



GOOD

QUESTION

NAVIGATING THE AMBIGUITIES OF TODAY'S
CAREER PATHS, ST. OLAF STUDENTS FIND
THEY CAN DO ANYTHING WITH A DEGREE
IN PHILOSOPHY, AND DO IT WELL.

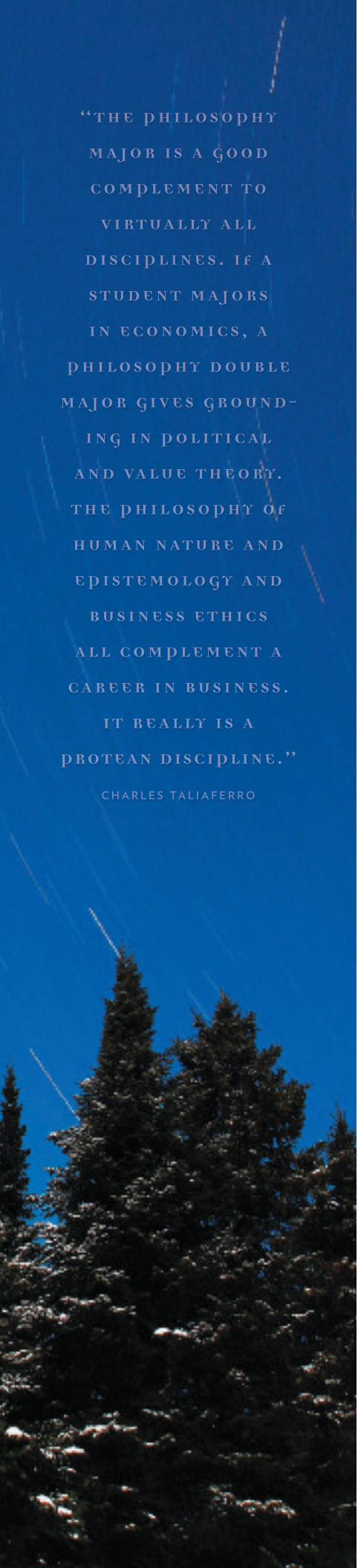
BY PATRICIA GROTTTS KELLY '77

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS WELSCH

MOST AMERICANS GO THROUGH LIFE without reading a word of Plato or Descartes or Kierkegaard. Most St. Olaf students wouldn't dream of it. At the dawn of the 21st century, more and more Oles have come to see the wisdom of Socrates' dictum: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

At St. Olaf — and all around the country — the study of philosophy is enjoying a resurgence. But philosophy is nothing new at St. Olaf. The first philosophy course, a logic class, was offered to seniors in the spring of 1890; St. Olaf students began to major in philosophy in the early 1920s. Today the department boasts ten highly respected, widely published professors whose specialties include early modern philosophy, metaphysics, the relationship between science and religion, health-care ethics, ancient philosophy, contemporary philosophy, and the social, moral and political philosophies of Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Hume, and Kierkegaard.

Ed Langerak, a professor of philosophy at St. Olaf since 1972, says the number of philosophy majors has remained steady in recent years, but there has been an increase in the number of non-majors who are taking philosophy classes. "And the students who do decide to major in philosophy don't get flak from their parents: 'What are you going to do with that?'" he says with a smile. "The joke used to be that a philosophy major enables you to scorn the money it prevents you from earning. But it's just not true."



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CHARLES TALIAFERRO

From careers in law, medicine, business, public service, theology, and the arts, these days students can do almost anything with a degree in philosophy — and do it well.

“The philosophy major is a good complement to virtually all disciplines,” says philosophy professor Charles Taliaferro. “If a student majors in economics, a philosophy double major gives grounding in political and value theory. The philosophy of human nature and epistemology and business ethics all complement a career in business. For theater, there is aesthetics, or the philosophy of art. It really is a protean discipline.”

Anthony Rudd, who taught philosophy at the Universities of Bristol and Hertfordshire in England before coming to St. Olaf in 2001, credits the new economy’s volatile, transitory nature with fueling philosophy’s popularity.

“Society is changing so much, and there is so much less stability and predictability, students know that getting specific career-oriented training in college isn’t necessarily going to help them in the long run,” he says. “It’s better to acquire skills that can be applied in many different contexts.”

Students of philosophy develop assets valuable in any career: disciplined thinking, clear reasoning, expertise in objective discourse or argument, strong writing skills, creative analysis, and a respect for dissenting views.

“Philosophy has contributed to my value system,” says Luke Peterson ’11, who is majoring in philosophy and biology. “At some point I’ll step back and say, ‘Wow. This was a bigger influence than I expected!’ It teaches you to think in a very meaningful and powerful way.”

