

For Professors at Liberal-Arts Colleges, Summer Is the Ideal Time for Research

Free of teaching duties, they can focus on long-term projects

BY ROBIN WILSON

CARLISLE, PA.

JANET WRIGHT makes her way up a huge pile of sandstone boulders, a radio antenna in her hand and a receiver strapped to her waist. Once she reaches the top, she sticks the antenna into the air. "Let's try Rachel and see if we can get a signal on her," she calls down to her student researcher. Rachel is a rat.

For Dr. Wright and other professors who work at liberal-arts and community colleges, summer is the only time they can get away to do research.

Most weekday mornings this summer, Dr. Wright, an associate professor of biology at Dickinson College, visits rocky outcrops on Blue Mountain, seven miles from the campus. She is tracking four Allegheny woodrats, which she has named Rachel, Esther, Kate, and First Catch. The rats wear collars embedded with tiny radios that send out signals picked up by Dr. Wright's receiver. She moved the rats 15 miles east, along the Blue Mountain ridge, to see if they would colonize a new section, where the woodrat population disappeared in 1994.

No one knows why woodrats are dying off in Pennsylvania and other states. Dr. Wright hopes that her research will shed some light on the mystery, and she believes that studying how the woodrats live and die can tell scientists more about attempts to save other endangered species.

As head of the biology department at Dickinson, she doesn't have much time in her academic schedule to pursue her own scholarly work. "I think people really look forward to summer as the time you're not pecked apart by meetings, classes, and appointments," she says. "You can devote long stretches of time to work that interests you most."

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Unlike faculty members at research universities, professors at liberal-arts and community colleges usually must save their research for the summer, a time when most of them are not required to teach. Tenure and promotion at teaching-oriented colleges are influenced by a professor's research and publications, and many faculty members on these campuses consider the summer their window of opportunity.

'THE PRESSURE IS ON'

Elmaz Abinader, an associate professor of English at Mills College, says she works just as hard during the summer as during the academic year. This summer, she is writing a three-part performance piece about women in her Lebanese family.

"I feel like the pressure is on during the summer," she says. "I'm going to be back in the classroom and have all the responsibilities with students and committees soon, so the summer is the time when I really have to do the work I feel I was born to do."

Some professors hole up in libraries and laboratories, but lots of others make their way into the field. That may mean a local

park, a coffeehouse, or a site halfway around the world. Dr. Abinader is working in a garage that has been converted into a music studio. There, she and a few musicians are putting together pieces of her one-woman show with contemporary music and ancient Middle Eastern rhythms.

THE RIGHT SEASON

The nature of a professor's research can make summer the logical time to pursue it. Woodrats, for example, are most active when it's warm.

Michael L. Womack, a professor of biology at Macon State College, would have a hard time doing his research if it *weren't* summer: His work concerns the mosquito.

Dr. Womack has visited seven sites within a 50-mile radius of the campus during the past two months, carrying a contraption that draws mosquitoes into a net with a light and a fan. He is counting the insects and examining various species as part of a state project financed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

When tropical storm Alberto caused massive flooding in Georgia in 1994, state officials wondered how the rainfall would affect the mosquito population. They realized that they did not have a good idea of the types of mosquitoes that thrived in the state, and so would have a hard time determining if there were any changes.

Dr. Womack's work is not glamorous. "I've got bites right now, and I came in yesterday pulling ticks off of me," he says in a telephone interview.

By comparison, Pat Manley's work this summer sounds too good to be true. The associate professor of geology at Middlebury College spends her days in a 42-foot boat called the *R.V. Neptune* on Lake Champlain, between Vermont and New York. She and staff members from the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum are mapping the bottom with sonar that sends back acoustical "pictures" of the underwater world. In June, they discovered a sunken American gunboat that had been commanded by Benedict Arnold during the Revolutionary War. Although her primary interest is geology, Dr. Manley says, "it is a childhood dream to go out and find shipwrecks."

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Jane Dirks is spending time this summer walking her dog in Pittsburgh. But these walks are research. The adjunct professor of anthropology at Carlow College is doing ethnographic research on the 50-some dog owners who regularly gather with their pets in Frick Park, and who, she says, have "qualities of a culture." For example, she says, they typically know each other not by name, but by their dog's name. Ms. Dirks is known as "Bamse's mom," after her mixed golden and Labrador retriever.

