

## INDEPENDENT STUDY AT THE COLLEGE OF WOOSTER

### PRESIDENT STAN HALES

I would like to offer my thanks to Jill Beck for the invitation to speak here today. I am glad to be back at Lawrence, though this time is a much happier occasion. Last time I visited this university was, unfortunately, for the memorial service for my earlier Pomona colleague, and your Provost and Dean of the Faculty Rick Harrison, who had passed away unexpectedly shortly before that. I am pleased to be back, Jill, thank you, on a much happier note.

I am pleased, also, to be asked to talk about independent study at the College of Wooster. But to understand it, it is certainly essential first to understand its history because indeed for 59 years, ever since 1948, education at the College of Wooster has been shaped and characterized by independent study. I should say independent study with a capital I and with a capital S, thus referred to by everyone—sometimes affectionately and sometimes not so affectionately—as IS. I will refer shortly later on in the talk to a one-page handout which you have in your brochure. But also to understand the history of IS at Wooster it is essential to understand the history and the background of its Founding Father, and let's turn to him for a minute. The seed for independent study at Wooster was planted by the college's sixth president, Howard Lowry, at his first opening convocation talk in September of 1944. In this talk he outlined the themes that he would enunciate repeatedly throughout his presidency, and I would like to quote from that first oration he offered to his faculty and the student body in September of 1944:

There is a current vogue for seminars, group discussions, and education by committee. These have, indeed, their rightful place, but be not deceived. Good talk in dormitory rooms at night and the bright fripperies that bounce across the table at the student union are delightful things and they may stimulate your mind. Education need not be a doleful thing and look forever like the old man of the sea, but it does have its depth and the price of it is hard, lonely hours. Half the college students I have known have tried to live off the community mind; it can't be done. The best talk I ever heard over dinner tables or in Oxford common rooms where talk is famous, was the bright, social outpouring of men who had filled their mental reservoirs alone. To be a great companion, you must first be a great solitary.

So who was Howard Lowry? Howard Foster Lowry was a 1923 Wooster graduate. A double major in Philosophy and Latin, who entered graduate school in English at Yale in 1925, and then returned to join Wooster's English faculty in 1929, *sans* Ph.D. Already he was an acknowledged expert on Matthew Arnold and became even more solidly so with his 1931 Ph.D. thesis on Arnold's letters to Arthur Hugh Clough. This thesis quickly turned into a book which was published shortly thereafter by the Oxford University Press.

Soon frequent leaves, interspersed with his teaching at Wooster, led to numerous trips to Oxford and to his being named, in 1935, as the general editor of the American branch of the Oxford University Press. His growing scholarly prominence eventually led to his leaving Wooster for an appointment at Princeton in 1940. However, Princeton could not hold him for long and he returned to Wooster only 4 years later, this time as President.

Lowry returned to Wooster having absorbed ideas on education in all of these places and even more, including Berkeley and Madison and Chicago, and he had thereby become persuaded that, for undergraduate students, excellence was best achieved by writing or creating something distinctly one's own: the result of an authentic independent study of which one could legitimately say, "This is mine."

Wooster had had an honors program since 1916, allowing independent work for a selected few, perhaps 10% of the student body. But Lowry's experience with the required program of independent study at Princeton convinced him that such study could not be for honors students alone, but rather should be a necessary challenge to "every man and woman to come to his best according to his capacity." He was convinced that this approach was equally able to be implemented at a small liberal arts college. So as Wooster's Founding Father in that way, he planted the seed at Wooster in 1944, and then later that fall in his inaugural address, he expanded upon the opening convocation talk which I quoted earlier, with an additional set of principles, enunciated then and later, each one revealing the depth of Lowry's motivation and perspectives on this topic.

