

An Interview with David Robertson

By: Kelsey Easterly

It was a Tuesday night on January 22, 2008 as I walked into the English Department in Voorhies Hall. In an empty room at the end of the row, the one missing a metal plate etched with a professor's name and reserved for retired professors' use, sat David Robertson. I interviewed this recently retired English professor because he was involved in the Integrated Studies program for 15 years, beginning with its earliest phase. He warmly greeted me and sat down in his silver rimmed glasses and jeans, ready to recall his years of Davis teaching before the tape recorder. And I was ready to learn about his time put into IS—the courses he taught, the experiences he had, and the memories he still carries with him.

What year did you begin teaching at Davis?

I came here in 1971 and have been teaching in the English Department and in a number of other programs ever since. The first program I taught in besides English was Integrated Studies. In the fall of '73 I started teaching the IS course in theology, which I would go on to teach for 15 years. There was one assignment in the class—students would write their own theologies. The student had to write about certain topics, called credos, which were "I believe....". He or she then had to defend it and give reasons why they believed this. The credo was divided into three parts. The first had to do with God, and whether they believed that there was no God or there were multiple Gods. The second part had to do with humans. How did humans get to be on earth? Is there some kind of purpose for human life? Those types of questions were what they answered. Finally, the third part of the paper had to do with ethics and evaluating if there is a right way to live that can be defended from an intellectual point of view. This class proved to be wildly successful.

On the first day of class I'd divide the students by asking them, "How many of you are theists?" I'd tell them to go to one side of the room. Then I'd ask "How many of you are atheists?" and have those students go over to the other side of the room. Broadly speaking, out of a class of 25, the group of atheists would be about 7 to 8 students and the group of theists would be 17 or 18. The atheists would exchange their credos with the theists, and the theists would give their credo to another atheist, so that there were no direct exchanges. This was great fun. I remember one of the things I always had to do was listen for titters and chuckles while the papers were being exchanged, and if that happened I knew that a girlfriend had just given her paper to a boyfriend. So after they exchanged papers

I would ask, "Are there any special problems here in terms of relationships between the people who are exchanging credos?" The students would be pretty honest about this, and then I would make my changes.

What was one of the most interesting things that happened in this theology course?

Far and away the most interesting thing to me was the people who would drastically change their minds from the first draft of the credo to the final draft. This happened more often than you might think, and in all directions. Atheists would become theists, and theists would become atheists. Of course I am using these words very loosely because people had wildly different notions of what atheism and theism meant.

I quickly realized after just a year or two teaching the class that the most important thing that happened were the discussions about the credos that were started in the dorm. Also, the advantage of this assignment was that it was in the fall. It was one of the IS students' first classes in college, and the questions asked in the class were big. People were leaving high school and going through what is a pretty big transition in most Americans' lives. During this transition, through my class you were asked if you believed in a God, if so what this God is like, and if you think there's any purpose to human life.

What type of students tended to sign up for this class, and what do you think appealed to them?

The description of the class always went out to the students, with a paragraph that explained the course. But it's still hard to tell.

However, in the fall quarter the students also had the option of taking a physics class. Back in the early 70s, there were less options to take classes outside of Integrated Studies than there is now. The students took mostly Integrated Studies classes. The teacher of the Physics class was Ken Grider, who has since died. Ken and I hit it off very well because one of my intellectual hobbies is physics, and still is. The second year I taught, that is the fall of 74, I began to sit in on Ken's introduction to physics class, and he would sit in on my theology class. I would say probably two thirds of the students in the classes were taking both the theology and the physics class. This was an extraordinary experience. I would arrange my readings somewhat to bounce off of his class, and vice-versa. I don't know how long it took the grapevine of students to get out to the incoming students this

peculiar conjunction of physics and theology, but it was certainly one of the most intellectually exciting things I've ever done.

That's very interesting. In the current IS program, we only take one class a quarter.

Well as you know, IS started out to be a two year program when it began in the academic year of '69/ '70. I think the 71-72 year was the last time it was a two year program. Then it became a first year program only, where students were required to take two IS classes per quarter.

In teaching both IS and non-IS courses, did you see any differences in the types of students? If you had to label some of the general characteristics of the students, what would they be?

I would say that there was one major transition in terms of the students in my fifteen years of teaching, and that was when Integrated Studies became an honor's program. I was not in favor of that change, and I'm still not in favor of that change. The reason is that it changed the demographics of the students. Back in the 70s anybody could do Integrated studies, and the students were still really good students. Admission was not based on your major, your GPA, or your SAT scores. My impression was that back then there was a greater diversity among the students in terms of intellectual interests. After it became an honors program, the students became more directed in terms of their interests. If you looked at it as a class, there was more homogeneity in terms of interests and career goals of the students. There was more emphasis in science, less emphasis in humanities, and less willingness to experiment, to really try out radically different options and experiment with radical intellectual ideas of how one might be in the world. But of course I think if you're looking at this intellectually, you'd have to say that at some time there was some change in the student body as a whole going into the 80s because people became, generally speaking, more interested in career track than was true before. I always look back, and as you know when you do, you create your own history. This is one of the reasons to interview people and get all different perspectives. But from my point of view, the golden years of Integrated Studies were the '70s.

That theory seems to make sense, for over half of the students in my hall are hard science majors in engineering or biological sciences. On another note, are there any other particular memorable experiences you have had from teaching IS at Davis?

Another aspect of the first decade of Integrated Studies was the yearly retreat. I remember those occasions very fondly. They were wildly chaotic, but still a great deal of fun. The faculty would get together off campus with the students for a weekend-long retreat. One year we went over to the coast, over by the Russian River, and another year we went to a place between here and Napa. It was required of students to go, but this was probably not needed because there was some real bonding on this trip. A lot of it was play, and there was relatively little intellectual work during the weekend. There was some, of course, but mostly it was getting to know each other, cooking together, and eating together. During the weekend, there would always be some group sessions in which somebody would talk. But what I think everybody liked best was the hike during the day, where we'd go off and hike for three or four miles. Everybody was involved in the cooking of one of the meals. Afterwards there'd always be singing. Art McGuinness was a first class tenor and guitar player. Of course every year there were a number of IS students who had guitars. They'd all bring them and there would be this songfest. Those are the things that I remember liking so much. I think everybody got a lot out of them.

What else was unique about the IS program that you appreciated?

Overall, the most fun I have had here teaching and the most challenging courses that I've taught here have not been in the English Department but have been in Integrated Studies and Nature and Culture. One thing I appreciated about these programs was the incredible flexibility in what you teach. Both programs are set up so that they emphasize the interests of the instructor. So I was able to offer courses that I liked and was really interested in. The second thing I appreciated was the diversity of the students. In most of the lower division English classes I've taught, there was 100% English major students. In Integrated Studies, I had pre-Med, pre-dental, engineering, molecular biology, history, and English all in the same class. Getting to know students with wildly different backgrounds is generally a characteristic of Integrated Studies. That is what I really enjoyed about it the most.

Are you still in touch with any of those students from IS?

I think that this is another point to prove the success of the program, for I know several that I am still in touch with. I am still on a pretty close basis with at least seven former IS students from the '70s. We correspond, see each other at least once a year, and write letters to each other. One of the women from the '76 program is now my neighbor and I see her all the time. This is one of the best parts of IS. I made some really good friends in the program.