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A Truly Golden College

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences celebrates 50 years of transforming students and the NIU campus

By Tom Parisi

Today William Tate is a professor at an elite university. He is considered one of the nation's leading social scientists. He is quoted in the media, and his research on science, technology, engineering and mathematics education moves academic fields.

But back in the fall of 1979, Tate's freshman year at NIU, he would never have pictured himself in this future. A smart kid from Chicago's South Side, he planned to rocket through college and launch a career in business, finance or accounting.

On the fast track, though, Tate discovered new interests. To satisfy general requirements, he took courses in economics and became fascinated with the development of human capital—or the knowledge, skills and abilities that people need to flourish in their jobs. And despite an initial reticence to take advanced mathematics, he discovered a love for the discipline, became a tutor in calculus and later accepted a post as a teaching assistant, a rare feat for an undergraduate. Dreams of the business career were replaced by new passions that captured his imagination.

As the NIU College of Liberal Arts and Sciences this year celebrates its golden anniversary, Tate's

experience serves as a shining example of a success story often repeated. For 50 years, the college has introduced tens of thousands of students to new perspectives and disciplines. It has helped young people develop, chase and realize dreams. And it has provided critical-thinking and learning skills that last a lifetime.

"With a liberal arts and sciences foundation, you gain an understanding about human behavior, history, government and the like," Tate says. "Then nothing can stop you. You can go into any venue and learn."

Tate earned an NIU degree in economics (with a minor in mathematical sciences) and later a Ph.D. in mathematics education from the University of Maryland. He now holds a distinguished professorship at Washington University in St. Louis, where he directs the Center for the Study of Regional Competitiveness in Science and Technology.

He can still recite the names of one influential NIU professor after the next.

"Basically, I gained the foundation at Northern for what I do now," Tate says. "It set the stage for me to become a person who can contribute new knowledge to various fields."



Professor William Tate '83 (right) at Washington University in St. Louis.

Learning for a lifetime

The term “liberal education” carries no political connotation. Rather, it describes a calling to endow students with fundamentals of critical thinking and expression; with both broad knowledge and a disciplinary grounding that can be focused on a particular career; with skills that are transferable between jobs and professions; and with a genuine understanding of the world around them.

While it has grown substantially over the past half century, NIU’s College of Liberal Arts and Sciences remains true to those ideals. And its work has never been more relevant.

With 17 departments, two divisions, 33 degree programs and more than 6,000 students, liberal arts and sciences is the largest of the university’s six undergraduate colleges. It boasts numerous graduate programs, including 10 at the doctoral level, as well as 10 research centers, ranging from the Center for Southeast Asian Studies to the Public Opinion Laboratory to the Institute for Nanoscience, Engineering, and Technology.

Virtually all NIU students, regardless of their career choices, benefit from the college’s general education and service courses. Foundational training in a variety of subjects—be it communication, computer science, philosophy, mathematics or biology—is an essential part of professional development even in areas outside the college, such as accounting, engineering, nursing, education and law.

“In a university with a multipronged mission of education, research, outreach and engagement, liberal arts provides the foundation for everyone’s success,” says Christopher McCord, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

The college also gives students the tools needed to adapt

in an ever-changing world, where professions and technologies evolve rapidly.

“A liberal education empowers students to become lifelong learners, which is necessary in most careers nowadays,” McCord says. “It’s also vital because we are more than just our careers. We hope for more out of our life than our jobs, and a liberal education strives to produce well-rounded individuals who better understand and engage the world they live in.”

Kristina Valaitis would wholeheartedly agree. The daughter of Depression-era parents who had quit high school in order to work and make ends meet, Valaitis came to NIU as an undergraduate transfer student in 1965.

And she fell in love with learning.

After earning her bachelor’s degree, she stayed on at NIU to earn her master’s degree and Ph.D. in English. Today Valaitis serves as executive director of the Illinois Humanities Council, which has flourished under her leadership during the past 15 years.

“I don’t know how people go through all the challenges that life brings to all of us without the wellspring of an education that frees you to think for yourself, to value reflection as well as action, to search for truth and be strong enough to face it even in its most mundane representations, and to be refreshed by beauty,” she says. “There literally is not a day that goes by when I don’t turn to this education that I was privileged to have.”