So I quote a few more, in this case from the inaugural address:

- "Institutions must offer something more than 120 miscellaneous credit hours";
- "A student's liberal studies should come to a head and not remain just a scattered dilettantism";
- "Independent study represents an aristocratic education on democratic principles. It does not invite a campus hothouse of intellectuals cut off from normal people in the healthy pursuits of normal life, may Wooster be spared that," he said.
- "The student ceases to be a passive recipient of information, he participates in his own education. This is a man's discovery of himself and a human integrated program with a central nerve running through all four years"; and then finally
- "When the awards are given at the end of the senior year, the honors man then often turns out to have been only the average student of the freshman and the sophomore years."

Despite his persuasive eloquence Lowry naturally met some faculty resistance in 1944 and 1945, and for a few years after that, but he persisted. After 2 years of optional independent study for juniors, the faculty finally adopted a mandatory independent study requirement for juniors and seniors in the fall of 1948. It has been in full force ever since.

In fact, independent study at Wooster today is very little changed from its original form. Senior independent study at Wooster comprises  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a student's work in the senior year, one course out of 4 in both semesters. It may result in a 150-page thesis or a publishable

scientific paper or an exhibit of oil paintings or a play written and cast and produced and directed by the student, or any one of the many possible forms of creative work appropriate to the discipline.

Students typically meet one-to-one with their faculty advisor—their IS advisor—for one hour weekly throughout the year to discuss and review the latest chapter or latest installment of their work. This is the tutorial aspect of the IS program—the weekly, face-to-face meetings between student and faculty advisor—yet these meetings differ from many tutorials. The critical fact is that the agenda for that meeting, rather than normally being set by the professor perhaps in preparation for an exam, is set entirely by the student. The student cannot drop out, it's the student's tutorial, they own the questions at stake. Finally, once the senior thesis is submitted in late March (and I will say a bit more about IS Day later on), a copy also goes to a second reader. Every student then has an oral defense in the month of April with the first and second readers and often with all faculty members of the department and students as well. The final version, with perhaps a few corrections, is then filed with the Registrar at the end of April.

Senior independent study is preceded in most departments by a Junior IS, a warm-up (as it were), an introductory experience in the prior year. This warm-up may take one of even a larger number of forms including (perhaps) a methods seminar or a group meeting with all that advisor's tutees, students, or some combination of these along with a tutorial.

We have certainly found that independent study, IS, at Wooster is an expensive model. Fortunately, as student ambitions in IS have grown, so have the college's resources to support these ambitions. An endowment honoring my predecessor, Henry Copeland, makes available about \$90,000 each year on a competitive basis to students whose projects may require special equipment or special supplies or even special travel.

A full description of Wooster's IS program is certainly available on Wooster's website, including a searchable data base of titles. Each year I revel in the opportunity to taste what has been fully occupying the attention of our seniors throughout the years, and I would like to toss out a few selected titles of the IS theses this year and in recent years, some of which are on that handout:

- in English, "Writing in the Margins: Formulations of Self in Three Autobiographical Recreations of American Girlhood";
- in Geology, "A New Dendro-Climatic Tree-Ring Network from Lake Clark National Park Reserve in Alaska";
- in English and Sociology, a joint thesis, "To Get a Voice Heard: The Development and Production of a Documentary Film As an Application of Qualitative Study";
- in Chemistry, "Progress toward the Synthesis of a Model Electro-Luminescent Polymer";
- in Communication, "More Than Just a Nurse: A Qualitative Study of the Communication Strategies That Pediatric Nurses Use with Family Members of Terminally Ill Patients and the Impact of These Interactions on Nurses' Perceptions of Their Work."

- This year: “Detecting TNT Using Integrated Optical Wave Guide Spectrometry and Interferometry”;
- “An Historical Evaluation of Stereotypes Linked with Tattoos, Aggression, Narcissism, and Substance Abuse as Predictors of Criminal Behavior.”
- And finally, “The Geo-Chronology of a Late Pleistocene Coral Reef in the Bahamas”—I think there was a travel grant related to that one.

I personally have been able to have four IS students in my 17 years at Wooster. One of my students, Katie Ziegler, whose thesis was titled, “Burnsides’ Lemma and Polya’s Enumeration Theorem: Counting Configurations Non-Equivalent with Respect to a Given Permutation Group,” is an excellent example of one who was not aware of her own abilities when she began that thesis. She blossomed, as so many Wooster students do, and with her Ph.D. she is now a young assistant professor of mathematics at St. Olaf College.

