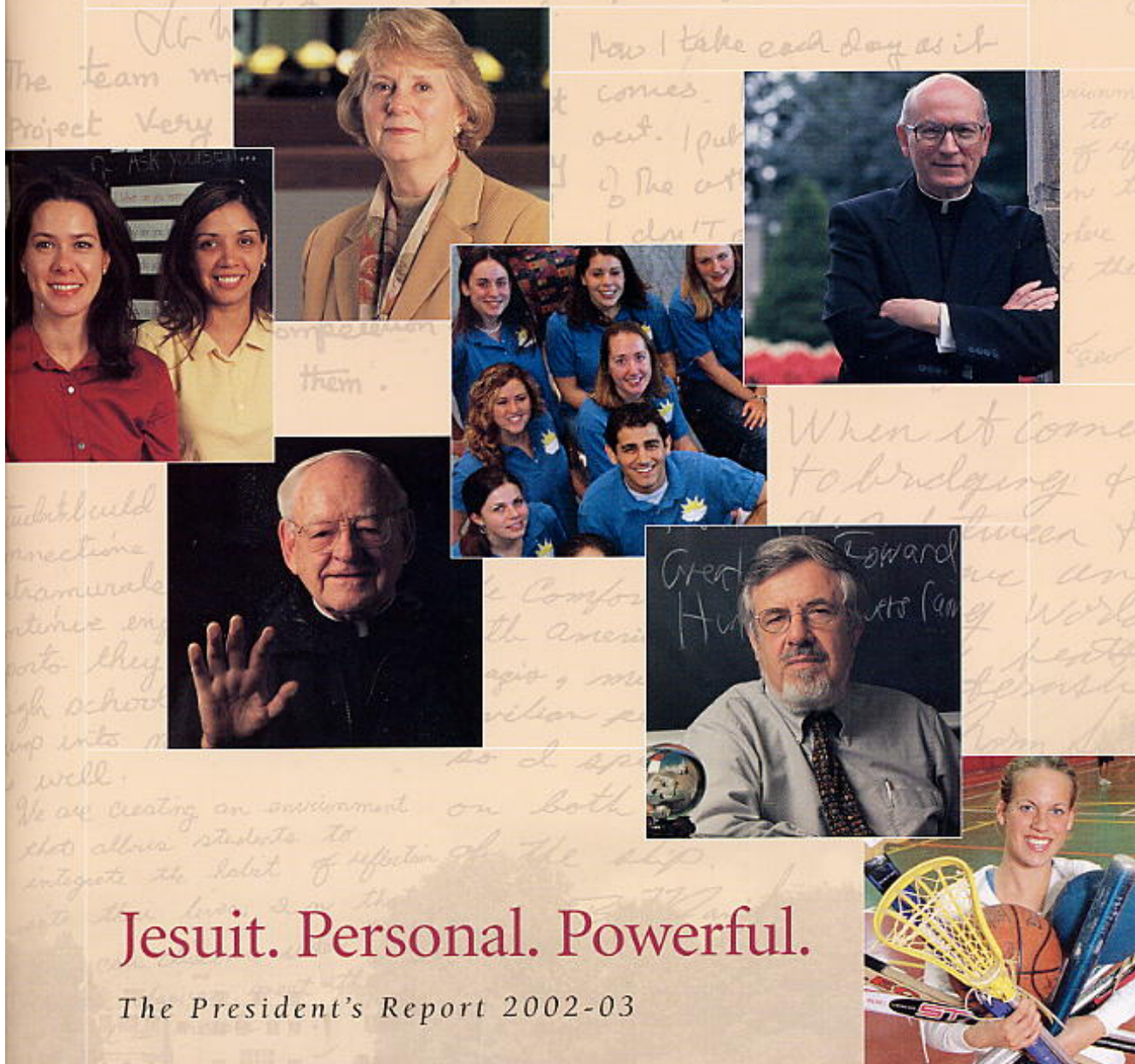


FairfieldNow

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Jesuit. Personal. Powerful.

