

LESSONS OF INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING

By Marti Gillespie



Left: Sarah Curry '08 and Beth De Stasio, associate professor of biology and Raymond H. Herzog Professor of Science

De Stasio chaired a committee on individualized learning and invited Lawrence alumni to share their experiences

Right: Dave Jones '71, Herb Tjossem, professor emeritus of English, and Dave's son, Richard Jones '10

Tjossem was a mentor to Dave Jones and the two share a friendship that continues today

Individualized learning — no two words wield more strength or hold more promise — for they empower students to explore and to discover. Individualized learning opens doors to frequent interaction between faculty and students. It creates enduring friendships that extend well beyond graduation. It puts Lawrence students on the path to success.

President Jill Beck often refers to individualized learning as “the cornerstone of liberal education at Lawrence.” With a passionate faculty, students empowered to excel, and an environment blossoming with smaller class sizes, Lawrence is able to offer its students a highly personal learning experience — one that recognizes and rewards the fact that every student’s path to the degree is different.

In February 2007, in part to celebrate the college’s legacy of individualized learning, Lawrence began a long-term study on its impact. A seven-member committee on individualized learning was assembled. Committee chair Beth De Stasio, associate professor of biology and Raymond H. Herzog Professor of Science, contacted Lawrence alumni, current students, faculty, and emeriti faculty, and asked them to share stories about what individualized learning meant to each of them. In the weeks that followed, De Stasio says she heard from more than 200 alumni. Here is a sampling of the very personal — and powerful — stories submitted by former Lawrence students.

Dave Jones '71 CHICAGO

When I think of individualized learning I think of my English professor and friend Herb Tjossem walking up to me in the Union Grill one gray winter day and asking me if I’d thought to apply for a Watson Fellowship. And, if not, I’d better hurry up and do so, as the next day was the Watson deadline day.

I hadn’t even heard of the Thomas Watson Fellowship before that moment Herb was telling me about it and, after he’d filled me in about this wonderful, magnanimous post-graduate *wanderjahr* program, I asked him what he thought might be a good idea for a project for me to propose to do.

“Dream,” he said. “Dream your big dream.”



It’s still amazing to me that Professor Tjossem knew me well enough (*cared* to know me well enough) to know that that was all he had to say to get me up and going. He was the first Lawrence professor I’d met when my parents first brought me up to Appleton during Freshman Week of 1967, and we’d seemed to click well in our common sense of offbeat humor. I’d studied some Shakespeare and the much-dreaded *History of the English Language* with him — my concluding, hippified essay on the contemporary meaning, structure, and all-pervasive use of the word “WOW” only received a passing grade because he shared my sense of its essential preposterousness. (“Awesome,” we might say today.)

Over the years, he introduced me to some of the best extra-curricular writings by practitioners of the as-yet-unnamed movement of Meta-Fiction, master clowns of belletristic silliness like Donald Barthelme and Italo Calvino, and maybe now, in this Watson moment, it was beginning to dawn on me that I was “gotten” — understood at last — and I was hooked. It was OK to have some fun with this language and literature I’d been struggling so hard to learn. (From him, as from Peter Fritzell, Bert Goldgar, Mark Dintenfass, Bob Gillespie, and anyone else in the English department whose classrooms I filled up with fustian clouds of self-serious, poetical smoke.)

It was not just OK. By Herb Tjossem’s light, it was mandatory. “*Light! More Light!*” says our Lawrence motto, by way of Goethe. “Lighten up,” Herb Tjossem says.

And it was just that sense of playful dreaminess that I put into the Watson proposal that ended up taking me to the lands of my Welsh ancestors — to the world of Monty Python’s *Holy Grail*, ale-sodden bards and wizard wannabes — all of which causes me, even now, to sit down, smile ... and write.

De Stasio was most surprised by the number of older alumni who shared their stories. "Their memories stayed with them a long time," she says, "and they were recalling such vivid detail about personal interaction 40 years later. It still means that much to them. It's humbling."