IS is expensive in other ways too. From the beginning, faculty concern over IS focused on issues of teaching load; surprise! Lowry found that necessary solutions were two-fold. The first was to build IS formally and to teaching load calculations. In our system, which until recently was a standard three/three teaching load, each IS enrollment counts 1/10 of a course so that 5 students carried across an academic year (2 semesters) equals one full course. Thus, a typical full-time teaching load at Wooster might have been 5 regular courses and 1 course worth of independent study. Some departments do 4 regular courses plus a double IS load. The new annual load for tenure-track faculty at Wooster is about 5½ courses, on our way, we hope, to a 5 course load so that perhaps eventually a typical load at Wooster will be 2 courses each semester plus a full IS load of 5 students carried across the entire year.

For the second part of Lowry’s solution, Wooster also established, along with independent study in the late 40’s, a research and study leave program making faculty eligible for full-pay leaves every 5 years. A mild limitation on the number of such leaves sometimes makes this program competitive, but the great majority of applicants are approved. It’s an expensive, but very valuable, leave program to complement independent study.

As might be expected, a number of powerful traditions have built up around IS. As students turn in their IS, they receive a gold and black pen with a number on it according to the order of their submission, and that number 1 is valued as is number last, whatever it may be in each class, and there is some competition for that as well. Students also receive a tootsie-roll which is very, very seldom eaten and often finds its way onto the dresser of graduates 30 and 40 years later. The due date is 5:00 p.m. on Monday after Spring Break, and that was just this past Monday (IS Day as we call it), at which point the Dean of the Faculty, accompanied by bagpipes and Scottish drummers, leads a parade of all seniors around the campus, especially if they have been a little bit uninhibited in their consumption of beverages during the day, a long hike all around campus, ending at a dining hall with mountains of pizza await them and then proceeding to a basement party area for the imbibing of various other liquid refreshments (see the handout at your place

for a bit more about that). And then, finally, there is a more formal sit-down IS dinner in late April with all faculty advisors and several student speakers.

We're proud of the many positive outcomes of IS, among which are these:

- The rate by which our students proceed to graduate school, particularly for the Ph.D. We think this is extraordinarily high, perhaps one of the highest in the country, particularly related to the entering SAT scores of those students.
- Our students say that nothing fazes them after IS and they have the confidence to take on any project.
- For those seeking employment right away, the IS thesis plunked down on the table at a job interview turns out to be very persuasive.
- The level of student writing by graduation is remarkable, showing itself especially in the very mature and professional letters of recommendation that graduates of only two or three years out write back to us in support of the contract renewals and promotion cases for their former professors.
- At our alumni gatherings around the country, at which we generally find at least 6 decades of graduates present, the ice is typically broken by a question from a woman from a class in the '50's asking perhaps a male in a class in the '90's, "What did you do your IS on?" That becomes the glue that makes those events so powerful. IS provides a common ground and links across many, many generations.

It's probably time for a second national study on the effect of independent study programs like IS at Wooster. Wooster conducted one 50 years ago, published in 1957, with the support of a grant from the Carnegie Foundation. It was a study on about 20 schools offering independent study programs, 10 of which required them, 10 of which didn't. It is a very interesting study to look at now, half a century back. I have a copy of that book here with me if you would like to take a look at it.

For Wooster students and for Wooster faculty, the one-to-one experience of IS, our version of the tutorial, is a transforming one. Faculty find their own scholarly range stretched and enriched by numerous students every year. Students, in finding that more is expected of them than they ever dreamed, respond by discovering in themselves reserves of academic strength that they otherwise never would have known that they had. And perhaps most significant, faculty member and student come to know one another in deep and satisfying ways, this perhaps the pastoral role and the lessons on living a life well.

For those of us at Wooster, IS is really our version of Hopkins' log. IS represents the best of the tutorial system and the essence of the liberal arts education.

Thank you.