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Faculty profile: Paula O'Loughlin

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Faculty profile: Paula O'Loughlin

Summary: With faculty from all over the world, it is interesting to hear about paths to Morris.

(May 23, 2011)-The University of Minnesota, Morris has faculty, staff, and students from all over the world. If you took a random sample of an average class on campus, you would probably find a room filled with Minnesotans with a sprinkling of other states and a couple countries. So while it's not unusual to meet people from any number of different places on campus, it is interesting to hear about their paths to Morris. Paula O'Loughlin, professor of political science and Academic Center for Enrichment (ACE) director, is a good example.

The road to Morris

O'Loughlin is originally from the East Coast with a family history steeped in education. Both her parents and all of her grandparents were teachers. Her maternal grandfather was the superintendent of public schools in San Francisco, California, New Haven, Connecticut, and New Rochelle, New York, and ended his career as dean at St. John's University in New York. Her godfather was president of Yale University. So how does someone with close personal ties to East Coast educational institutions end up teaching and advising students in Morris?

After attending Smith College, an all-women's school on the East Coast, O'Loughlin attended the University of Minnesota to pursue a doctorate in political science. During her time as a doctoral candidate, she taught a few courses at Macalester College in St. Paul and Carleton College in Northfield, and realized that a small liberal arts college was where she wanted to be. After interviewing for different positions at private liberal arts colleges, she began to wonder if she really was right for such institutions. Then she landed an interview at Morris, and that's all it took. Says Paula, "I took a walk around the campus the night before my interview and realized, this is the place for me. It was non-pretentious, real, and steeped in intellectual excitement."

The person with all the connections

Since coming to Morris in 1996, O'Loughlin has taken on plenty of official duties and positions, but she is perhaps best known for her work with students outside of the classroom. As Roland Guyotte, professor of history and O'Loughlin's mentor, puts it, "Paula has a remarkable knack for getting people together to work on things." Whether it's finding opportunities for students to work on campus or elsewhere, she constantly finds new opportunities for students to succeed. Guyotte estimates that O'Loughlin has coordinated upwards of 150 student internships and positions in Washington, D.C., and across the country. Jen Zych-Herrmann '00, Morris retention coordinator, who regularly works with O'Loughlin on campus issues, says, "Paula is the one with all the connections."

O'Loughlin tirelessly seeks connections with Morris alumni and professionals in various fields who can benefit students by offering internships, jobs, and college and career advice. She credits the late Tom McRoberts '68, a longtime Morris staff member and mentor to many members of the campus community, with laying the groundwork for the kind of work that she does.

"Usually," O'Loughlin says, "in any situation, I just think, what would Tom do?"

McRoberts was known for vigorously working to help students and Morris, so it's no surprise that O'Loughlin has built a similar reputation. Pareena Lawrence, professor of economics, Division of the Social Sciences chair, and friend, knows how much O'Loughlin does because she approves some of that work. "She'll sometimes come into my office," says Lawrence, "and try to get approved to teach 28 credits in a single semester, so that a student can do this or another student can do that. And I just have to tell her no, because otherwise she would have no time to sleep!"

Business but casual

Many of the things that fill O'Loughlin schedule on a given day are personal meetings with students, but she also has official business to carry out through her many positions. O'Loughlin is the only Morris faculty member to currently chair a University of Minnesota Senate committee (Judicial), she is the director of the ACE office, which helps students study abroad and work on undergraduate research among other things, and chairs Morris's Consultative Committee while also serving as the discipline coordinator for political science. While she is well suited for each position, she is perhaps best suited to be the chair of Consultative Committee, which gives consultation on a wide variety of campus issues to faculty, staff, students, and administrators. Her selfless nature makes it a perfect fit, because as Guyotte puts it, "The consultative chair is meant to work quietly, rarely getting praise or attention for their accomplishments or work."

And at the end of the day, O'Loughlin is just a person who loves working with students and drinking diet soda. Her best quality is probably the way she is approachable to anyone and everyone, especially students. When you see her on campus, she's usually talking with a student about an application she is helping them with or about the Twins-Yankees playoff series last fall. Like many professors at Morris, she goes by her first name in the classroom and around campus, Paula, and doesn't ask people to call her 'Doctor Paula.' O'Loughlin explained it like this, "The only time I called myself a doctor was when I called my dad to tell him he was talking to the other Dr. O'Loughlin."

Her teaching and advising styles focus on getting to know the student as well as she can so that she can help them find the right opportunity. And with 37 official advisees, about half of which are not in her political science discipline, she works to get to know a lot of students. When asked to comment on how many she had, O'Loughlin was quick to not accept any praise and point out the fact that, "There are tons of faculty with just as many, if not more, than me."

But as Nate Christensen '11, a student who has worked with O'Loughlin on numerous study abroad and scholarship projects, points out, "She really understands her advisees' abilities and interests and works hard to help them get the best out of these by finding them opportunities like scholarships, abroad programs, etc."

If you see Paula O'Loughlin walking around campus wearing her "Smith" stocking cap with a cup of diet Pepsi or Coke in her hand, you no longer need to wonder how she ended up in the middle of west central Minnesota. And while her path from the East Coast probably wasn't the most likely of journeys, we can be very happy that she took that walk on the Morris campus more than 14 years ago and felt she was home.

Through personal and academic discovery, the University of Minnesota, Morris provides opportunities for students to grow intellectually, engage in community, experience environmental stewardship and celebrate diversity. A renewable and sustainable educational experience, Morris prepares graduates for careers, for advanced degrees, for lifelong learning, for work world flexibility in the future, and for global citizenship. Learn more about Morris at morris.umn.edu or call 888-866-3382.