

Chairs' Corner -- January 2009
Studies at Rome Center and Sichuan University

TO: UW Foundation, Deans, University Advancement Staff
FROM: Daniel J. Evans, Chair, UW Foundation
Lyn Grinstein, Vice Chair, UW Foundation
Orin C. Smith, Immediate Past Chair, UW Foundation

Dear Friends,

At the risk of seeming frivolous, callous, or just plain clueless, we invite you this month to leave the gloom behind for a bit and do a little armchair traveling.

We begin in Rome. Think sunshine and blue skies; a lively, warm, and stylish population; beautiful buildings and monuments at every turn; a visible history that goes back almost three millennia. Now imagine that you are a UW undergraduate, fresh from the Pacific Northwest (fill in the appropriate climatic, social, and historical contrasts), encountering all this for the first time.

That is the happy situation of 80 students who have just started winter quarter at the UW's Rome Center. They are the winter cadre of some 350 UW students who come to the Center in a typical year, under the aegis of 17 or so departments (varying from year to year).

The Center's location and facilities, leased and renovated by the UW in the early 1980s, are stunning: three floors of the 17th-century Palazzo Pio, built on the ruins of the ancient Theater of Pompey (55 BC). The Campo de' Fiori, home to a busy open-air market and evening social scene, is right at the Center's door, and the major Roman monuments are a five- or ten-minute walk away.

This winter the Rome Center is hosting UW students in history, communication, the Comparative History of Ideas (CHID), and the Honors Program. Each discipline has its own curriculum and visiting faculty, but of course the common classroom is Rome (with nearby sites and towns) and the common subject is the enormous and complex influence still traceable to this cradle of Western civilization.

During other quarters, sponsoring departments might be architecture (which ran the very first UW Rome program in 1970 and is still the administrative home of the Center), classics, creative writing, Minority Affairs (during spring break), Italian, or the Law, Societies, and Justice Program. Language study is included in most programs, and most admit students, including graduate students, from other disciplines. CHID, for example, makes a point of including science students.

For Trina Deines, an architecture professor who spent 14 years as director of the Rome Center, the most important thing students take away is a sense of deep history. "That's

very important,” she says, “for people who live in a place like Seattle. It’s not just the history of Rome—it’s history itself—what the past means to the culture of a place. It’s so thrilling to watch those students making connections. Rome is a very inspiring place, and inspiration is what you hope for in education.”

And in life, of course. For centuries, buttoned-up northerners from cloudy climes have come to Italy and found new selves. Our students follow in their footsteps. “In Rome,” says Professor Mona Modiano, who has been teaching English and CHID courses at the Rome Center since 1995, “students discover a different way of life, one they could never have imagined. Everything is in the public sphere. They are immersed in this new world of pleasure, food, monuments, the beauty of the city and the art, and they are totally captivated.”

Five thousand miles away, in south central China, 13 other UW students are having a very different but equally intense experience. As exchange students at Sichuan University in Chengdu (their Chinese counterparts are spending a year at the UW), they have set their sights on bridging a linguistic and cultural divide much more daunting than that between Seattle and Rome. Most spend a full year in Chengdu, and all arrive with some preparation in Chinese (usually two years) and a research proposal worked out in advance with anthropology professor Steve Harrell, who helped plan the program in 1999 and now directs it.

Students mostly live with Chinese students or families. Their classes are taught by Sichuan University professors, so they have to adapt to an educational philosophy and practice very different from that in the U.S. Much of the classroom time is spent in rigorous study of the Chinese language, with progress cheered along by their host families and neighborhood merchants. (Chengdu has in common with Rome very friendly people and outstanding food.) By the end of the year, students are fluent—no small achievement.

The program welcomes applicants from any major, though they tend to come mainly from anthropology, international studies, Chinese, forest resources, and engineering. For their research projects, some students work in Chengdu—an art history major, for example, is currently exploring the contemporary art scene there. But some, adding yet another layer of adventure and cultural diversity to the year, travel to the remote village of Yangjuan (inhabited by the Yi, a poor ethnic minority) or to Jiuzhaigou National Park in the eastern Himalayas (whose people are Tibetan), both interdisciplinary UW research sites. Not your father’s junior year abroad.

“What we’re trying to do,” says Professor Harrell, “is prepare people for careers or lifetimes that are globally engaged.” Judging from a recent reunion back on the UW campus, the program is working. One attendee was Geoff Morgan, a senior honors student in international studies and civil and environmental engineering, who spent last year in Chengdu. The year he described was full of challenges—learning the language, negotiating tricky subjects with his (very kind) Chinese family, traveling five times to Yangjuan village (24 hours each way) to study and then rebuild a water system, and, by

the way, coping with the May 12 earthquake, which prompted him and a fellow student to start a relief organization. And when it was all over? “To tell you the truth,” he said, “I hated to leave. I’d go back in a heartbeat.”

What happens to students in Rome and Chengdu could not happen on the University of Washington campus. But it also could not happen, for most of these students, *without* the University of Washington. And it is really just a special case of what universities regularly do: they take students to a new country—the country of history, of science, of literature or law—and show them new possibilities for their own lives.

Preserving hope in dark times, though you will not find it any official mission statement, is among the great public benefits of universities. Not that the University of Washington—students, faculty, staff, programs—will not suffer significant pain and loss from this economic collapse. It is unclear, for example, where Steve Harrell will find the funds to sustain his very frugal Sichuan exchange program. But as we watch, astonished, while so many of our institutions melt away faster than snow from Seattle streets, it is worth reminding ourselves that universities and their good works will survive. Even now, they are quietly preparing a hopeful generation for a better time.

Dan, Lyn, and Orin

Looking Back

- **Contributions July 1, 2008 through December 31, 2008 total \$160,591,699.**
- The December Report of Contributions is attached and contains fundraising details.

Looking Ahead

- **Friday, January 30, 2009.** Foundation Board Meeting, 8:30 a.m. coffee; 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting.
- **Friday, April 24, 2009.** Foundation Board Meeting, 8:30 a.m. coffee; 9:00-11:00 a.m. meeting.
- **Friday, September 11, 2009.** Foundation Board Meeting, 8:00 a.m. coffee; 8:30-11:30 a.m. meeting.