

New Honors Program Hires

The Honors Program at James Madison University has added a number of new members to its ensemble of faculty, staff, and administrators in the past year. The latest additions are Honors Academic Advisor Jared Diener and Dr. Philip Frana as Associate Director and Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies.

Jared Diener

Jared Diener hails from Pflugerville, Texas, notable as the filming location for the television drama *Friday Night Lights*. Diener played football in high school briefly, but moved over to choir and theatre during his junior year. “My folks still have a ranchette in the country,” says Diener. “You can’t call it a ranch unless you have cattle.” Austin’s expansion in the direction of Pflugerville meant that his school became big and ethnically diverse. “There was an interesting mix of people. I knew ‘Old Texas’ people who had streets and roads named after their families, but also residents who worked for the university and local high tech firms.”

Diener lived in France near the old Maginot Line for a year after high school, volunteering at a home for disabled young people. After a year he returned to study History at The University of Texas at Austin. “I did a senior thesis in college,” Diener says, “and it was one of the best growth experiences of my life. It’s worth doing for all sorts of reasons. It broadens and deepens your knowledge of a particular topic and field, which can be useful if you plan on pursuing a career in that discipline. It’s great project management experience. The ability to execute a large project independently is a prized skill in almost any career track. You also learn something about yourself – how well you work with deadlines, how you deal with adversity, what kind of writer you can become, and where your strengths and weaknesses are located.”

Diener completed his M.St. at Oxford University, and won the German Historical Institute/Royal Historical Society Prize for Best Postgraduate Dissertation for “Criminals, Rebels, and Heretics: Perceptions of Anabaptists in Reformation Württemberg.” Diener was interested in the ways in which sixteenth-century Anabaptists were demonized and criminalized by authorities and society generally. “It’s undeniably romantic studying history in a place like Oxford,” he recalls. “One of the first things I did was go to Duke Humfrey’s Library, the oldest reading room in the Bodleian Library, and order an original 1524 edition of Martin Luther’s ‘On the Anabaptists.’ They gave this 500 year old book to me, with no special instructions and no gloves. Now that was cool.”

Diener’s family has Amish roots on both sides, and his mother can still speak fluent Pennsylvania Dutch. “Some who leave the Amish become Mennonite. That was true in my family,” says Diener. “My grandfather actually lived in Harrisonburg in the 1950s and 1960s and went to Eastern Mennonite University.” His aunt and uncle still live in the area, and Diener was familiar with the Shenandoah Valley before following his fiancée Mikki Brock, a faculty member in the History Department at Bridgewater College, here in January.

Prior to coming to JMU, Diener served as the Academic Advisor and Graduate Coordinator for the Religious Studies Department at The University of Texas at Austin, a position he held for 5 years.

Diener is available every day on the second floor of Hillcrest House to help Honors students with their course planning and academic requirements. He also holds office hours from 3-5 PM in Shenandoah Hall. "Students can ask me about anything. I can help them with Gen Eds, course selection, long term academic planning. I can also share details about the special opportunities offered through Honors, such as Seminars Abroad and Areas of Emphasis. Anything general or personal related to their education at JMU is fair game," he says.

He is also knowledgeable about careers in academic advising, which are often of interest to Honors students. "My recommendation," he says, "is to get involved in the MAP (Madison Advising Peers) program here at JMU. That's a great place to start. Getting an advanced degree also helps you prepare for my line of work. Most important, though, is you need to be a people person. Some are naturals at this, and some have to work on it. I'm somewhat extroverted by nature, but continue to sharpen my skills."

"Meaningful community," Diener declares, is the reason he enjoys working in Honors education. "We live in such an individualized, isolating, and fast-paced society. Young people are constantly barraged by media that celebrates self-gratification and a 'me-first' attitude. Technology has made it possible for us to move around, which is good, but now we are in danger of becoming uprooted. I still value a sense of place and community."

