

An Independent Thinker

Historian pushes the boundaries of convention

DR. MARGARET PEACOCK is always asking “why.”

Why, for instance, should she deliver a traditional-style lecture when technology and online classes have diminished its value?

The answer, in Peacock’s eyes, is simple: She shouldn’t.

“I’m not convinced that group work is best, either,” said Peacock, an associate professor in the Department of History. “Students hate group work. Inevitably, a few read, but others don’t and end up sitting there and receiving credit without contributing. It tells them that they don’t need or have to do the work, and they don’t learn anything.”

So Peacock takes a different approach, one that is anything but conventional.

In one exercise, she has each of her students write a different discussion question on the board, and she selects the five best questions to discuss in class that day.

The trick? Getting to those last few questions.

“Coming up with a good question after 38 other people have written theirs on the board can be really hard,” she said. “But those last few questions are usually some of the best ones.”

In another exercise, she develops discussion questions herself and places a dozen or so notecards with the questions face-down on a table. Individual students walk up, pick one, and lead the discussion for that question. In yet another exercise, she requires each student to make an argument without writing a paper or making a PowerPoint. Students have made sculptures and composed music to convey their thoughts, then defended their choices in writing.

As Peacock says, all three exercises not only encourage students to be prepared, but they also challenge students to think big and take on active roles in their educations.

“I like to keep students accountable, but in a way that’s fun and not punitive or boring,” she said.

INCREASING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Outside the classroom, Peacock is tackling bigger questions.

The first: Why do some high school students with 4.0 grade point averages make low 16s on the ACT college admissions test? She discovered the conundrum while working with a local nonprofit, College Admissions Made Possible, or CAMP. The organization rivals prestigious public and private high schools in providing comprehensive, college admissions services, except it targets an often overlooked group—low-income and minority students. CAMP provides these services free of charge with the goal of getting all of its participants into college.

Initially, Peacock helped CAMP students, high school juniors and seniors, with their college admissions essays. But her interest in the organization grew as she realized the extent of the barriers facing the students with whom she was working.

“These were very hard-working students,” she said. “But their ACT scores didn’t reflect that. It wasn’t that these kids didn’t want to go to college; they were just behind.”

Peacock now serves as the Tuscaloosa-area coordinator for the Birmingham-based organization, facilitating college admissions preparation at Central High School, Holt High School, and Fayette County High School. For some 40 committed students, CAMP counselors conduct college admissions workshops, provide one-on-one advising, host a 10-week ACT prep class, and facilitate visits to college fairs and campuses. They also assist with financial aid and scholarship applications, college admissions essays, recommendation letters, and long-term academic planning. The ACT prep classes alone would cost the students nearly \$80 an hour, or \$2,400 for the 10-week class, were they not participating in CAMP, she said.

Peacock said the disconnect between the students’ goals and their ACT scores reflect broader issues in education.

“These schools and counselors are trying really hard to make their students ready for college, but they’re underfunded and overworked,” she said.



Margaret Peacock leads a class discussion.

And help from organizations like CAMP only goes so far.

“Intervention really needs to happen earlier when these students are 14 and just starting to fall behind,” she said. “As it is now, there’s not enough time for CAMP to completely make up that difference. It speaks to a broken education system that lacks funding and needs fixing. If we want to close that gap between schools, educate our citizens, and promote diversity, then we need programs like the ones that CAMP provides.”

RECONSIDERING RUSSIA, THE MIDDLE EAST

Through her research, Peacock raises other questions. In her first book, *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War*, she questions how popular support was created during the Cold War and proposes that, despite their ideological differences, the United States and Soviet governments manufactured support and manipulated their populations through propaganda in similar ways.

“I argue that those in power in both countries were more similar to each other than they were to the people whom their ads were targeting,” she said.

In both cases, government officials used images and messages involving children as propaganda tools, asking the masses to support their policies “to protect the children.”

“I show that there was not just a vertical divide between the East and West, but a horizontal divide between those in power and those most affected by their decisions,” she said.

Her next book, tentatively titled *The Faults of Power: Cairo, Moscow, London, Washington, and the Struggle for the Modern Middle East*, will raise similar questions.

“It will attempt to understand how the modern Middle East was made,” she said. “I’m looking at how we think about the Middle East not only as a nation, but across the globe. For instance, what is being said about the Middle East, by whom, and why? Are opinions about the Middle East formed along national lines, or is the divide horizontal, as it was during the Cold War, between people in power and everyday citizens? I’m not sure what the answers are yet, but sometimes you just have to dive into the archives and let the sources speak for themselves.”

What lies behind Peacock’s zest for questioning and encouraging others to do the same?

“I really believe that a liberal arts education is the one and only way to teach citizenship, humanity, empathy, and rational thinking,” she said. “If we want to avoid the brutal mistakes of our human past, we must learn to be independent thinkers who demand honest, rational leadership from our government and a commitment to world citizenship from ourselves and those around us.

“Civilization is fragile and easily broken. History has proven that. But it is made by what we practice every day.” ■