Painting a Brighter Picture of Research Across the Liberal Arts

By Tina M. Melczarek, Philosophy Department Program Management Specialist

 Whether it’s creating a series of paintings, studying the stress effects of the H1N1 pandemic on a population or exploring a lesser-known Brontë sister, SU’s Fulton School of Liberal Arts faculty are actively pursuing their research, bringing it to their current courses and involving SU students in research, mentoring them toward excellence in school and beyond.

 Much of this is made possible by the Fulton curriculum reform passed in 2008, which changed faculty work load from teaching up to four classes a semester to teaching only three greatly enhanced classes each semester, thus freeing up more time for exploring this type of scholarly work, which results can then be brought back into the classroom. Students take four, four-credit courses instead of five, three-credit courses. The rationale is that it enables students to delve more deeply into the content, not with increased classroom time, but by doing more work and engaging in more project-based experiences outside the classroom. This has led to an increase in the number of undergraduate research projects and faculty mentoring activities within the school. Every major within the Fulton School had to be re-designed to accommodate the four-credit course load. Faculty began engaging and mentoring their students in research projects as a way to add depth and enrichment instead of simply increasing classroom time or giving students more assignments.

Jinchul Kim: Establishing a Gallery of Success

 Jinchul Kim, associate professor in the Art Department, uses paint to explore and express his ideas and worldview in his creative works. His style of contemporary realism with figurative work is shown at five galleries worldwide and at many shows during the year. He says that teaching informs his art and vice versa.

 “As artists, we must have a creative body of work. I need to be a successful and professional artist before I stand in front of students. I also try to be a good role model. To be a successful and professional artist means you have to support yourself with your own art, have gallery representation, sell and move your work, and exhibit your work nationally and internationally,” Kim said.

 He models this for his students by running his own self-supporting 3,000 square-foot studio, where he takes in student interns each summer. There the students learn everything from the basics of canvas preparation to eventually graduating to painting the first layer of Kim’s paintings if they show enough skill. The Fulton curriculum reform has helped him with his painting schedule. Before the reform, he could paint only in winter and summer, since the spring and fall semesters were filled with teaching.

 Kim also inspires and mentors his students by finding ways for them to show their work outside of the classroom.

 “Students sometimes do solo exhibitions. In the Guerreri University Center there’s the Art Space, which is a 20-foot-long wall. One of our students, Leah Lewman, has shown there twice. It’s more work for me to curate this space, but it’s so important for the students to have their work be seen,” Kim said.

 One of his students, Jee Hwang, who graduated in 2006, has gone on to garner representation in a New York City art gallery, which is the pinnacle of success for many artists.

 “I share their stories with my art, and I share my art with them. It’s full circle,” said Kim.
Karl Maier: Seeking to Solve Global Issues and Study their Stressors

In the Psychology Department, Dr. Karl Maier, associate professor, has expanded his stress-based health psychology research program to encompass more global issues, including pandemics and climate change. He and his students, whom he considers junior collaborators, run both basic and applied stress research out of the department’s Behavioral Medicine Laboratory. His students are integral to designing and building their projects, collecting data, and reporting the findings at student and professional conferences.

“They learn from me and I learn from them,” Maier shared.

One of his studies was funded by an SU mini grant and a Fulton Faculty Grant. “Those types of grants are critical to pursuing this type of research. It’s difficult to get external funding for relatively small projects when they are about studying basic research questions,” Maier explained.

Not only does Maier mentor students in the classroom, but he also works with his current and former students to publish empirical articles in peer-reviewed journals on findings based on their collaborative efforts in the lab.

“In the lab, we have just finished data collection from one experimental study looking at perceptions of climate change. Do the messages that people receive change their perception of climate change? At what point do people feel prompted to action? Or do they feel as though all’s well if they’re told climate change is only affecting part of the globe?” Maier pondered. In addition to his lab work, students will be grappling with these basic research questions and more in a special topics course he’ll be co-teaching in fall 2013, Psychology and Global Climate Change.

This mentoring also leads beyond the walls of SU for Maier’s students.

“By mentoring them, I can help them put together a competitive application for graduate school,” he insisted, stating that many students go on to pursue master’s or doctoral programs in psychology, and some have even gone on to pharmacy and medical schools. “This broad mix reflects the interdisciplinary nature of what we do in the lab.”

And that interdisciplinary nature is what Fulton School Dean Maarten Pereboom encourages.

“One of our goals as an institution of higher education is to ensure that all SU graduates leave here with the tools to conduct meaningful research and become innovators in their chosen fields,” said Dr. Pereboom. “One of our strengths as a University is in our ability to integrate research across academic disciplines and schools. Fulton faculty members have sought numerous ways to enshrine research within the liberal arts curricula,” he added.

Judith Pike: Celebrating the Lesser-Known Brontë Sister Unearths Vacuum in Critical Area

Sometimes studies show not what is present, but what is missing. When Dr. Judith Pike, associate professor in the English Department, was researching the Brontë sisters, she realized that there was a wealth of research yet to be done about Anne Brontë. Of the three, Anne is the lesser-known Brontë, Pike explained.

“Surprisingly, her [Anne’s] derelict brother who died from an overdose is more celebrated and has more of a presence than she does, even though she published two books,” Pike said.

She translates this research into a seminar for her students, who in turn learn how to critically read scholarly articles and add to the continuing discussion.

“We had to learn how to read critical scholarly articles in graduate school, but it was more of a ‘sink or swim’ mentality,” Pike said. “What they don’t understand is that one article is often in response to another article.”

Recently, 10 of Pike’s students were accepted to the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR).

“I had a student who went against the foremost scholar on author Jane Addams and found some textual evidence that went against what the criticism was saying. It was brilliant,” Pike said.

In summer 2013, Pike traveled to England to present at the Research Society in Victorian Periodicals. She says this level of scholarship has been made possible by the change in her curriculum load.

“There was no time to do research during the year,” Pike said, regarding the pre-curriculum reform teaching schedule.

Pike’s work will appear as a chapter in the The Blackwell Companion to the Brontës (forthcoming in 2015).

Faculty extending themselves and their research are a firm benefit of the change from multiple three-credit hour classes to the enhanced curriculum. “Our reformed curriculum enables our finest scholar-teachers to be sustainably active in their disciplines while inspiring their students to take up those disciplines actively and successfully,” said Pereboom.

By adding to their respective bodies of research work, Fulton faculty continue to expect excellence in the classroom. SU students reap the rewards by learning from engaged scholars and creative minds, then expand that into the world beyond the walls of Salisbury University.