Oberlin’s Watson-Winning Ways: Jared Johnson Makes It 29 Years in a Row

For 29 years in a row—since the first awards were granted in 1969—at least one Oberlin student has won a Watson Fellowship. This year’s winner is Jared Johnson, a fifth-year double-degree student from Portsmouth, Ohio.

Johnson will travel to England this summer to study choral music in English society. He won’t return to the U.S. for a year and until he has heard, he says, “as many good choirs as I can find.”

Choral music is everywhere in England, says Johnson, at levels that range from amateur professional. The college English major and con organ major is most interested in learning about amateur groups, including blue-collar choirs established at the beginning of the industrial revolution by factories to improve the lives of the workers. What about English society, he wonders, has caused so many groups, so it will be important, he says, to include choirs in rural areas as well—to see if they’re different and how and why.”

Johnson says he sees the Watson Fellowship as “a wonderful opportunity—the time to do something you really want to do and could not do any other way.”

Choral music “raises” an individual, says Johnson, by allowing a person to produce in a group what one person alone cannot. Johnson learned about English workers’ choirs through Kay Thomson, director of major gifts.

Andy Evans, vice president for finance, keeps his cool while NBC-TV conducts and tapes an interview.

Office of Communications Cops a Coup

If you watched the news on Channel 3 last Tuesday evening, you saw some familiar faces. NBC Nightly News aired a segment April 1 that featured Oberlin College in the first episode of “Class of 2001,” a series on “the high cost of higher education.”

The three minutes and 15 seconds of air time were the result of two weeks of nearly around-the-clock work, says Alan Moran, director of communications. The Office of Communication’s news-services staff put many hours into the project, says Moran, and the entire office participated in some way.

“We didn’t have complete control; there were some things we wanted included that weren’t, and some things we didn’t want included that were. But over all we were pleased with the piece and with the positive responses we’re receiving from alumni and friends of the College.”

The time leading up to the taping was “a two-week courtship,” says Moran, “where we were in competition with 30 or 40 other suitors from U.S. schools” for the lead piece. To fight off the competition, Moran was never farther away from the show’s producer than the cellular phone in his back pocket or on his night stand. Over dozens of telephone conversations, Moran and his staff gave the NBC news staff a steady stream of information about Oberlin: general information, specific information, information about financial matters, about the faculty, about the facilities, present and planned. Moran and his news-services crew helped the television staff focus on “what Oberlin is strong in,” knowing all along that being open to coverage also put the College in the field of potential dangers.

“The next episode in the series showed a Smith College graduate whose parents took out a second mortgage on their house to pay for her education—and they had shots of her rummaging around in dumpsters.

Planning: Into the Home Stretch

In two days (April 13) the Planning Advisory Committee will meet to plan the final phase of the longrange planning process, and two days later (April 15) President Nancy Dye will introduce the proposed plan to the General Faculty at its regular April meeting. That week the president’s office will distribute the report across campus.

Students will discuss the planning document in small groups between April 21 and 30. On April 29 the General Faculty will get together for a special meeting to discuss the document.

The next day, April 30, an Administrative and Professional Staff break will be devoted to discussing it. Divisional faculty meetings—May 6 for the College Faculty, May 13 for the Conservatory Faculty—will likely continue discussing the planning document, and the General Faculty will pick up the topic again May 20. The faculty is expected, at the conclusion of the May 20 meeting, to accept the document.

The last step will occur June 12-14, when the trustees review the planning document.
Faculty and Staff Notes

Debra Chermonte, director of admissions, reports good news in several areas. Here are some of the statistics:

- Like many of the nation’s most selective institutions, Chermonte says, Oberlin is seeing a decline in regular-decision applications. Oberlin’s decline is 2 percent (3641 applications in 1997 versus 3720 in 1996). Applications in all categories are down 1 percent overall.
- Chermonte expects the admissions cycle to end with a selection (admit) rate slightly lower than that of 1996—around 64 percent compared to 65 percent in 1996. Knowing that Oberlin will have accepted 40 percent of its applicants. (They yield the rate at which accepted students who enroll; this figure is not calculated until fall.)
- Chermonte expects that that yield will be around 65 percent; therefore, eligibility numbers will be released in June. Oberlin will accept 40 percent of its applicants.
- Six hundred and seventy-seven students of color applied to Oberlin this year, accounting for 17 percent of the applicant pool—about the same as a year ago.
- The configuration within the groups is somewhat different, however. Applications from African Americans were up 247, 4 percent; Latinx, 124, 10 percent; Asian Americans 205, down 12 percent, and native Americans 21, up 91 percent.

Watson...

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$150,000 award will help assure that he remains what he calls a "low-maintenance guest" during his stays abroad.

Sixty Watson fellows were chosen this year nationwide from more than a thousand applicants, students attending liberal arts colleges. They were selected for their academic leadership potential, willingness to immerse themselves in new cultures, and the creativity and personal significance of the projects they proposed.