David Alan Chidsey '03
New York City

Studying at Lawrence changed my life. I went to Lawrence with a passion to absorb the music discipline with as much zeal as a cub has for devouring a salmon. I left with an understanding of the world through the broad lens of the liberally

educated and constructively nurtured. The Lawrence difference for me meant approaching my understanding of the world through an interdisciplinary education. One that one day would find me analyzing a Beethoven sonata with John Benson, instructor in music, while he compared a minor second to a distant train whistle, and the next pondering transcendentalism while Professor of English Peter Fritzell would rant and rave about the hometowns of my fellow classmates and somehow blow me away with a profound truth concerning my existence. All the while being able to weave all of this information together into a clear conception of knowledge and its purpose in my life and the world. Indeed, NEVER feeling like a number awaiting a grade tag.



Priscilla Peterson Weaver '69
Jacksonville, Ore.

Were I to rank the top 10 aspects of my student experience at Lawrence, numbers one through at least five would be the mentor relationship I had with my professor of music Robert Below. Having at least one hour each week with

the same professor one-on-one enables and enhances many aspects of the learning experience. There never is a need for either student or professor to get up to speed on where the student is in the learning process, as is always the case in a group class. Both student and professor have the luxury of having "thick" and "thin" sessions, thick ones when the student is prepared to delve deeply into the music or the lab experiment or the French novel or whatever, and thin ones when a less intense session is required or even preferable. In a group class, this nuance can never happen for the students, only for the teachers. Put bluntly, in one-on-one learning, there is no place for either the student or the professor to "hide," nor does either party want to. Individualized learning is, in a real sense, higher risk learning, but also much higher reward.



Vicky Mason Runnoe '83
Boise, Idaho

The opportunity for individualized learning is one of Lawrence's greatest gifts to its students.

As a faculty child, I spent a considerable amount of time around my father's

(Ronald J. Mason, professor emeritus of anthropology) students. While my parents and their Lawrence student crew spent five summers conducting an archeological excavation on Rock Island State Park, my brother and I played, caught snakes, hiked, and occasionally helped sift for artifacts. I remember intense lunchtime discussions, the ebb and flow of conversation over peanut-butter sandwiches. And I can still see a covey of students huddled around my dad examining a Jesuit medallion of particular interest. At the time, I did not know anything about individualized learning nor did I realize how much these experiences meant to both my father and his students. But when Dad retired in 1995, many of those same students returned to Appleton to say hello and tell him how much he meant to them during their Lawrence career and beyond.



Tanya B. Davidson Coughlin '92
Lakewood, Ohio

Feeling the pressure to make up my mind and get on with paving my path with course work, I began making inquiries into changing my major to education. I knew what teachers did and I wanted

to know what I was going to do. Then a meeting with Beth Seebach from the psychology department changed my path forever. She had heard about my state of confusion from my advisor and felt that perhaps I would benefit from an internship program she was founding and coordinating for the following academic year.

Professor Seebach offered me a window into my future and I jumped right through with both feet. She had arranged student internships with several different types of agencies in the community that would provide a variety of experiences and exposure to the "helping profession". Students would work in many capacities ranging from intake and assisting with testing

to providing direct client services. I was offered the only position at an inpatient psychiatric hospital in Green Bay working on all-three units — adults, adolescents, and children. Three days a week for a trimester of my junior year I drove to Green Bay and worked harder than I'd ever worked. The hospital allowed me to be involved in every level of client services including individual therapy, group sessions, special interest groups, play therapy groups, experiential groups, and staff meetings. I was treated like a staff member and experienced the full range of this position from successes to major mistakes. I learned every minute I was there and then went back to campus and hashed it all out with Professor Seebach who advised me, pushed me, and ultimately congratulated me. This intense individualized learning experience literally shaped my future. I had found what I wanted to do. I was inspired to pursue a career in social work and went on from Lawrence to work for the next 10 years with children with behavior disorders while earning my masters degree. Thank you Professor Seebach for knowing what the psychology field had to offer and for choosing me to experience it for myself.



Cassie Bowman '98
Pasadena, Calif.

