

Tiny BC department off charts with Fulbrights

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By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff | July 28, 2007

When Michael Resler, chairman of the German studies department at Boston College, learned that 13 of his seniors, almost half the graduating class, had landed coveted Fulbright scholarships, he was at a loss for words.

So, the German scholar turned to Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th-century philosopher, to capture the magnitude of the moment. He found the perfect phrase, "Jenseits von Gut und Böse," the title of one of Nietzsche's most famous philosophical works.

"Literally, it means 'beyond good and evil,' " Resler said. "But it has the broader meaning of 'off the charts.' "

This year's record haul of the prestigious grants culminated a decade of striking success for the tiny department. With just three full-time faculty members and no graduate students, the department has become a formidable Fulbright machine, stockpiling 55 awards in the past decade.

"The little engine that could," Resler quipped.

Fulbright officials say Boston College will probably send more scholars to Germany this year than any other institution, and Resler thinks it might be the largest number of Fulbright scholars ever sent from one university to one country. The department typically sends more Fulbright scholars to Germany than any other American university, he said.

This year, 1,354 Fulbright scholars were chosen from more than 6,400 applicants.

Resler usually mentions the Fulbright to his freshman students within minutes of meeting them. Created just after World War II, the Fulbright program seeks to "increase mutual understanding" between Americans and the rest of the world, but Resler's Fulbright year in Germany in 1970 was one of self-discovery. Resler, 59, touts the year abroad as an opportunity for personal transformation.

Sascha Rubin, 21, of Mount Kisco, N.Y., was a freshman when she met Resler to discuss the results of her German placement test. The discussion became a two-hour conversation about religion, philosophy, world affairs, and the Fulbright. Four years later, she will leave in September to study political philosophy in Tübingen.

"He introduced the idea as so feasible, so possible," she said.

BC's success with Fulbrights did not happen by accident. Resler has become a Fulbright Wunderkind, deftly navigating the system to maximize his students' chances. He tells students not to apply to Berlin, for example, because many students want to live there. Try Potsdam instead, outside the city, he says, or eastern Germany, which draws fewer applicants because of its communist past.

"I know some of the little tricks," he said.

Most importantly, he tells students to pitch a unique research project, even an unconventional one, and make it clear it could be done properly only in Germany.

"You need to show them you need that library, that professor," he said.

Or that beer garden, in the case of the student who studied the country's beer industry for a year.

Tactics aside, Resler said his students have a natural competitive advantage: Germany is among the most active countries in the exchange program and provides more slots than other countries. Students apply for Fulbrights to conduct research or teach English in individual countries.

For example, 77 of 353 applicants to Germany's research Fulbright program won scholarships last year, compared to 21 of 190 in France, 14 of 495 in England, and 5 of 74 in Ireland. More than half of applicants to teach English in Germany won grants.

This year, nine of BC's 13 Fulbright scholars will teach in Germany, including Stefanie Casillas, a 21-year-old from New York City, who is headed to the small town of Ennepetal in September.

Casillas arrived at BC never having heard of the Fulbright program, but soon became very familiar with it. "It was always in a joking way, but it certainly came up a lot," she said.

University officials call the German studies department the "crown jewel" in BC's Fulbright success. "We're all toasting Michael Resler," said Margaret Thomas, a linguistic professor who coordinates the college's Fulbright program.

But success carries a price: Resler wrote 18 recommendations for his students last fall, struggling to find synonyms for accomplished and aplomb.

"You can't do a 'save as' and just change the names, because the same people read them all," he said. "I'll tell you I used the thesaurus."

Resler said the extra work helps settle the debt he believes he owes his college mentor for steering him toward the Fulbright.

"This is payback," he said.

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