Transforming a university

Just as the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences transforms students, it also played a large role in shaping the university. In 1957, Northern Illinois State College officially became Northern Illinois University. Two years later, three new colleges within the university were created, including Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Many of the liberal arts courses had been taught at Northern for decades, but structural changes were needed to better equip the university for growth. In the wake of Russia’s launch of the Sputnik satellite, the U.S. government channeled



Ben Gross, political science major, recently received a highly coveted internship with the editorial board of the Chicago Tribune. Ben was named NIU’s 2008 Student Lincoln Laureate, an annual honor reserved for the university’s top senior.

tremendous resources into higher education, particularly for scientific research. At the same time, baby boomers streamed onto college campuses.

From 1959 to 1969, NIU's enrollment exploded—growing by 1,000 to 2,000 students *per year*. Jerrold Zar witnessed firsthand how the campus mushroomed. He had graduated in 1962 with a degree in biological sciences. When he returned to NIU six years later as an assistant professor, previously wide open areas of campus were occupied by multistoried buildings.

Springing up in his short absence: Douglas Hall, Faraday Hall, Graham Hall, Wirtz Hall, Lowden Hall, Grant Towers North and South and Stevenson Towers South. More academic buildings, such as Montgomery Hall, would be erected in his first years back on campus—in part to accommodate growth within liberal arts and sciences.

“In a sense, the college became the center of the university because it housed the basic disciplines,” Zar says.

All NIU faculty members stepped up their scholarly efforts. Nowhere was that more evident than in liberal arts and sciences, where professors embarked on both applied and basic research. Over the decades, the university was transformed into a major research institution—charged not only with imparting knowledge but also with creating it.

“It was a gradual change,” says Zar, who spent 34 years on the NIU faculty and retired in 2002 from his post as dean of the Graduate School and vice provost for graduate studies and research.

“Across the university as new faculty members were hired, more attention was paid to their research interests and expertise,” he says. “We not only advanced knowledge but also exposed students to the research process.”

Today, faculty members and students alike engage in a wide array of research that benefits Chicagoland, the nation and the world. Those efforts range from measuring public opinion on proposed community improvements to exploring the post-9/11 state of academic freedom to uncovering clues to global warming buried beneath the Antarctic sea.

Since 1982, NIU has recognized world-class faculty research and artistry with Presidential Research Professorships. Of the 79 professorships awarded over the past three decades, 69 have been given to liberal arts and sciences faculty.

Learning by doing

NIU has long prided itself on being an institution where students learn by doing—Zar had conducted undergraduate research in the late 1950s, for example. But those opportunities increased exponentially in recent decades.

Jolene Skinner came to NIU in 1997 to work on a master's degree in social psychology. A top student, she planned to become a university professor.

Skinner, who has six sisters and one brother, was raised by a single mother who held down two professional jobs. Not

POINTS OF PRIDE

As the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences reflects on its first 50 years, the excellence of its programs and accomplishments of faculty, students, and alumni come to light. The following list highlights just a few of the vast achievements of NIU's largest college.

- NIU's public administration program, a division within the Department of Political Science, produces about one-third of all Illinois city managers. *U.S. News & World Report* ranks the program third nationally in the specialty field of city management and urban policy.
- NIU Professor Douglas Klumpp and students in his organic chemistry laboratory class made a discovery that might help fight cancer. They found a simple method for preparing diarylalkylimidazoles, a class of compounds possessing promising activity against certain forms of cancer. The resulting research was published, with all enrolled students listed as co-authors, in the *Journal of Organic Chemistry*.
- NIU's Department of Philosophy is ranked among the top five departments nationwide among those offering terminal master's degree programs, according to external rankings.
- NIU physicists and students are playing key roles in one of the world's most ambitious physics experiments: the “DZero collaboration” at Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory. The D-Zero collaboration explores the subatomic universe using the world's most powerful particle accelerator.
- NIU's undergraduate program in meteorology is the oldest undergraduate program of its kind in Illinois and one of the largest undergraduate-only meteorology programs in North America. Alumni inform you about today's weather and tomorrow's forecast both regionally and nationally.
- Anthropology Professor Susan Russell has spent the last six years working on projects designed to help bring peace to the war-torn southern Philippines. With more than \$1.5 million in funding from the U.S. Department of State, these projects bring young people from Christian, Muslim and Animist religious communities together to reconcile their differences and learn about U.S. institutions that promote tolerance and diversity.
- Department of Communication graduate student Andrew McCormick and undergraduate Steven Stein recently were awarded paid internships in Hollywood. The highly competitive internships were arranged through the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Foundation. McCormick interned with the Post Group, one of the largest post-production houses in the world. Stein interned with the Cartoon Network.

