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## First Students Chosen as Mellon Scholars

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## First Students Chosen as Mellon Scholars

Aug. 15, 2013

Joseph O'Brien '14 and Mallika Kavadi '15

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The first major student awards from a \$300,000 grant for humanities initiatives at Illinois Wesleyan University have been presented to Mallika Kavadi '15 and Joseph O'Brien '14.

Awarded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the *Re-Centering the Humanities* grant is funding Illinois Wesleyan's commitment to keeping the humanities at the core of the University's liberal arts curriculum. Among the grant's initiatives are opportunities for students such as Kavadi and O'Brien to engage in full-time research as Mellon Summer Scholars under the mentorship of faculty members.

For her project, Kavadi is looking at the comparative development of humanities and sciences from the mid-20th century through today.

"I have been interested in the sociology of knowledge and the history of ideas for a long time," said Kavadi, a sociology and history double major. As an incoming student from India, Kavadi and Assistant Professor of Sociology Meghan Burke spent the Engaging Diversity and International Student Orientations discussing epistemology and theorists they both admired. Burke remembers one particular luncheon well.

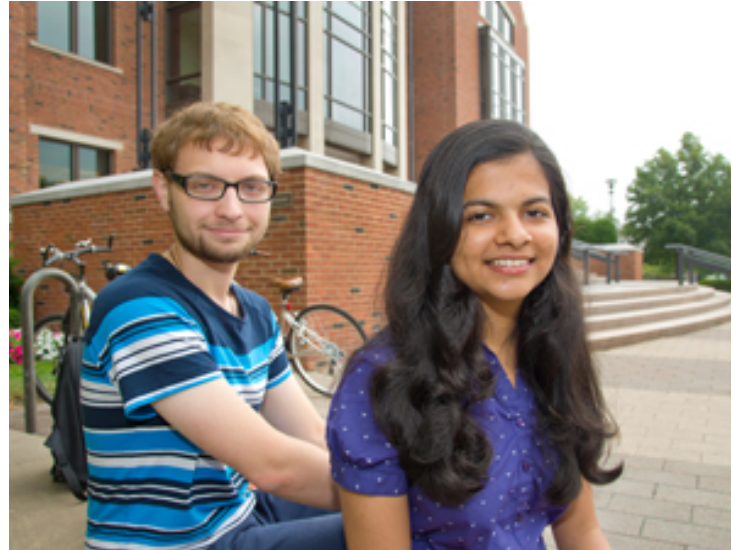
"While the other students and faculty discussed foods, hometowns and popular culture, Mallika and I discussed the social construction of knowledge and the kinds of coursework she could undertake for this study at Wesleyan," said Burke, who also serves as Kavadi's academic advisor and mentor for the Mellon scholarship. "She has actively pursued this line of inquiry during her first two years here, taking six Intellectual Traditions courses in a variety of disciplines."

Burke added that even though Kavadi has found a yearlong study abroad program that will enhance this foundation, the Mellon Summer Scholarship allows Kavadi to devote an entire summer to a deep reading of the literature, spanning not just several disciplines but also several distinct academic traditions.

Kavadi said her literature review thus far indicates the gap between the two academic cultures — humanities and sciences — has increasingly widened in both academia and popular imagination since the middle of the last century in spite of the growth of interdisciplinary areas of study that seek to bridge that gap. For the most part, the two cultures remain highly segregated.

"The natural sciences today tend to dominate," said Kavadi. "The study of science is more sought after than the humanities due to high economic and utility value of science."

Kavadi said the autonomous nature of her Mellon Scholar study combined with the advice she receives from her mentor Burke have been of great value and benefit to her as she prepares for a career in academia.



“Working on my own, from coming up with the topic that interests me to designing the process and then narrowing the topic, with Dr. Burke coaching me, has been the greatest aspect of this project,” said Kavadi. “It’s been very rewarding to come up with a project on my own and make it take shape.”

This fall Kavadi begins a yearlong program at University College London. After graduating from Illinois Wesleyan she plans to enroll in a sociology Ph.D. program.

O’Brien’s project combines philosophy and art by investigating sensations of qualia associated with attempting to recall episodic memory. O’Brien is majoring in art with concentrations in photography and graphic design. He also describes himself as an artist who “moonlights as a philosopher.”

Being unable to recall part of an episodic memory is a sensation philosophy defines as qualia. O’Brien said it is a sensation that cannot be completely defined without experience. Episodic memory is that of autobiographical events (times, places, associated emotions and other contextual knowledge) that can be explicitly stated.

“You can’t know what a lemon tastes like until you’ve tasted a lemon,” O’Brien explained, referring to qualia. “And when you are trying to remember the details of an event that happened and can’t quite get the memory of a detail, like the color of the shirt your friend wore last Tuesday, you have a sense almost of urgency and futility.

“That’s the issue I’m trying to address with the project,” O’Brien added. He will create a series of 12-16 color photographs – two photos in each set. One will be a straightforward composition and the other will have parts of the photo removed.

“As people view those two photos, they’ll be recalling the photo that’s whole as they view the photo that is missing pieces, and trying to fill in those gaps of their episodic memory,” O’Brien said. He will also write a 10,000-word article on his topic.

He said his interest in incorporating aspects of philosophy into his art took a huge leap in the fall of 2012, when O’Brien studied abroad at the Burren College of Art in Ireland. O’Brien said he was pushed to incorporate more conceptual significance into his work.

“I started drawing on my background in philosophy and started looking at things inherent to the photograph,” he explained. “There is so much writing about the photograph and memory. All of this came together as I have been working with memory and examining it through the lens of philosophy for about the past year. When I found the opportunity for this project where you are allowed to bring another discipline in combination with humanities, it seemed like the perfect fit.”

Assistant Professor of Philosophy Emily Kelahan said the Mellon Scholars program makes an excellent case for investing in artists and humanists.

“Joe is producing work that, while deeply personal, helps all of us make sense of aspects of our common experience and common humanity,” said Kelahan, one of O’Brien’s faculty advisors for the Mellon project. “When you view his photographs or read his work, you are reminded of what is distinctive about being creatures like us and you are given tools for thinking critically about those distinctive features.”

Kevin Strandberg, director of the School of Art and O'Brien's other faculty advisor, noted that artists are usually solitary individuals, working on projects alone and surfacing only when completed artwork is ready for critique or exhibition.

"I have been able to do a lot of observing as Joe proceeds with his project," said Strandberg. "I now know how Joe realizes ideas and concepts into art objects. There has been way more experimentation than I would have expected."

O'Brien said allotting the entire summer to the project has allowed him to "engage completely in the project. It's almost like a three months artists' residency," he said.

After completing his degree at Wesleyan, O'Brien plans to enter graduate school. His long-term goals include working in the arts field while maintaining a studio practice.

Illinois Wesleyan students have multiple ways to conduct original research at the undergraduate level through opportunities such as the Mellon Summer Scholars program, the Eckley Summer Scholars and Artists program, the John and Erma Stutzman Peace Fellows program and the Elizabeth Weir Action Research Fellowships. Many students also showcase their scholarship and creative activity in undergraduate research journals and at the annual John Wesley Powell Research Conference.

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