Diener is a Europhile, and not ashamed to admit it. He has lived in France, Germany, and England, and enjoys following Arsenal in the Barclays Premier League. "I spend far too much of my spare time watching soccer," he notes, "but I also play guitar and enjoy choral singing. I like to hike and travel. A good night out for me is dinner and a concert with my lovely fiancée. I like folk and classic country music, but also rock, blues, classical, and even the German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten."

Philip Frana

Dr. Philip Frana began working at JMU just last month. Frana grew up in Grinnell, Iowa, but hails from a hilly area of rural Nebraska known as the Bohemian Alps. "My dad didn't know a lick of English until he went to school. All of my relatives still live there." Family heritage, particularly in the mechanical arts, is an important part of his identity. "A few years ago one of my extended relations living in Germany told me that he'd traced our family back to a 'Meister Frana' who helped illuminate the Wenzelsbibel around 1400," he says. "I took a look, and sure enough he'd been the one drawing illustrations of engineering works, towers, and machines. The whole Frana clan was thrilled to see that, even if it was just a coincidence."

Frana has a rather eclectic educational background. He did his undergraduate work at Wartburg, a small liberal arts college, where he studied history, economics, and vocal performance. He completed an interdisciplinary MA/PhD program in the History of

Technology and Science at Iowa State University, and a National Science Foundation post-doc at the University of Minnesota's Charles Babbage Institute (CBI). At CBI Frana co-founded a research journal and conducted oral histories with software pioneers and Turing Award winners. His oral histories are used widely in secondary works and appear in publications like *Communications of the Association for Computing Machinery* and *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*. Frana is now working on a book documenting the history of health informatics called "Calculating Care: Medicine and Computing As If People Mattered."

He attributes his career trajectory to interests that began in his elementary years. "I was a weird kid. I used to draw maps a lot, maps of real and imaginary places, and also write programs for some of the early personal computers my dad tinkered with." His father also fixed typewriters on the side, and so there was always one around the house to type on. "I used to write elaborate stories on them [typewriters, then word processors], stories about spies and robots and aliens. Back in the 1980s, people got into history because they didn't want to have anything to do with technology, especially computers. I loved computers and had an intuitive sense for graph theory and algorithms that basically developed from play. And I enjoyed writing."

Frana comes to JMU from the Honors College at the University of Central Arkansas where he was Director of Undergraduate Research and Associate Professor of Science & Technology Studies. He has taught seminars on the Artificial Other (robotics, artificial intelligence, and society), Art & Technology, Oral History and Memory, the History of the Life Sciences and Engineering, Technology and the Law, Virtual Worlds and Online Communities, Strange Communities, and Economic Globalization and Transhumanism. He has also supervised courses on research and writing across the disciplines.

Frana is involved in Honors at the national level, and is the current Secretary-Treasurer of the Southern Regional Honors Council. Of JMU's Honors Program he says, "This is exactly the kind of post I've always dreamed of having. It's perfect. I get to be a faculty member and administrator in a small college setting, with all the benefits of a top-flight comprehensive university." Frana hopes that he might share his wisdom in getting more students to undertake superior senior honors projects. "One of my jobs is to work hard with very capable departmental honors liaison faculty members to mount the best classes and workshops and programs we can. What we do is raise the bar to quality scholarship, while helping students find the best pole to get up over that bar."

Frana enjoys working with undergraduates in and out of the classroom. "My students are my legacy. If they do great things, or just stay great people – that will be enough for me. I do want them to express themselves as researchers and writers. I think having your ideas preserved in print is the best way to become immortal. Currently, anyway. (laughs) Eventually, everything else passes away. But ideas in print persist forever."

Frana describes himself as a French electronica nut and connoisseur of old science fiction movies. He has a growing collection of classic science fiction anthologies, which he reads from in his spare time. He has two children, Kaia (13) and Brenna (8), who attend public

schools in Woodstock. His wife Kelli is a certified nurse anesthetist at Winchester Medical Center. His brother Drew is a Senior Engineer at IBM.

Both Diener and Frana drove classic Beetles in high school and have younger brothers named Andrew. "We think there's a conspiracy at work here," jokes Frana.