

Dear Friends of Austin College

By now, we all are familiar with the impressive statistic that allows Austin College to lay claim to being a national leader in global education: over the last 10 years, an average 70 percent of our students have studied abroad. Equally remarkable, during that same period, our students have explored 92 countries on six continents. While I am eager for that number to reach 100, I am gratified to know that we continue to find ways to enhance the educational component of study abroad.

A new initiative involves encouraging Austin College students returning from study abroad to create digital stories that use both words and images to convey meaningfully the core of their learning. My thanks to Truett Cates, director of the Center for Global Learning, for spearheading this effort, and to Brett Boessen, assistant professor of communication studies, for lending his expertise. And this summer, our Global Outreach (or GO) Fellows are taking with them iPod nanos with built-in video cameras to begin digital records of the difference their participation makes to themselves and the world. Please visit our YouTube channel to see examples.

Given that students now are digital natives, this form of communication is entirely natural to them. But just as good penmanship does not assure one is a good writer, familiarity with digital tools does not mean our students can use them to communicate effectively. That is why it has become of increasing importance to me that a liberal arts education integrates the study of symbols, pictures, and other visual images into the traditional disciplines. It is my hope to create a state-of-the-art digital learning lab on campus so that students in every discipline have the opportunity to deepen their “visual literacy” skills. Allow me to explain the educational merit.

Traditionally, our curricula pay close attention to helping students develop sophistication in those forms of literacy (reading, writing, and speaking) that *privilege* what the philosopher in me would call “the word.” As our graduates know, the ability to write and speak with grace and rigor, and to interpret written texts and spoken narratives quickly and deeply, are essential skills for success in every field of endeavor. Projecting forward, these skills only are going to grow in importance—deeply developed literacy skills are a prerequisite for participation in the information economy.

Austin College supplements these core forms of literacy with expanded skills in foreign languages. We are fairly unique among small liberal arts colleges in our commitment to offer a wide range of languages and in the depth to which our students typically study one or more languages. Even more, few schools our size can boast an immersive residential language experience as is offered by the Jordan Family Language House.

We also have a curriculum devoted to developing quantitative reasoning, and our requirements in mathematics and statistics foster broader skills in argumentation and problem-solving.

But let me put in a word for adding visual literacy to these core skills. Our graduates need to be able to approach the interpretations of

images with as much depth and sophistication as they approach written texts or statistical evidence. They need to be able to communicate using images—still and moving—with the same degree of confidence with which they communicate in writing and speech. Yes, the courses our students take in the visual arts are a part of this, but we also are increasing the attention we pay to visuality in disciplines that are traditionally more rooted in text.

I would be grateful to hear from those of you who find visual literacy an important part of the work you do. Let me know what you would recommend that we offer to our students.

We intend to be more intentionally visual in our recruitment and development efforts, too. Visit our new website and stay tuned this fall for a visual campus tour, full of video interviews with the talented students and faculty who make our thriving academic community both high-touch and high-impact.

In the meantime, please take seriously your role as an Austin College storyteller as well. By sharing with others the amazing story that is Austin College, we will move from strength to strength by continuing to attract bright and talented students and increasing the generous alumni and friends who support them.

Gratefully,

Marjorie Hass, President
Austin College

