OBERLIN IN LONDON

Summer 2014, Issue 1

OBERLIN-IN-LONDON: THE JEWEL IN OUR INTERNATIONAL CROWN
By Marvin Krislov, President, Oberlin College

AS A RHODES SCHOLAR who benefited from a transformational experience at Oxford, I understand on a very personal level the value of international experiences within a liberal arts education. Oberlin offers many excellent opportunities to study abroad, but none as longstanding and celebrated as the Danenberg Oberlin-in-London program.

For more than 40 years, the Oberlin-in-London program has immersed generations of our students in one of the world’s great cultural epicenters, offering the rare opportunity to see, touch, and feel what is being read and discussed in class.

In fact, the city of London becomes the classroom. Students visit the birthplaces and homes of the authors whose works they are reading and walk through the places where these stories are set. They tour museums where the paintings of the great masters become tangible, and explore the halls where critical political theories evolved.

I have visited our program on several occasions and have been impressed by the depth and quality of our students’ experiences. The opportunity to share such an intimate academic experience alongside Oberlin faculty and peers—in which London serves as both setting and central character—is described by alumni as life-changing, even decades later. It is one of the most intensive, hands-on, immersive programs available to our students, and represents the very best of Oberlin.

By Marvin Krislov, President, Oberlin College

40 YEARS OF OBERLIN IN LONDON
By David Walker, Professor of English and Creative Writing, Chair of the Danenberg Oberlin-in-London Program Committee

AS I SAID IN THE WONDERFUL video Daniel Schloss made for our website a couple of years ago, the London Program remains one of the crown jewels of Oberlin. Since 1974 (40 years!), Oberlin has been sending small groups of students to study in one of the world’s great capital cities, often with life-changing results. Most of you reading this inaugural newsletter have had the pleasure of participating. As the chair of the faculty committee that oversees the program, I’m delighted to tell you that Oberlin-in-London continues to thrive.

This past semester, English professor Nick Jones and biology professor Roger Laushman led 25 students in a team-taught course on nature and culture in 19th-century England, as well as individual classes on biological diversity and on the intersection of poetry and museums. Meanwhile, we’re already busy recruiting for the urban studies semester to be taught in 2015, and faculty members from English and history are beginning to plan for 2016. Every semester’s curriculum is unique; what unites them all is the conviction that to study British culture, society, and history using the laboratory of London is to enhance an Oberlin education in thrilling and powerful ways.

We are particularly grateful to those of you who have supported our efforts by joining the Friends of the Danenberg Oberlin-in-London Program, which is described on the last page of this newsletter.

We hope to make this newsletter an annual publication—please let us know if you’d like to see it continue. If you’re on Facebook, please also join the Oberlin-in-London Program Alums page and share your news, memories, and reflections there. We’re always happy to hear from you.

Holly Thompson, Matt Utterback, and Josh Grubb Robinson, from the spring 1993 London program, reminisce at the reunion open house in May.
LONDON JOURNALS

By Walter Gordon ’14

AS HARD AS IT IS for me to believe, it’s been two years since I studied in London. Every once in a while I look back at the journals that Professor David Walker asked us to keep during our trip and find myself surprised by things I did, saw, and wrote about—things I have somehow forgotten to varying degrees.

Certain experiences have stuck with me quite intensely—reading A Handful of Dust on the tube, seeing David Holzman’s Diary at the BFI, the Hans-Peter Feldmann retrospective at the Serpentine Gallery—but my journal is really the most powerful tool I have for remembering London. What has remained more profound than any individual moment in the city is the state of mind and the approach to the world I learned to value during my time in London.

The Oberlin-in-London program made me confident in my ability to walk into a gallery or museum and get more out of the visit than a sense that “this looks cool” or “I like that.” It taught me how to articulate interests, affinities, and critical insights. I learned a new way of being in a place—be it a gallery, a city, or elsewhere—and how to take in the world around me with more curious eyes. After London I found myself awake to the richness of my own experience in a way that I had not previously. It took being in a place that “had a lot of stuff” immediately and apparently around me to teach me to strive for equally meaningful and intellectually engaging experiences everywhere else.

In London I learned what it meant to let myself wander, and at the same time found out what it meant to live focused on the world around me. I felt a simultaneous sense of aimlessness and an active “working” with the city I was in. This sense was also characteristic of the feeling of serendipitous productivity I felt in the two English classes taught by David Walker. We gathered four times every week to discuss whatever play we had most recently seen or whatever modernist masterpiece we happened to read that week.

In those classes—which, despite their length, always felt too short—David would lead us (in his own special, almost invisible mode of leadership) as we twisted through complex, always illuminating discussions of Woolf, Lawrence, Edward Bond, or Jacobean revenge. My journal of these class sessions can be found in the margins of my books, in the sentences I underlined or the couplets I circled. As I get closer and closer to “heading out into the world,” as I am taught to believe I will do (as if Oberlin and all of the diverse individuals here do not, somehow, belong to “the world”), I imagine I’ll return to these books, to my margin notes and journals, for a reminder of what it is like to think with others and explore the edges of my own experience.