It is difficult for me to identify anything in my Lawrence education that wasn't centered on individualized learning. I took multiple independent studies (everything from examining single-sex classrooms to studying Central American literature),

took at least two seminars (one on the reintroduction of wolves into Wisconsin and another on multicultural literature), and was supported in restarting the tutoring program at the Oneida Reservation. Most classes I took had fewer than 10 students. This meant that all my professors knew who I was (and knew I was absent if I missed class). It meant that I had the opportunity to explore topics that, while not of interest to a large number of students, were of interest to me. I had the chance to complete my student teaching in the Urban Education program in Chicago instead of in Appleton, and to participate in two study abroad programs, both of which were outside the regular Lawrence University international programs. All this individualized learning encouraged me to be self-motivated and self-directed and to advocate for what I needed — traits that continue to serve me well as I work to finish my doctoral thesis.

GOING BEYOND THE BOOKS

As she sifted through the responses, De Stasio began to notice an unexpected shift in tone and content. "Instead of anecdotes reminiscing about academic and honors projects," she says, "many more than I thought were talking about personal interaction, the humanity, the caring about what was going on in someone's personal life."

The Lawrence community, as the responses clearly showed, provides an environment that is nurturing and compassionate — and one that deeply cares for its students outside the classroom. Adds De Stasio, "It is making a bigger difference than we think."



Dave Hill '78
Overland Park, Kansas

I was fortunate enough to participate in an independent study with Professor of Biology Nick Maravolo, exploring the horticulture of the state of Wisconsin.

While during the day we executed the teaching plan and wandered the forests, parks, and caves, the most memorable and most lasting component was the evenings sitting around the campfire talking about world politics, life at Lawrence, and most importantly life beyond Lawrence.

During that semester, Maravolo was instrumental in my evaluation process of what I would like to do with my life. He regularly challenged me to think outside the box as to alternatives that might excite me as it related to a career, family, and financial objectives. In fact his influence was significant enough that after my freshman year, I transferred to another school with the dreams of playing Division I football (I was recruited) and as the result of an injury, decided to return to Lawrence heavily influenced by my personal experience from a professor who cared about me not only as a student, but as an individual.

Over the years, our relationship grew and it was not uncommon to be invited to Maravolo's house along with a friend or two to have an Italian dinner, Italian wine, and a wonderful evening visiting and exploring our respective futures.



Ron Jensen '60
Livermore, Calif.

My learning experience at Lawrence was influenced tremendously by individualized interaction with Professor of Chemistry Robert Rosenberg.

I entered Lawrence as a language major with a clear intent to work in the international business society that existed and was expanding. During my freshman year, Rosenberg taught the basic chemistry course with such vitality that I became quite interested in that subject. I continued with science as well as languages into my sophomore and junior year. During my senior year, I performed an independent research project under the auspices of Rosenberg. This was exciting, and these interactions with him convinced me that chemistry was my calling. I went to graduate school at the California Institute of Technology, received my Ph.D. in chemistry, and spent my lifetime performing biochemical and molecular biology research. I concluded my career with 15 years as professor of laboratory medicine at the University of California San Francisco, performing molecular genetic research on cancer progression, while instructing young scientists on research methods. If it were not for Robert Rosenberg's strong individual influence, all of this probably would not have happened.



Donald E. Jones '50
Safety Harbor, Fla.

As a teacher in my professional life I kept touting the small school experience for the very reasons you are seeking. The ability to meet a professor in the union and just chat was worth the price of admission. They knew who I was! By name! I carried Anne Pusey's groceries. The president's wife knew who I was! My relationship with Professor of Theatre and Drama Ted Cloak changed my life. My relationship with James Purdy, assistant professor of Spanish, enriched me in so many ways. I was responsible for bringing the first foreign films to the campus and it was James who encouraged me and made wonderful suggestions of films to include.



Stephen Johnson '74
Medford, Mass.

Like all great liberal arts colleges, a Lawrence education assumes several expressions and takes many forms. Inevitably, the excellence and distinction of a Lawrence education is a fertile combination of factors, experiences, and forces — some shared and collective, others individual and intensely personal. But among the common elements, we can discern at the core the college's capacity to inspire and motivate its students to take personal responsibility for their own education. And, equally important, the college serves as a catalyst, enabling student self-direction by providing the people and the tools, the resources and the opportunities, to make superior learning possible. In the act and in the process of assuming this responsibility, the student becomes the agent of their own education — a collaborator and participant in their learning, and the co-author of their undergraduate experience.