"Oberlin is one of the few schools to have been among the colleges invited to nominate students since the beginning," says David Walker, professor of English and Oberlin’s Watson Fellows coordinator. "All applications, criteria, and awards have changed very little over the years—at least since 1972, when I was involved with it. For so many I’ve been helpful to administra-
tor fellowships.") chonson is the 59th Oberlin student to win a Watson.

Senior Amy Evans, from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is an alternate and will be eligible for an award if any of the original 60 Watson fellows declines the fellowship.

The music written for amateurs gives a hint as to what women did in mid-18th-century France," says Catharina. The recording is on the Dorian Discovery label, DIS 83030.

"Leon Podis, associate professor of history, recently received a letter from a graduate student for the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s prominent Williamirk program.

The letter confirmed what Tisha Turk ’95, a former Oberlin writing tutor now a graduate student at Wisconsin, said to Len earlier: that Wisconsin is modeling its program—which will have its first group of writing fellows this coming fall—largely on Oberlin’s peer writing tutoring program. Len initiated Oberlin’s tutoring program in 1976. Around the squared cover stock for the 20th anniversary of the program in its summer 1996 issue.

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Jane Macarthy Saw El Salvador's Election Up Close

By Carol Ganzel

When El Salvadorans voted on March 16, safety and security dispatcher Jane Macarthy was there as a visiting observer.

Macarthy took a week's vacation time for her trip to El Salvador, which was sponsored by Christ Episcopal Church in Oberlin and the Episcopal Peace Fellowship. She arrived seven days before the election, stayed with local people, and joined other observers from various organizations and countries for the special election in the capital city of San Salvador.

Her preparation time for the trip—her first foreign travel—was short. On February 11, she remembers, W. Dean Wolfe, Episcopal Church member (and emeritus associate professor of speech) asked her to substitute for a person from Michigan who had been scheduled to go. After a few days' consideration, Macarthy agreed. She then had three weeks to get her passport, visa, and shots—and arrange to board her dog. Fortunately, she already knew Spanish, having learned it in her high school and taken more courses at Lorain County Community College.

Macarthy's training sessions in El Salvador provided information about voting procedures and guidelines for behavior on election day. Most of the disturbing behavior they had seen, she said, anyone had to intimidate them, but Macarthy's professional training for her Oberlin work had already taught her that.

The polls she watched were in Quetzalteque, a municipality with a population of about 86,000 spread over a wide area, one of 262 municipalities in El Salvador. Voting took place in three schools, all within a block of each other. The buildings were “nothing like our schools,” Macarthy says. They had walls, ceilings, and entryways, but no doors and no screens on the windows.

On election day she and other observers arrived at the schools at 6 a.m. to be sure all the necessary materials were there—ballots, ballot boxes, and registration lists. The ballots listed candidates from 14 parties, which had all been invited to send representatives to the polling places, but only the last three parties were represented in Quetzalteque. One party represented by the FMLN, (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front). Officials from these parties sat at one of two tables in each room, and nonpartisan Salvadoran election officials—members of the National Electoral Tribunal—were from room to room during the day.

While the polls were open from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., Macarthy and other observers looked out for infractions, which might have included anything from wearing T-shirts with candidates' names to trying to vote under a dead person's name. Eligible voters had an ID card with a name that matched one on the registration list. Macarthy saw no major infractions but some irregularities, such as mismatches between the ID card and the registration name.

In the segment featuring Oberlin, rather than question the value of education was demonstrated on this campus, Oberlin College, says Moran, "This school has always been a model for the grace aspect."

“The richness of a liberal arts education was demonstrated on this campus, Oberlin College,” says Moran. "This school has always been in the big leagues, and [NBC’s coverage] showed that we’re in the big leagues.”

Why was Moran successful in getting Oberlin portrayed in a favorable light? Much had to do, he says, with “saying the right thing in every phone call over two weeks.” Also important, he says, was recognizing that the NBC employees needed to be treated “like regular people: they’re doing a job.” Kevin Snos, show's field producer made a point of telling Moran that he appreciated the open and honest way the Office of Communications staff dealt with the TV staff.

Part of the success of the event also stems from the cooperation of other campus, says Moran. “Oberlin, besides the Office of Communications staff, he credits David Orr, professor of African-American music; Robert Shinn, professor of piano; Andrew Bertoni as the Piano Shop technical assistant; David Benning, Danforth Professor of Biology; Wendell Logan, professor of African-American music; Robert Shinn, professor of piano; Andrew Bertoni as the Piano Shop technical assistant; Pamela Stawasz, admissions counselor; and Andrew Bertoni as the Piano Shop technical assistant.”