By Devon Rettew '13

LONDON IS NOT WHERE YOU'D EXPECT people to say they spent junior year abroad. Certainly, if you had asked me where I would have expected to be during my junior year, I would not have said London. In fact, I didn't even know Oberlin had a London program.

My introduction to the program was as an English program; so, at that point, based on my majors, East Asian studies and politics, I expected that I’d be in China. However, once I learned from Professor Marc Blecher that the politics department had a program on social class, my mind was made up.

A comprehensive list of what made the London politics program great would require writing a book (an opportunity that did in fact present itself on the London program, but more on that later).

However, here are a few of the highlights…

The Setting: Having grown up in New York City, I am a proud and adamant city snob. The program offered the rigors and thrills of the Oberlin academic experience in the context of city life—my ideal environment. Classes were held one block from the British Museum. Pubs opened at 3:00 in the afternoon, providing for enjoyable and uninhibited discussions after class… all academic, of course. There were frequent opportunities to “take in a show” in the evening.

Though at first blush these perks of city life might seem unrelated to the study of class politics, nothing could be further from the truth.

There is no better place to study class politics than London. As we soon learned, the concept of “class” has affected nearly every aspect of English life, including politics, popular culture, literature, and art. As our founding fathers recognized, British society has long been marked by class politics. And London—the center of British society—is the perfect place to study class. Nowhere else in the world could students go on a five-day field trip to the north of England to experience the location of the 1984-85 coal miners’ strike, one of the last overt instances of class warfare, in England at least.

Dynamics among students: London was the “where,” but my fellow students were the “who.” Everyone who participated in the London program was amazingly smart; what else would you expect of a group of 11 Obies? And the program gave us a chance to study, live, travel, and just hang out together. This intimacy was initially billed as one of the program’s potential downsides, since the point of a traditional study-abroad program is to get to know “the natives.” But the London program offered that and more. The size of the program encouraged friendships that carried over long beyond the end of the program.

Our Book: As alluded to above, the academic focus of the program was What the English Know as Class, a book that that we wrote, edited, and published on our own. Each student conducted original field research and wrote a chapter about a subject of interest to us. Marc was a font of information and an inexhaustible source of contacts and suggestions. The range of subjects we studied was astonishing (buy the book and see).

It was also exhilarating that Marc had the confidence in us—well-placed, as it turned out—to conduct original field work on the subjects we studied. And Marc, of course, was another true highlight of the program: working and living with him as friends and colleagues as much as students.

I know it took place during my junior year, but the London program was, in a very real sense, the culmination of my Oberlin experience. I think of it often, and of the people who shared the experience with me, and I am grateful every day for the way all of the factors I discussed above continue to shape me and my view of the world.

Devon (third from right) and fellow politics students meet Anne Scargill and Betty Cook, leaders of Women Against Pit Closures.

Miner and National Union of Miners leader Dave Douglass explaining “pit ponies” to politics students.
LONDON 2013: MAPS REAL, INTELLECTUAL AND PERSONAL

By Emma Eisenberg '15

A FEW WEEKS AGO, I received an email from Transport for London; never has news of a 48-hour Tube strike made me so happy. It had been months since my last alert, so this unexpected message—probably quite an inconvenient one for Londoners—was extremely welcome. It reminded me of taking the Circle line for runs in Regent’s Park, the Northern line for free concerts at St. Martin’s-in-the-Fields, and the 45 bus for tea at the Yumchaa off Tottenham Court Road.

It also reminded me of sprinting across intersections at Trafalgar Square in 3-inch heels, when my inability to read a Tube map made me late to Macbeth. Such charming memories attach themselves to public transport.

Of course, the 2013 Oberlin-in-London program gave me more than a London road map: it gave me an intellectual map to underwrite it. As an English major with a 19th-century focus and a fair number of political theory courses under my belt, the politics and sociology program worked brilliantly for me. Reading political theory with Professor Harlan Wilson (who, to our loss, is retiring after this year) and British history with Associate Professor Veljko Vujacic was both an intellectual pleasure and a welcome break. Oberlin is wonderful, but the campus and the circumscribed habits one acquires there—academic, personal, or physical—can begin to feel constricitive after a few years. A beauty of going on the Oberlin-in-London program was that even while taking a break from campus life, my travel companions and I took the best of Oberlin with us. That is to say, we brought wonderful people.

This advantage was always clear, whether we were discussing Jeremy Bentham in the classroom on Great Russell Street, or going on field trips to Ironbridge in Shropshire and Regent’s Canal, street markets, the Tower, and Parliament in London. With the lovely Donna Vinter, many of us also went to see weekly plays, featuring famous actors onstage (such as Judi Dench in Peter and Alice) and occasionally in the audience (Damien Lewis of Homeland was at our performance of The Low Road at the Royal Court Theatre). We also had the opportunity to meet the Oberlin Club of London and talk to alumni who had put down roots in the city we were visiting. This experience of learning outside the classroom was immensely important to me. I discovered that I could be both a scholar and an enterprising, commuting person—or rather, I discovered that to be a really good scholar I have to be that out-in-the-world person.