The President's Report 2002-03



Wonderfully disorientating

BY DANA AMBROSINI '99

Three times a week Carol Chiodo, a part-time adult learner in University College, also becomes part mime, part gymnast, and part cheerleader. The transformation takes place when she revs into assistant teacher mode and begins dramatizing the day's oral practice session for traditional undergraduates new to the French or Italian language.

"We speak only the target language in class," explains Chiodo, "so students can hear the language in context, practice the sound of the words in their mouths, and learn what those feel like. It replicates the sense of disorientation they would have if they went to the country 'cold.' And she should know. At age 17, Chiodo traveled to Italy as an exchange student and stayed for nearly 20 years. For financial reasons,

University College student Carol Chiodo (center) exudes energy in an oral practice session, as she makes French come alive for freshmen (l-r) Eileen Mullen, Francesca Andre, and Jonathan Flores. Dr. Joel Goldfield (rear), director of the Culpeper Language Resource Center, established the oral practice program in 1998.

she left college midway through for a job with an Italian publisher and moved back to the United States with her husband and three children in 2000.

Three years ago, she enrolled in University College and resumed the education she had put on hold. Since then, Dr. Katherine Kidd, director of international studies, has become a mentor of sorts.

"It was Dr. Kidd who suggested I look into a paid assistant teacher position in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures," she says, "because it was becoming difficult to reconcile tuition payments with the family budget."

While Fairfield does not use such assistant teachers for regular classes (those are taught by a professor), the DMLL relies on these peer student teachers to conduct the oral practice sessions. Attendance is not required, but faculty members encourage students to immerse themselves.

"The program was born out of a need to give language students more oral practice," explains Dr. Joel Goldfield, director of the Charles E. Culpeper Language Resource Center and an associate professor in the DMLL. The sessions, which began in spring 1998 as a pilot in French only, have blossomed to include eight of the nine modern languages offered at Fairfield. And while students are able to hone their oral techniques, advanced students like Chiodo get hands-on teaching experience.

Students seeking to become assistant teachers attend a workshop to receive 14 hours of training, and must re-audition each year. "When I attended the first training session, I was floored," recalls Chiodo. "Dr. Goldfield put us through a mock lesson in Hebrew. It was wonderfully disorienting and a great reminder of what the kids feel when they're beginning a new language."

Assistant teachers evaluate the students in their sessions, but do not grade them. On average, 30 percent of the department's 18 assistant teachers are international students, and many others are native speakers in the language they are teaching. Such was the case for Xiomara Morales '00 when she signed on

her junior year. Now a Spanish teacher at Trumbull (Conn.) High School, she continues to build props, dress up, draw pictures, and act things out in the course of her class. "It's a very energetic and active way of teaching," says Morales, "and the method ingrains the new language in students' heads."

Not without effort.

"One of the quickest phrases they learn is 'non capisco,' 'I don't understand,'" says Chiodo. "But that's OK. As I make a fool of myself acting out things like ordering food at a café, the students feel safer to take risks, to stretch themselves as they try to get the gist of what I'm saying. It's part circus, part language lesson. But the circus atmosphere helps make the students comfortable."

The dramatic immersion helps them move beyond

the mechanics of language and come to embrace its cultural context as well. "Eighty percent of our students say their number one priority is learning to speak a language," says Dr. Goldfield, noting that most are way behind in this proficiency. "With just one oral practice session per week, students close two tremendous gaps – one between the ability to read and listen, the other between the ability to read and speak."

Bethany Scalise '07, who began studying French in sixth grade, agrees. "It's very entertaining," she says, "and at the same time it's stretching my mind. I've invested a lot of time and effort learning French and I want to hold onto it. These sessions are helping me do that." What also may help is her budding plan to spend part of next summer in France working with Volunteers for Peace. "That way," she says, "I may be able to learn and serve at the same time."

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Carol Chiodo