Gerald W. Gabbard, '92
Trinidad, Colo.

One of the greatest life lessons Professor of Music Ted Rehl taught me was about pursuing excellence versus perfection. We were walking across campus, heading back to the conservatory after lunch together in Downer Commons one sunny winter afternoon and talking about stressors that affect student's lives. Stressors such as the constant pressure of studying, practicing, reading, writing, and researching, and feeling guilty about procrastination and blowing off steam with friends. He said, "I've always done as much in a day as I can, to the very best of my ability, and then, when I go home at night, I forget about it until the next day." This little lesson has been invaluable to me in my professional life, first as a music educator for five years, then as a public school administrator for the past ten years. There are always tasks that can never be fully completed in a single day. We will never be perfect, even when those tasks are finished. Yet, we can accomplish them with alacrity, energy, and excellence. After many years of practicing Professor Rehl's life lesson, I have learned how to maintain balance in my mind, work, and family. I am able to put

work's pressures aside in the evening, so I can focus on my wife and young son. There will be another opportunity to revisit my work again tomorrow.



Tara DJangi '06
Brooklyn, N.Y.

My relationship with my independent study professor, Karen Hoffmann, associate professor of English, was not purely academic — it turned into a mentor-like one. I felt comfortable enough to spend time at the end of my weekly sessions chatting (and worrying) about my future after leaving the Lawrence bubble and just talking about the things that interested me outside of the classroom. It helped my professor and I get to know one another on a deeper level than I had ever known a teacher from whom I took a regular course. I felt like it was easier to accept critiques on essays, discuss my opinions on the books I had read, and allowed me to feel comfortable speaking up when normally I would have stayed silent.

Not only was one-on-one learning better in that sense, but it also increased my sense of responsibility for my course. In a regular classroom, I may be a little more lax in doing the homework or reading; there are other students who can speak up if you get behind in the work. In an independent study the focus is all on you. It made me be more conscientious about getting everything done ahead of time and finishing it completely — nothing was ever done just to get it done. So not only was the subject something that encouraged me to be involved in the independent study, but since it was also just me, myself, and I with the professor, there was a need to be fully involved.



David Scott '02
Roxbury Crossing, Mass.

It is not every school that allows a math student to earn honors by writing a paper that is primarily historical and philosophical. Furthermore, it is not every school where a senior talk about mathematics can be just as well-attended and just as enjoyable to the attendees as a senior music recital. Yet at Lawrence, these pursuits were not only allowed, they were

encouraged. My independent study at Lawrence was one of the most significant and enjoyable learning experiences I had. I am convinced, too, that it is the type of experience that only happens at Lawrence. Lawrence independent studies are one of the many things that make it a truly unique and uniquely remarkable educational environment.



Sarah Katherine Curry '08
Decatur, Ill.

I've found that I can glean only so much material from text books and lectures, and that to make difficult theories memorable, I often have to discuss them with the professor. Since I do learn best this way, I've been lucky that so many professors at Lawrence keep their doors open and are so eager to help a befuddled student.

A genetics course I took during my junior year reminded me just how important individualized learning is to my comprehension of the material. The class promised to be interesting, and like most courses I find interesting, it was also challenging. Professor Beth De Stasio's door was always open, and she patiently answered my questions when I stumbled over the material. This wasn't enough, however, and I did poorly on the first two exams. I may have been discouraged and resigned to my fate of a poor grade, but she wasn't, and continued to encourage me and offered help weekly to make sure I understood the material. Her persistence paid off; I scored very highly on the final and left the course feeling confident about my ability to pursue biology.

Not only has help from professors outside the classroom helped me to better understand the material, it has also made the college experience considerably more enjoyable, and this aspect should not be underestimated.

At Lawrence, it's been wonderful to find that so many of my professors are excited about the courses they teach, and they pass this excitement to their students. The objective of education is not to merely cover material, but to retain and use it, and the extra attention I've received has undoubtedly given me the best preparation possible for my future career. ■