As someone with a tendency to treat a library carrel as a sealed bunker, I found London to be an important reminder that culture accrues to buildings and streets as well as to literature: John Stuart Mill distributed contraception pamphlets in the slums, Marx sat in the Reading Room at the British Museum, and Virginia Woolf’s Septimus Smith flings himself onto the railings of a Bloomsbury boarding house. It is much easier to “historicize” now that I have walked in a city with two thousand years of history. I look forward to applying that lesson—almost as much as I look forward to going back to London.
MEETING, THINKING, AND DRINKING: THE FIRST DANENBERG OBERLIN-IN-LONDON COLLOQUIUM

By Donna Vinter, Resident Director of Oberlin-in-London

IN THE SPIRIT OF E.M. FORSTER’S DIC'TUM—“Only connect”—the inaugural Danenberg Oberlin-in-London Alumni-Faculty-Student Colloquium took place on February 20—or, as we say in London, 20 February—at the gorgeous Parcel Yard pub in the stunning new Kings Cross Station.

The program has always striven to make connections between disciplines; between continents; and between small campus, intensive, liberal arts Oberlin College and the wide-open, extensive, three-dimensional encyclopedia of human culture that is London Global City.

The February 20 colloquium, to be repeated on a yearly basis, was a new venture in connection-making, formal and informal. Nicholas Baumgartner ’99, trustee and Oberlin alum, emceed the formal side, during which faculty directors of the current DOILP made short presentations about their current academic research and interests.

Roger Laushman from the biology department gave a lively account of the “sixth extinction,” a human-induced event that we are currently experiencing, and the relationship between invasive species and problems of conservation and biodiversity. Rising above the lack of PowerPoint facilities or other visual aids, he presented brilliant word pictures of the subject and the research questions it poses.

Nick Jones of the English department followed on with a thought-provoking talk about disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity at Oberlin. Teaching at Oberlin, in his account, has evolved from its early days when learning occurred in a highly non-disciplinary mode—many courses being geared to the study of broadly intellectual themes and texts in a sort of “great books” mode—to a more discipline-based structure, certified by the PhD programs in which faculty are nowadays trained. But recently that paradigm is being challenged by the growth of interdisciplinary pursuits such as environmental studies and by the widespread engagement in interdisciplinary teaching and learning within the traditional departments (including such activities as teaching within the Allen Memorial Art Museum and on the Danenberg Oberlin-in-London Program itself).

In true Oberlin fashion, both talks were punctuated by lively interventions from the audience and followed up by equally animated Q & A. One student noted, for example, the contrast between the rather serene, high-minded idea of learning of those early Oberlin years and the stresses of needing to prepare oneself for the job market today, suggesting that such real-world pressure might still operate to keep students more narrowly focused on learning goals. But there were many perspectives and connections proffered in an animated atmosphere of sharing.

Finally, 2014 DOILP student Claire Yeske talked engagingly about what it is like to be an Oberlin student today—the joys, opportunities, and, yes, stresses. Then it was time for informal connections and refreshments. The “Waiting Room,” our private room in the Parcel Yard looking down onto Kings Cross station tracks, buzzed with conversation. My strong impression is that everyone had a stimulating time. We’ll certainly do it again!
TEN YEARS AGO, in the midst of a budget crisis, Oberlin-in-London was saved by the massive outpouring of support from alumni, students, and parents, including many of you. To help assure that the program will never again find itself in that position, we created an endowment. The fund is supported by the Friends of the Danenberg Oberlin-in-London Program, to which so many of you have also contributed in recent years. We ask each of you to be our Friend year in and year out so that the program will always be a part of Oberlin—and, we like to think, one of its very best parts.

Income from our endowment enhances the program in two ways: by contributing directly to our programming budget (to help pay for theater and concert tickets, field trips, museum admission fees, guest speakers, and so on), and by providing special Danenberg financial grants to students who might not be able to afford the program otherwise. Your gifts also provide tangible evidence of the support of alums and friends for the program, which is vitally important to ensure its future in a time of rapidly rising costs.

Unlike other such “membership” schemes, we have no sliding scale of donations and benefits—no mugs, sweatshirts, exclusive dinners, or other prizes. What we do have to offer you is the abiding knowledge that you are helping 25 Oberlin students experience the thrill of learning and living in London each and every year.

That said, this year we can offer all our 2014 Friends who contribute $100 (or more!) a copy of *What the English Know as Class*, the book that the politics students of the 2012 program produced based on their field research. If you’d like a copy, please say so in the Special Instructions box on the online donation page. Ta!

PLEASE CLICK TO JOIN THE FRIENDS OF THE LONDON PROGRAM.