

Meet the Prof: Larry Carlin

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The following faculty Q&A was submitted by the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Faculty Advocacy Committee, a committee of the Faculty Senate. Larry Herzberg, associate professor of philosophy, wrote the introduction.

It's hard to know where to begin when introducing Larry Carlin. His teaching ability is certainly remarkable. Students are drawn to his classes by both his expertise and his enthusiastic approach to the subject matter. He can explain the most difficult material in ways students can understand. He also regularly leads groups of UW Oshkosh students to Cambridge, England, enabling them to study British philosophy in its historical and cultural setting.

Larry's area of research is the history of modern philosophy and science, which covers mainly the 17th and 18th centuries, an incredibly fertile time in intellectual history. He has published many articles as well as a recent book, "The Empiricists: A Guide for the Perplexed," which discusses the philosophical underpinnings of modern science in a highly accessible way.

But quality instruction and research are not Larry's only virtues. He is a dedicated family man who volunteers at his kids' schools and coaches their sports teams. He is also surprisingly easygoing and approachable for someone with so many accomplishments. For all of these reasons and many more, Dr. Larry Carlin is a valued member of the philosophy department.

How did you find your way to UW Oshkosh?

After finishing graduate school at Rice University in southern Texas, I entered the job market. At that time, UW Oshkosh was searching for someone with my area of specialization. Two things made me jump at the opportunity: First, the UW System has an outstanding reputation for teaching and research, and UW Oshkosh provides faculty members the wonderful opportunity to balance teaching and research.

Second, I prefer living in the north, so I welcomed the opportunity to move north to Oshkosh, where I could enjoy changes of season, the lake country and the Oshkosh community.

Why did you choose to go into your field?

When I entered college, I was convinced I was going to be an accountant. I began taking business classes but also took an introductory philosophy course in order to satisfy a general education requirement. It changed my life. I remember reading the story of Socrates and being fascinated by it. I changed my major, and I decided I want to teach it and research it for the rest of my life, and that is why I chose to go into the history of philosophy and science.

What is your favorite thing about UW Oshkosh?

I have two favorite things about UW Oshkosh. First, I know it is a popular answer, but the students are one of my favorite things about UW Oshkosh. They are respectful and honest, and most of them take their education seriously. I taught at other institutions, and in my experience, our students are unique, and they are a pleasure to have in the classroom.

My other favorite thing about UW Oshkosh is that it provides many opportunities for rewarding and worthwhile endeavors. The University provides resources to improve research and teaching; to engage in community service, artistic enjoyment, study abroad; and so much more. The pursuit of these opportunities leads to rewarding experiences and a full and rich life.

What is the professional accomplishment of which you are most proud?

There are two things of which I am most proud. The first is my research. I love doing original research and sharing it through publications, and I recently published a number of articles and completed my first book.

The other thing of which I am most proud is my study abroad program. Every summer or so, I take a group of UW Oshkosh students (and sometimes others too) to Cambridge, England, to study the history of British natural philosophy. It is not unusual to have students in the program who have never even been on an airplane, let alone gone to Europe. The experience makes a significant impact, and giving this kind of experience to students is rewarding.

What leadership or service activities are you involved in?

I am currently the president of the Wisconsin Philosophical Association, the secretary/treasurer of the Leibniz Society of North America, the faculty adviser to the UWO Philosophy Club, the philosophy department webmaster and the editor of the UW Oshkosh Philosophy Student Handbook.

Outside of my University life, I am a founding member of Oshkosh for Education, a teacher for College Day for Kids, a volunteer at Lakeside Elementary School, and I coach kindergarten/first-grade softball as well as a kindergarten flag football team at the YMCA.

What is the most common misperception about what you do?

I think the most common misperception about philosophy is that it is impractical and/or irrelevant. This is absolutely not true. In our classes, we examine opposing beliefs about religion, morality, politics, society and science, among other topics. Such beliefs are the very things you use to confront your experiences: They determine things such as what kind of friend you will be and how you will vote. They are what motivate you and frame your outlook on life's most important matters. Indeed, they are the very things that make you the person you are.

What could be more practical and relevant than a critical evaluation of those beliefs?

What is the most exciting project you are working on right now?

Right now, I am working on my second book. It will focus on the intersection of theology, science and

philosophy during the intellectual revolution of the 17th century.

How does what you research help you to be an effective teacher?

The connection between my research and teaching is straightforward: I teach what I research. The discovery of new knowledge that comes from my research — whether it comes from translations of older philosophical texts or the learning of a humorous anecdote involving some figure from the past — goes right into my classroom. This means that students have an opportunity to learn about “cutting-edge” material in the field. I am fortunate to teach classes on the very topics I love to research.

Describe some ways your department serves northeastern Wisconsin.

Our department is active in the community. A number of us give talks to local organizations and participate in programs such as Learning in Retirement at UW Oshkosh. We also have community members regularly participate in our Philosophy Club meetings, and we teach children about philosophy through programs such as College Day for Kids.

In general, graduates from our department are rigorously trained in logical argumentation and critical thinking. In the current climate, we believe there is a demand for graduates who have a well-rounded education and the ability to problem solve with these sorts of logical and critical skills. We seem to be right about this, as our students are routinely accepted into business school, law school and other graduate fields.

Tell us about your family.

My wife, Stephanie, and I have been married for 13 years, and she is the coolest person on the planet. We met in college, and she went on to earn an M.A. at the School of International Affairs at American University. She now works part time as a consultant in the business world and is very active in the community. We have three wonderful children: Nate (8), Max (6) and Sophie (3), and they keep our house pulsating seven days a week.

What are your hobbies?

I am a homebrewer. I enjoy the science of fermentation, and I make beer, mead (and sometimes wine) at home, and I sometimes enter regional homebrewing competitions. I also try to jog several times a week. Aside from that, playing with my kids is my hobby, and that one I do every day.

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