Natasha Fredericks ’11, an English and philosophy double major, finds herself wrestling with her place in human history, her ethical obligations, and even her own mortality. “Philosophy really forces us to cultivate the habit of contemplation and curiosity and a passion for wisdom, all of which enriches our lives, no matter what profession we pursue,” says Fredericks, a native of Monrovia, Maryland.

RELEVANCE TODAY

PHILOSOPHY TENDS TO FLOURISH during times that are unsettled and, in fact, philosophy was born in both the East and the West during times of crisis. “There were warlords and a complete lack of social structure in China. In Greece, it was the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, which was absolutely devastating for Athens. All the early philosophers in Greece were veterans of a defeated army,” explains Taliaferro. “And the birth of Renaissance humanism also occurred in the midst of crisis. In times of trouble, people ask fundamental questions: What is justice? What is the point of it all? Philosophy is a natural arena in which to take on those questions.”

St. Olaf students tackle those heady questions under the guidance of professors who see the classical tradition as very contemporary and cutting-edge. They focus on four areas — metaphysics, logic, epistemology (theories of knowledge), and ethics — and examine all of the Platonic dialogues and much of Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and Aquinas, who are resources for contemporary issues such as war and peace, human dignity, and caring for the natural world.

Students discover that even specific contemporary issues and concerns, such as physician-assisted suicide and immigration, were taken up among the ancients. “The question ‘Can computers think?’ echoes early speculations about early primitive machines,” Taliaferro says. “So, it’s not like we are busy thinking, ‘How can I make this relevant?’ We don’t have to connect ancient texts to contemporary issues in a self-conscious way because it happens on its own.”

Professor Arthur Cunningham, who teaches philosophy of physics in the new interdisciplinary Science Conversations program, says students want to make sense of how science and religion fit together in a coherent worldview. “What they come to realize is that science is not always black and white. They come to talk a little less about proof and more about the weight of evidence.”

Once you have an agreed-on answer, it's no longer philosophy, adds Langerak. "We deal with good questions. And I think students are encouraged by that — that it's okay to live with good questions. You don't always have to have answers."

SLOWING IT DOWN

TODAY'S COLLEGE STUDENTS LIVE a fast-paced life, filled with instant and constant communication and connectedness. The study of philosophy requires them to slow down.

"One of the things that has always been true about philosophy is it takes time," says Taliaferro. "I really love the word 'truth' in Greek, which is *aletheia*, and it means 'clearing.' With so much text-messaging and technology, it's hard to find a clearing where you can actually think reflectively and calmly.

Luke Peterson agrees. "When I'm studying philosophy, I get this feeling that's really analogous to the satisfaction you get from a good workout," he says. "It's a tangible feeling of mental exertion that is very satisfying."

That's precisely what the philosophy professors have in mind. As the world grows ever smaller and more technologically interconnected, it's more important than ever for people to be able to reason together about religious and secular issues and about value systems and to cooperate politically and economically.

Philosophy's emphasis on clear-headed, critical analysis is particularly valuable in the era of the sound bite.

"It's easy to just sort of gab off," says Rudd. "But it's important to be able to state — and actually support — your opinion. It's a difficult balance: to have a respectful disagreement with someone while sticking to your own convictions and not becoming wishy-washy, but it's a balance that philosophy is good at teaching."

The word *philosophy* means the "love of wisdom." "It might sound a bit presumptuous to say that's what we're busy doing," says Taliaferro, "but that is one of our goals. We encourage love of wisdom among our students. That's the bottom line." 🦁

PATRICIA GROTTTS KELLY '77 is a freelance Twin Cities writer and frequent contributor to *St. Olaf Magazine*.

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LUKE PETERSON '11

A Rich History

The study of philosophy at St. Olaf College dates back more than 100 years. Learn more from these web extras:

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AT ST. OLAF

Professor of Philosophy Ed Langerak, who has taught at St Olaf College since 1972, offers an overview of the past and present faculty and events of the department. stolaf.edu/people/langerak/Phil_Dept_history.html

HOWARD AND EDNA HONG

Professor Emeritus of Philosophy Howard Hong '34 and his wife, the late Edna Hatlestad Hong '38, influenced generations of Oles with their passion for Søren Kierkegaard, their deep faith and humor, and their devotion to each other. *St. Olaf Magazine* featured the life and legacy of the Hongs in 2006. stolaf.edu/magazine/2006winter/index.html

[CLICK ON "LOVE AND KIERKEGAARD" AND "THE GREAT BOOKS."]

THE HOWARD AND EDNA HONG KIERKEGAARD LIBRARY

A special collection at St. Olaf College that serves anyone interested in the writings and ideas of the 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and related thinkers. stolaf.edu/collections/Kierkegaard