of that, we can find ways to communicate across languages, across cultures and across time.”

Patrick Olivelle: Connecting worlds through words

“Outside of our differences, we have a basic connection in that we are all human, and because of that, we can find ways to communicate across languages, across cultures and across time,” Olivelle said in describing his work with the texts of ancient India.
Those studying Sanskrit and Indian Religions at The University of Texas at Austin have the opportunity to connect with Olivelle daily. A professor at the university since 1991, this foremost expert in ancient Indian culture whose books have become standards in the field has also been chair of the Department of Asian Studies since 1994 and Alma Cowden Madden Centennial Professor in Liberal Arts since 2000.

In addition to his writing, his research and his teaching, Olivelle serves as a U.S. delegate for Oxford University Press, reviewing material related to world religions before it is published. Add to that his role as editor for the book series “South Asia Research,” published by Oxford University Press, and the book series “Sources of Indian Law” for Motilal Banarsidass, the largest publisher in India. Olivelle has also written reviews of more than 30 books about ancient Indian culture. Elected as vice president and president-elect of the American Oriental Society, Olivelle is also a trustee for the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Not surprisingly, when scholars talk about Patrick Olivelle, they often mention his massive contributions to Indology. But in his prolific 30-year career, what has Olivelle found to be most rewarding?

“I’m most proud of doing things that are not fashionable,” said Olivelle. “I’ve worked hard to help bring to light material that otherwise would not have been published. These are books that are not sexy to many of today’s publishers.”

Born in Sri Lanka, Olivelle pursued his interests on a winding path that eventually led to Austin. He studied philosophy and theology in Rome before receiving his B.A. from the University of Oxford in 1972 where he studied Sanskrit and Pali, an ancient Indian language used in Buddhist scriptures. He then went to the University of Pennsylvania, where he broadened his focus beyond Buddhism and was awarded a Ph.D. in History of Indian Religions in 1974.

From Pennsylvania, Olivelle went to Indiana University, where he taught in the Religious Studies Department for 17 years, and served as chair for six. While Olivelle enjoyed Indiana’s Religious Studies program, he was one of only two people focusing on India, leaving him without much community in which to grow.

Olivelle was drawn to Austin in 1991 by a college friend who was then teaching Sanskrit at the university. That friend was Richard Lariviere, now the dean of the College of Liberal Arts.

“UT offered a much larger South Asia program, which has become even stronger over time,” explained Olivelle, who was attracted to the university’s Title VI program for South Asia, a national resource center funded by the U.S. Department of Education. “Coming here was the best move I could have made, because there are so many people with whom I can converse and collaborate. In fact, my shift from purely religious studies to a broader study of history and culture was due in part because I came here, and a different world opened up to me.”

Olivelle’s religious focus early in his career spurred his research on asceticism and Hindu culture, resulting in his award-winning book on the development of the Asrama System, an important religious institution, as well as his annotated translation of the early Upanisads, a group of significant philosophical Hindu scriptures in ancient India, for which he received the A.K. Ramanujan Translation Award. His focus has since shifted to the ancient Indian legal tradition of Dharma and, he has just completed a seven-year project on a major ancient Indian text known as the Law Code of Manu. His published translation was released in February, and his 1200-page scholarly edition titled “Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Manava-Dharmaśastra” has just been released.

Those describing his translations often use words such as succinct, lucid, elegant, concise, meticulous, indispensable.

“Translation is both an art and a craft,” said Olivelle. “You have to have some artistic ability as well as the willingness to craft it, to rethink it, to find the precise description that conveys the true meaning.”

Ironically, Olivelle credits his strength as a translator to a lack of confidence in his English.

“I’ve found it helpful that English is not my native tongue,” said Olivelle. “This makes me less self-confident, less sloppy, more self-aware. I’m always second-guessing every word choice in order to attain the exact nuance.”

But, according to Olivelle, just as important as accuracy is context. In his books, Olivelle uses his vast research and knowledge of ancient Indian life to convey to

Olivelle, continued on page 21
Olivelle
Continued from Page 12

modern readers the environment and culture in which the ancient texts were written. This helps the reader to further understand the texts, and has won his translations a great deal of praise.

“The translator provides the lens through which the reader understands the text,” Olivelle said. “And we all have subconscious presuppositions that affect our views. What I try to do is let the ancient texts speak for themselves.”

Currently, Olivelle is working with a few of his students on a dictionary of terms used in ancient Indian law. He is also developing a side-by-side presentation of the four earliest legal texts of India, comparing the position of each on various topics, which will be published in 2005. In addition, he is working on a book about how the human body was culturally constructed in ancient India.

“What excites me most about my work is taking unfamiliar territory and making it familiar,” said Olivelle. “This enables us to see that human beings, irrespective of time, cultural and language differences, have similar questions – to which they have often given very different answers.”

One scholar described Olivelle’s output of books and articles as almost superhuman. But ironically, this award-winning author, gifted translator, prolific pundit and professor who has made several lives’ worth of contributions to the field of Indology during his 30-year career, says his greatest challenge is... time management.

“I can be busy all day long, but before I know it, the day is gone and I find myself wondering, what did I really do today? Nothing substantial has been accomplished.”

It turns out that, like the rest of us, Patrick Olivelle is only human after all.

Melissa Anderson
Photos by Marsha Miller

Falola
Continued from Page 18

As a teacher, Falola acknowledges the importance of good communication and keeping his students’ interest.

“History is not chemistry,” Falola said. “Students don’t have to be interested in chemistry; they’re taking the class because they’re invested in a future tied to it. History is different because knowledge is not tied to a market. The ability to communicate is not negotiable.”

To begin this communication, Falola makes extensive use of captivating visuals, from scenes from his native Africa to New Orleans voodoo festivals.

“Spend as much time as you want defining it,” he said. “It’s not real until you see it.”

A second favored technique was cultivated in his native Nigeria: storytelling.

“I want students to stop taking notes,” he said, “and listen for a while.” Not only does storytelling make lessons more fun, but it can introduce a new level of meaning. By using proverbs and anecdotes, teachers say that what we teach is relevant to day-to-day living, useful for human interaction.

“Most important is the realization that knowledge is analytical, not descriptive,” Falola said. “Each class is a controversy, a discussion; each discourse moves knowledge forward. Each lesson poses a question.

“Right now I don’t have an answer,” he tells his students. “I’m inviting you to be part of that answer.”

Christa French
Photos by Marsha Miller

Class Notes

David Dye (Psychology, 1970) has taken the position of deputy assistant secretary of labor for the Mine Safety and Health Administration. Dye has been with the U.S. Department of Labor since June 2001, where he served as deputy assistant secretary for the Employment and Training Administration.