

An ILS Pioneer reflects on the first ILS class and today's challenges

I was a member of the first ILS class in 1948. We called ourselves Pioneers. Lately I have been reading national articles about the decline of liberal arts education and whether a college education is worth the cost. I find this very disturbing.

This concern prompted me to attend a recent "Thursday After Class w/ ILS" at Meiklejohn House. It was described as a meeting "to unwind with an informal discussion with fellow ILS students, TAs, and professors after a long week of class." During the discussion I asked whether stories about declining interest in liberal arts applied to ILS. The response was a rather dispiriting lament about the status of the ILS program. They commented on the decline in support for the liberal arts across the campus as well. I also learned that the program has changed a lot since the late 40's and has been "restructured" before.

I decided to write to the Dean of L&S and the Chair of ILS. I thought it might be useful for them to hear about my ILS experience and how important it has been in my life. The following paragraphs are a pared down version of what I communicated to them.

During my senior year in high school I learned about a new UW-Madison program starting in the fall of 1948 called Integrated Liberal Studies. At the time I had no clear idea what I wanted to do with my life. In a way, I was probably going to college to find my future by learning about the world and how it worked. I wanted to try to become an educated, well rounded, interested, and interesting person. I believed a person with that experience would find a way to make a good living and become a productive and contributing member of society. ILS sounded like just the right program for me.

I arrived on campus in the fall of 1948 as a 17-year-old farm boy. I lived in the dorms surrounded by WWII veterans. (Those veterans proved to be an important part of my liberal education too.) But the Integrated Liberal Studies Program was the highlight of my education. Greek and Roman Culture was one of the first semester courses. Walter Agard was the Lecturer. He was also my quiz instructor. One morning I picked up a copy of Life Magazine and found my quiz instructor's picture on the cover. Walter Agard was being featured in an article about the country's great teachers. I remember how astonished I was to have this acclaimed teacher in my freshman year.

The ILS faculty took the word "integrated" seriously. In our first year we all noticed a distinguished looking silver haired gentleman attending every lecture. In our sophomore year we learned that he was our biology teacher, Professor Lowell Noland. He explained to us that he wanted to know what his colleagues were teaching so that he could make connections in his own teaching. Not all the professors were as diligent, but they all made cross-references to other courses where appropriate. This was not generally true of the other courses I took at UW-Madison.

ILS in those years was not just about the classics and western civilization. We had seven credits of biology and four of science in a course called Physical Universe. There were also courses called The International Scene, Modern Industrial Society, and Transition to Industrial Society. (For the entire course list, see the article available on the ILS website by former ILS Chair Michael Hinden. http://ils.wisc.edu/documents/archives/Hinden_article_1982.pdf at page 67.)

ILS was then a two-year course with a core curriculum of about 12 credits per semester. All ILS students were required to take these courses. As a result, we became well acquainted with one another. The teachers were among the best in the University. I had the feeling of being enrolled in a small liberal arts college in the middle of a very large and great university. Because of the resources of this large campus, I was introduced to ballet, symphony orchestras, theater, and amazing diversity. For me, it was ideal. I could not imagine a more favorable environment for learning.

The first section of the 1982 paper by Michael Hinden is entitled "The Recent Crisis." It appears that the University has to rediscover the value of studies that are integrated and liberal every decade or two. I believe it is time to renew the vows and restore the passion. I am a little old to volunteer to get involved in the challenge, but for heaven's sake I hope someone is willing and able to fight to support something as valuable as liberal arts education and the Integrated Liberal Studies Program. I think that if the University administration looked at the careers of ILS graduates over the years, they would find that the investment has paid off handsomely for the University and for the country.

Since writing to Dean Scholz and ILS Chair Mike Vanden Heuvel, I have received their replies and talked with others and have learned that the problem is far more complex and far reaching than I thought. I have also come to the conclusion that ILS is in a state of great uncertainty – and risk. There is talk of restructuring, relocating and possibly folding ILS into some other department. I find this all a bit unsettling. The end result of these choices could be a good thing, but there are so many possibilities that it is hard to tell what might happen. Clearly, the problems that concern the College of Letters and Science are not limited to ILS. The concern appears to be that students are listening to the charges that liberal arts will not lead to a job and so they are moving to engineering, finance and other courses they perceive will offer better job opportunities. This creates challenges for the University and its many constituencies. There certainly will be changes – and there will be winners and losers.

I am concerned that some of the possible outcomes will seriously curtail the ILS program. My own experience was so valuable to me that I'd rather not let this happen. For that reason, I have decided to keep informed. I will pay very close attention to developments and provide whatever support and encouragement I can to the program. I will also communicate my concerns to those I know at the University of Wisconsin. If you valued your ILS experience, you may wish to do the same.

Respectfully,

Richard L. Olson,
ILS 1948-50