surprisingly, she was drawn to issues surrounding women in the workplace.

At NIU, Skinner began working in Women's Studies, teaching a course titled, "Growing Up Female." She co-authored an article on strategic planning for the National Women's Studies Association. And she coordinated women's conferences and events, exposing her to academics from different disciplines and professionals from the outside world.

Skinner also ventured outside liberal arts, teaming up with a management professor to conduct research on dysfunctional bosses. She continued on at NIU to earn her Ph.D. in industrial-organizational psychology. Her dissertation research—identifying the factors that encumber and encourage women to take workplace leadership roles—caught the attention of academics and corporate executives alike.

"As far as NIU goes, I really took advantage of lots of different educational aspects that provided me with a diverse

"We hope for more out of our life than our jobs, and a liberal education strives to produce well-rounded individuals who better understand and engage the world they live in."

– **Christopher McCord**
Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

background," Skinner says. "Before getting involved with Women's Studies, I was pretty sure I wanted an academic career. But then I became exposed to people outside the university who also had a passion for learning—but in a different way."

Only three years removed from NIU, Skinner today makes decisions that improve the lives of tens of thousands of employees worldwide for Dell, where she is a senior talent management consultant.

"I surprised a lot of people," Skinner says. "And I surprised myself. But my liberal arts education taught me to go outside my comfort zone."

Crossing traditional boundaries

As Skinner's experience suggests, faculty and students are increasingly crossing the boundaries of disciplines to bring multiple perspectives to modern challenges.

"The liberal arts and sciences have become much more sensitive to diverse viewpoints and ways of learning,"

Dean McCord says. "We are also more concerned with the connections between different areas of knowledge."

For example:

- The chemistry and physics departments now offer a specialization in nanoscience, an exciting new field that is developing materials, electronics and machines so small they approach atomic scale. Nanoscience integrates physics, chemistry, biology and engineering.
- An environmental studies program is being developed that will incorporate chemistry, biology and geology, while also addressing issues of environmental policy and ethics.
- Another new major area of study being planned will train students to work in the growing field of non-profit organizations, both local and international, and will involve aspects of anthropology, business, history, public administration and sociology.

Students also can combine disciplines to create their own unique educational experiences.

Ben Gross came to NIU in the fall of 2004, fresh out of high school and with thoughts of a career studying astronomy. But while taking his general education courses, he discovered an affinity for math and a passion for political science. So he did all three—minoring in physics and mathematical sciences and majoring in political science. He was named NIU's 2008 Student Lincoln Laureate, an annual honor reserved for the university's top senior, and is now pursuing a master's degree in political science.

Then there is his journalism gig.

Although Gross never took any journalism courses, he has worked four years at the *Northern Star* as a reporter and editor. This past spring, while looking for an internship in political science, he sought advice from *Star* adviser Jim Killam. With Killam's encouragement and a razor-sharp letter of recommendation from political scientist Gary Glenn, the 24-year-old Gross netted a highly competitive summer internship with the editorial board of the *Chicago Tribune*.

The opportunity provides a window into real-life applications of political science. In Gross's first few weeks, he attended a press conference held by U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald and met with U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush and former Gov. Jim Edgar. He also sat in on a meeting with Cook County Circuit Court Clerk Dorothy Brown as she responded to criticism over the practice of accepting gifts from employees.

"It gives me a whole practical view of politics that I don't think I'd get in the classroom," Gross says. "I've taken two separate loves and tried to meld them together."

In true journalistic style, Gross sums up his liberal education experience simply and succinctly.