Correction

The photo caption on page 1 of the March 28 issue failed to identify mudslinger John Wetzel as the PianoShop technical assistant.
Some years ago, with the support and encouragement of William Fuchman, professor of chemistry, I began investigating whether there is a threshold score on the mathematics SAT test (SAT-M) necessary for achieving a passing grade in Chemistry 101, general chemistry. Such a threshold score, if it existed, would be helpful for planning by academic advisors and students.

The course is important in our college life. Every fall about 6 percent of the students register for it, and Chem 101 is the first scientific course encountered by students, a vital component in the study of several academic disciplines, and a requirement for admission to medical school.

Most authors of published studies of relationships between general chemistry grades and SAT-M scores have focused on the correlation of grades and scores. The results of those studies indicated that students with high mathematical scores tend to achieve high grades, but the broad distribution of grades corresponding to any particular SAT-M score produces a rather unreliable prediction of grade based on score alone. Nevertheless, mathematical scores have considerable predictive value. For example, Andrews and Andrews of the University of Virginia concluded in a 1979 article that a high score does not guarantee a good grade, but a low score is a strong indicator of a low grade, particularly if the score is very low.

After analyzing SAT-M scores and grades for all students in eight successive years of Chem 101, I found no simple threshold score, but some important strong trends instead. These trends were repeated year after year with only slight variation and will continue in future years, I presume. If so, I think that they can be used to predict the approximate probability of a student earning any particular grade. That is, a student with a 330 SAT-M score (550 on the new recentered scale) has about a 1 percent chance of earning an A; a 35 percent chance of earning a B+, a 18 percent chance of earning a B, a 22 percent chance of earning a C, and so forth. I think that students and academic advisors need to be aware of these trends—hence this article.

Many, but not all, students in the eight-year sample with relatively high SAT-M scores attained the highest grades, whereas few received an NE grade. In contrast, students in the lower ranges of SAT-M scores rarely achieved those highest grades, but a large fraction received a grade of NE. These trends are illustrated in Figure 1, which shows that the fraction of NE grades decreased, and the fraction of A- or higher grades increased, as the SAT-M scores increased.

Further analysis answered other important questions. Does college experience improve mathematical skill as measured by SAT-M scores? To answer this question, I compared statistically the actual and expected grades earned by several subsets of students. The determination of expected grades is illustrated by a simple example. In the eight-year sample about 10 percent of all students with SAT-M scores in the 610-650 range earned grades of A-. Within a subset of those students, such as all males, therefore, 10 percent would be expected to earn A-grades. No statistically significant differences between expected and actual grades were found for first-year, nonfirst-year, female, male, Asian, black, and Latino students. Among the subsets, those with higher average SAT-M scores tended to exhibit higher average grades. See Figure 1.

I concluded that college experiences, gender, and ethnic background did not affect appreciably the grades, but mathematical skill as measured by SAT-M scores was an important factor. Mathematics majors exhibited a different pattern. Members of this subset of students tended to be overachievers in the sense that their actual grades were significantly higher than the expected grades—hence this article. However, I don’t know if these students chose chemistry or biochemistry because of their high performance in general chemistry, or if they earned higher than expected grades because of special interest in the subject.

Thus, mathematical skill is important, but alone does not determine grade. My general experience is that among other nonmathematical factors of importance are personal interest in chemistry, willingness to work hard, well-organized work habits, attention to detail, good attitudes, reasonable good health, freedom from extraneous distractions, and willingness to seek help from instructors and fellow students. Mathematical skill is necessary but not sufficient for attainment of the highest grades in general chemistry.

Students with low SAT-M scores may experience considerable disappointment as one of the unintended consequences of studying Chemistry 101. Only half of those with SAT-M scores of 500 or less (520 or less on the recentered scale), for example, can expect to earn a grade of C or higher. Grades of NE or C- may dash hopes of continuing study through medical school. Some students may even consider dropping out of school.

What can advisors recommend to a student who wishes to improve his or her prospects in Chemistry 101? Unfortunately, I do not know of any advice that will give certainty of success, but perhaps the most promising recommendation is that a student with a relatively low SAT-M score take the intensive preparatory course. Mathematics 102, before attempting Chem 101. Math 102 concentrates on improving reasoning and problem-solving skills, which are skills of importance in chemistry courses. Such improvement may be sufficient to result in a chemistry grade higher than expected, particularly if a grade of A or B is earned in Math 102.

Harry Spencer, distinguished visiting professor of chemistry, adapted this article from his "Mathematical SAT Test Scores and College Chemistry Grades," published in the December 1996 issue of the Journal of Chemical Education. Spencer acknowledges the cooperation of Lori Gumpf, registrar, and her staff; the library staff of Alison Rider, science librarian; help in data gathering by Ross Peacock, director of institutional research; and helpful criticism of Margaret Edson Spencer, his wife.

Associate Professor of Mathematics Rudd Crawford, who teaches Math 102, asked his students to take a version of the SAT-M in class as an aid to monitoring the success of Math 102 in developing the quantitative problem-solving skills students need in Chem 101 and elsewhere.