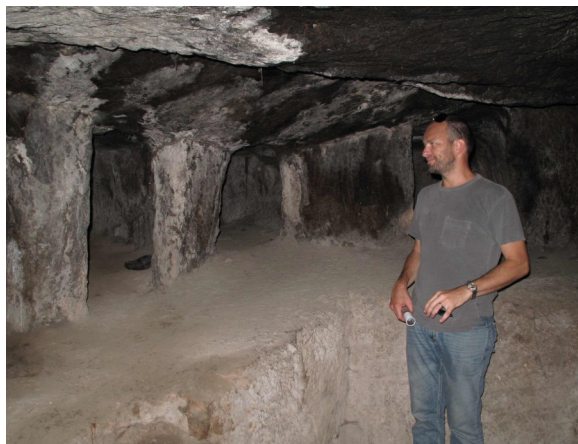


Instructor Spotlight: Sean Kirkland

A fragment attributed to Epicurus reads, “As far as death is concerned, we human beings all live in a city without walls.” That is, to be human is to be surrounded by death and incapable of fending it off or barring it access; to be human is to be dying. Much of human experience, with the application of relatively little reflection or analysis, can communicate precisely this sense of radical finitude. And yet, strangely, despite death’s insistent omnipresence, most of us will side with the seasoned wisdom of Rochefoucauld, who writes, “On neither the sun nor on death can one look with a steady eye.” How to make sense of this? Death is everywhere but we cannot seem to take it in.

In the Discover Chicago course I teach, “Death in the City,” we spend a quarter looking at death with precisely the kind of eye it requires—an *unsteady* eye. Jumping from one site to the next, moving from culture to culture, we find it hiding around every corner in the city. We find it tucked into the Couch family mausoleum, which even today is home to a few cadavers just behind the Chicago History Museum in Lincoln Park, likely unbeknownst to the dog-walkers and Frisbee-tossers buzzing around it. We brush up against it in a Buddhist “death of the ego” meditation



in Roscoe Village. We find it hiding right out in the open in the *Día de los muertos* celebration in Pilsen. And we feel it beneath our feet when we visit a city of the dead, the *necropolis* that is the enormous and beautiful green-space of Rosehill Cemetery.

Once our week touring the city is over and we have now come to see death as perhaps it should be seen—all around us but always in the shadows, only viewed obliquely or indirectly—we then take our unsteady eye and give it a history. We read texts of various genres, from *Gilgamesh* to Plato’s *Phaedo* to Mary Roach’s *Stiff*, from

Philippe Ariès’ historical study, *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, to George Saunders’ “Sea Oak,” the best short story about the salutary power of death in life (and male strippers) that my students are likely to come across all year. Through this unapologetically challenging, intellectually sophisticated, series of readings, we come to see our very own concepts and values as being something other than the universal, absolute, and ahistorical verities they sometimes seem. Rather, we learn that what we think of as true and right turns out to have a long and complex history indeed.

I am a scholar of ancient Greek philosophy primarily, and for this class I do appeal to some texts in my area. However, this class requires that I push myself to teach outside my comfort zone, in terms of historical period, geographical region, and literary genre. And this is always rewarding. In the end, my hope is that the students go away not merely with a different relation to death, but, precisely therefore, with a different, more thoughtful relation to life.

—Sean Kirkland
Associate Professor
Philosophy Department

From the Director

I have some wonderful news to pass along. Enrollment Management and Marketing reports that at DePaul, “The first-year retention rate continues to increase with a new, all-time high of 87.2% after 2 years of first-year retention rates at 85%.” (To compare, last year, the national average retention rate for four-year private institutions was 74%.) We know that there are many reasons why a student may or may not continue at a university, but we do know that the First-Year Program plays a role. This is thanks to the work you do in the classroom (and, in the case of Chicago Quarter, that classroom extends to the City of Chicago).

As we head into the last part of Winter Quarter (already!), we have a request and a suggestion:

If you are teaching a Focal Point Seminar this quarter, please take some time during the last week to reiterate the student success skills they have developed in the class, including the importance of revision in writing, the art of the seminar, and the ability to study a single topic from multiple perspectives. Also, remind them of where this is in DePaul’s Liberal Studies spine. Now that they’ve had Chicago Quarter and Focal Point Seminar during their first year, they are ready to move on to the Sophomore Seminar, which focuses on a topic through a multicultural lens.

Academic Affairs has let us know that this quarter, for the first time, you have the opportunity to allow students to complete the Online Teaching Evaluations during class on their mobile devices (phone, tablet, laptop). As you know, the rate of completion has gone down since the days when we used to do these in class on paper forms; this is one way to try to help improve that rate. If you do this, be sure to:

- give advance notice so students can bring a suitable device
- give them enough time to complete it
- leave the room for privacy

If any of the students don’t have an appropriate device, you can help them identify a publicly available DePaul computer they can use during that time.

We had a terrific Faculty Chat for Focal Point Seminar instructors on Feb. 13 in the LPC Student Center. 17 instructors shared interesting ideas about how to accomplish Focal Point learning outcomes. Justin Staley shared that he uses audio responses (using free downloadable [Audacity](#) software) to Dropbox submissions. Joe Phillips meets one-on-one with each student after the first draft. Another instructor has the Writing Center make a presentation before revisions. Several instructors have used Writing Fellows. Jan Hickey shared the seminar “roles” she assigns students; a new addition is the “Googler,” one person allowed to use an electronic device to look up online information for the group during the discussion.

Stay warm and thanks for the great work you do that helps DePaul retain its first-year class.

—Doug Long

Important Dates!

Receipts for WQ reimbursements are due within 60 days of the date of purchase or by Tuesday, March 17, whichever is earlier.