"You let life take you, and you grab opportunities as they come," he says. "I take full advantage of every one."

It's a recipe for success perfected by a college that is indeed golden this year. **N**

50 YEARS ALUMNI

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences marks its 50th anniversary by honoring distinguished alumni with Golden Alumni Awards

Fifty inaugural recipients of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Golden Alumni Award will be honored at a September 25 gala dinner on the NIU campus. The award honors individuals who have distinguished themselves either in professional fields or through involvement in civic, cultural or charitable service.

The gala will launch a year-long celebration of the college's 50th anniversary. A number of activities are being planned, including an event next spring to honor current and retired faculty members. More information on the 50th anniversary and related activities can be found online at www.niu.edu/clas50. The site will also include biographies of all 50 Golden Alumni Award recipients.

Following is a closer look at four of the award winners, each of whom is featured in the accompanying story.



William F. Tate IV
B.S. Economics, 1982

William Tate is the Edward Mallinckrodt Distinguished Professor in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis. He is widely considered to be one of the nation's leading social scientists, urbanists and policy leaders.

After receiving his undergraduate education at NIU, he earned a master's degree in mathematical sciences from the University of Texas at Dallas and a doctorate in mathematics education from the University of Maryland.

Tate's research and development efforts are in four interdependent areas: human resource development in mathematics, engineering, technology and science; adolescent development and health; political economy of urban metropolitan regions; and leadership in public-private learning alliances and research collaborations.

Tate has authored scores of journal articles and book chapters focused on school mathematics, school science, technology education and urban school reform. He served as the 2007-08 president of the American Educational Research Association and as editor of the *American Educational Research Journal*.



Kristina A. Valaitis
B.S. Secondary Education, 1967
M.A. English, 1969
Ph.D. English, 1974

In a society where the humanities are too often given short shrift, Kristina Valaitis has been their champion. As executive director of the Illinois Humanities Council (IHC) since 1993, she has done so by bringing the

humanities into our communities in everyday settings.

Valaitis began work with the IHC in 1979 as a program officer, after teaching for several years at Arizona State University. As she rose through the ranks, she built a network among arts and humanities professionals in Chicago and then statewide. Today, the IHC is renowned for its broad array of programs that reach a range of audiences, including citizens living below the poverty level, in new and exciting ways.

Valaitis has not limited her humanistic contributions to the IHC. She serves on the boards of the Chicago Metro History Education Center and the Donors Forum. She also remains active in numerous cultural groups.



Jerrold H. Zar
B.S. Biological Sciences, 1962

Jerrold Zar served the NIU community in a variety of capacities for 34 years until his retirement in 2002, and he continues to contribute to its activities.

After earning his master's and doctoral degrees in biology and zoology, respectively, from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he joined the NIU faculty as an assistant professor in 1968. He quickly rose through the ranks to associate and full professor and became chair of the Department of Biological Sciences in 1978. From 1984 to 2002, Zar served as NIU's vice provost for graduate studies and research and dean of the Graduate School.

His book, *Biostatistical Analysis*, is one of the best known and most widely used on the subject. He also has authored 44 journal articles, 11 book chapters and a laboratory and field manual for general ecology. His many professional memberships include being an elected fellow of the prestigious American Association for the Advancement of Science.



Jolene L. Skinner
M.A. Social Psychology, 1999
Ph.D. Industrial-Organizational Psychology, 2006

Jolene Skinner's decisions have the power to change the lives of more than 60,000 people.

As senior consultant in Global Talent Management at Dell, she led the redesign of the global employee survey that is used to identify critical priorities that drive employee engagement and shape Dell's culture.

In addition, she co-chairs Dell's "work-life team." Her team has helped dramatically increase flexibility for workers across the globe. She wrote the first work-life survey that is used to understand how Dell can enhance work-life effectiveness in all cultures and in all countries. In 2008, the team successfully helped Dell land a spot in *Working Mother* magazine's list of Top 100 U.S. Companies. Currently, she is facilitating a class for female employees that helps strengthen their executive presentation skills.

Skinner is the continuing education chair for the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology and serves on the Board for the Association of Women in Technology, Austin.