Letting them run free, as these owners do, is illegal, but they pressure each other to pick up after their pets, and they hold park-wide cleanup days twice a year. "This is part of their self-construction as a group that is good for the park," Ms. Dirks says.

She presented a paper on her work at the national meeting of the American Anthropological Association last year, and this summer she is videotaping the dogs and their owners for use in her courses at Carlow. "The video will show students what the characteristics of a subculture are, and how you can decide that this is a group that's unique," she says.

Some professors say getting off campus in the summertime is crucial not only to their work, but also to their sanity.

Gary McDonogh, a professor of the growth and structure of cities at Bryn Mawr College, has been in Hong Kong this summer, studying the transfer of authority from Britain to China. His work focuses on the physical changes in the city and how people's use of it may change.

Dr. McDonogh frequently spends his break far from Bryn Mawr. He has worked for seven summers in Barcelona, doing field research on urban culture and how conflicts take shape between people of different social classes. He has spent seven more in Savannah, Ga., exploring Catholicism and Southern identity.

"This is healthy, because suddenly I'm

out of academic life and seeing things and thinking differently," he says. "I need the summer, because otherwise, I'm not refreshed when I go back to teach." His trips are important to his work as well, he says. "I can't sit in Philadelphia and pretend I know what people in Barcelona are thinking."

'INTERESTS TO SHARE'

The summertime also gives Dr. McDonough the chance to collaborate with his wife, Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong, who is from Hong Kong and just completed her Ph.D. in communications at the University of

Pennsylvania. "We create interests to share," he says. This summer, they are doing a paper on movie theaters in Hong Kong. "I'm interested in spatial arrangements of them," he says, "and she's interested in film."

He is not the only professor who puts a personal spin on some of his scholarly interests. Jack Chatfield, an associate professor of history at Trinity College in Connecticut, is driving to Albany, Ga., this month, partly to revisit the scene of his work in the civil-rights movement 35 years ago.

In 1962, when he was an undergraduate at Trinity, Mr. Chatfield took a year off to register black voters in Georgia for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He plans to spend this month visiting people who were also involved in the movement, and talking with both black and white people about how race relations have changed. He hopes to write an essay on his findings.

"I hope to talk to white people who a generation ago might have viewed me as a pariah," says Dr. Chatfield, who is white. During his time in Georgia in the 1960's, the only white people he met were police officers. He was jailed four times because of his work with black people.

STARTING A POLITICAL PARTY

For other professors, the summer months are a time to entirely shed their academic skin. Howard Richards, a professor of peace and global studies at Earlham College, also holds a law degree. He travels to Santa Barbara, Cal., each summer to practice bankruptcy law. His legal work helps him finance his social activism: He and some collaborators are trying to start a political party, called the Natural Law Social Democratic Party. "We're organizing a whole movement to reconstruct the world," he says.

Tahir R. S. Andrabi, an associate pro-

fessor of economics at Pomona College, is also trying to reorder the world, but in his native Pakistan.

He and some other Pakistanis living in the United States have formed a social group to implement reforms in their country.

This summer, Dr. Andrabi has helped launch 40 home schools for 1,000 girls. In

some Pakistani villages, fewer than 30 per cent of the girls go to school. At Pomona, he says, "I am a very straight-laced, but-toned-down economist." But in Pakistan, he considers himself a social activist.

Dr. Wright, the Dickinson field biologist, also combines one of her passions with her work on Allegheny woodrats. She is a pilot—her office at Dickinson is decorated with photos, models, and mobiles of planes—and she goes up in a Cessna Skyhawk to get an aerial view of rocky outcrops dotting her terrain, possible habitats for woodrats.

One hazy day this summer, Dr. Wright took a reporter up for the view from the four-seat plane. The biologist flew the seven miles from the airport in Carlisle, Pa., to Blue Mountain, pointing out landmarks along the way.

It was a fellow student in graduate school who started Dr. Wright thinking about flying. He had flown over his field site and told his colleagues that it changed the way he conceived of his work.

"The nice thing about flying is that it gives me a particular perspective on spatial relations that I wouldn't have otherwise," says Dr. Wright. It's also nice to be out of the classroom on a warm day. ■