

German and Russian Studies Professor Kiarina Kordela Wins Jack and Marty Rossmann Excellence in Teaching Award

St. Paul, Minn. - Professor of German in the Department of German and Russian Studies and Director of the Critical Theory Program Kiarina Kordela has been awarded the 2014 Jack and Marty Rossmann Excellence in Teaching Award that recognizes “a faculty member who has been identified by colleagues and students as exemplifying the teaching goals of Macalester College.”

Here's the citation:

A glance at Kiarina Kordela’s record would disabuse even cynics of the notion that popular teachers are “easy” teachers. Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Marx, Hegel, Kafka, Lacan—the thinkers Kiarina introduces our students to in her German and Critical Theory classes--scarcely bring to mind the word “easy.” Almost without exception students rank Kiarina as the, or one of the, best professors they’ve ever had, and as the single biggest influence in their intellectual and personal development.

The reason is as simple as her courses are reputedly hard:

Kiarina goes to the source of things, uses philosophical works deemed “esoteric” and “abstract” to help students make sense of the world and their lives. It would be an understatement to say that Kiarina is an original, brilliant thinker whose engagement with several critical traditions is nothing less than exhausting. Her demands upon students stem from her unwavering confidence that they *are* capable of gaining a genuine understanding of their own cultural foundations. This means reading original works (if possible, *in the original*), then reading *readings* of the works, and then readings of the readings; it means writing papers as many times as it takes to make them good. And it means leaving preconceived notions behind. The title of her course “Dead White Men” captures Kiarina’s challenge to some of those notions: It tells us that before we pass judgment on earlier thinkers as racist, sexist, or classist, we’d better read them first-hand.

When her students go on to graduate school (and a disproportionate number of them do), they have an easy transition because they’ve already been doing graduate level work with Kiarina. When hearing comments to that effect, Kiarina’s response is always the same: who ever got the idea that Macalester students can’t handle “graduate” work?

Kiarina’s commitment to student learning goes way beyond the classroom, beyond independents and honors theses, tutorials hosted in her home, Keck grants, or campus symposia. The culmination of her efforts has been Macalester’s new Critical Theory Concentration, which engages 20 faculty from three divisions, and *with* it our annual Critical Theory Symposium, engaging our community with graduate students and colleagues from the University of Minnesota and beyond.

It’s no coincidence that last Fall her German 101 class won first prize in the German Film Festival with their entry “Wo auf der Welt ist Kiarina Kordela?”--in which a spy named K.K. disappears into thin air. Where



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Kiarina is, Kafka is not far off.

Not unlike Madonna or Prince, the iconic name “Kiarina” needs no further qualifiers here at Macalester. Yet it would be a mistake to ascribe Kiarina’s impact to her charisma or “star” quality. Her secret is less in the intellectual dazzle that “blows your mind” (to quote a student) than in her *empowerment* of students to discover their own critical potential. Rather than disciples, she fosters thinkers, and, as an alumna once wrote, “communities of thinkers.”

Macalester College, founded in 1874, is a national liberal arts college with a full-time enrollment of 2,011 students. Macalester is nationally recognized for its long-standing commitment to academic excellence, internationalism, multiculturalism, and civic engagement. Learn more at [macalester.edu](http://www.macalester.edu) (<http://www.macalester.edu/>).

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