

EDUCATION UPDATE

EDUCATION NEWS TODAY FOR A BETTER WORLD TOMORROW



Volume XIV, No. 10 • New York City • JUNE 2009
FOR PARENTS, EDUCATORS & STUDENTS

www.EDUCATIONUPDATE.com

SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE NAMES NEW DEAN: JERRILYNN D. DODDS

By EMILY SHERWOOD, Ph.D.

Saying that she is “thrilled to be part of... one of the few institutions of higher learning that is truly committed to progressive learning, an institution that molds the passion of individuals in an extremely vigorous way,” Jerrilynn D. Dodds prepares to become the next Dean of Sarah Lawrence College in August, replacing Pauline Watts.

Professor Dodds, who has spent most of her academic career at City College of New York (CCNY)—most recently as distinguished professor and faculty advisor to the provost for undergraduate education—will be making a rather dramatic transition from a sprawling public university on Convent Avenue in upper Manhattan to a small, private liberal arts college in tree-lined Westchester County. Among the many attributes that attracted her to Sarah Lawrence is its unique advisory program, patterned after the Oxford/Cambridge system in Britain, whereby each student is matched with a faculty “don” with whom he or she works closely to design an individualized program of study. Dodds also gave high marks to the “activist values” that are instilled in the Sarah Lawrence student body: “[Sarah Lawrence] doesn’t want to just give an education to their students; they motivate their students to want to go out and change the world, and they do that across disciplines,” she enthused with an incipient pride in her new institution.

Her departure from CCNY will be bittersweet. Calling her mentors—provost Zeev Dagan and president Gregory Williams—“visionary leaders, dedicated to public education,” Professor Dodds added, “I’ve learned so much from them.” Her respect for the student body she will leave behind is equally vigorous. “A lot of [CCNY] students come from high schools where they have not had consistent preparation across the board” and there are often “intense financial difficulties” with “many first



Jerrilynn Dodds

generation students from families who have never gone to college,” she reflected thoughtfully, adding, “They are often working, giving money to their parents, supporting themselves and others, and facing the unknown... nothing for me has compared to working with them because of their courage and bravery.”

A scholar of Medieval, Islamic, and Hispanic art and architecture (Professor Dodds’ resume is overflowing with numerous books and scholarly articles which she’s written and edited, in addition to prize-winning films and critically acclaimed projects she’s curated for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Newark Museum, and the Jewish Museum, among others), she is a fervent believer in multiculturalism. “There are over 100 mosques in New York City. In every office, every day, Muslims, Jews, and Christians are going to work together, having lunch together, and shopping at the Gap together...Why is this not better under-

stood?” she asked rhetorically. She’s equally supportive of interdisciplinary studies: “There is not a wall between creative arts, social sciences, and writing, for example... It’s all very permeable. The creativity used in the social sciences is the same kind of creativity that’s used in the visual arts,” she explained, adding that Sarah Lawrence President Karen Lawrence is a strong proponent of interdisciplinary education. Noting that the number of art history majors at City College increased substantially during her tenure, she pointed to the many career opportunities available to students whose passion leads them to the arts, including filmmaking, playwriting, advertising, public relations, digital arts, website design, and industrial design, not to mention painting and sculpting for those who wish to pursue “pure art.” “The key is that you nurture the desire of students to make art that reflects the ethics and values that are important to them,” she concluded thoughtfully.

It’s clear that Professor Dodds, whose own love of art was piqued while an undergraduate herself (“I was traveling in Provence, France, and I came upon these extraordinary Romanesque churches that were so deeply beautiful... it was a visceral aesthetic experience,” she recalled in awe), will bring her unique combination of scholarship, dedication to undergraduate teaching, and art appreciation to the undergraduate community at Sarah Lawrence. Remembering her Ph.D. professor and mentor, Harvard professor Oleg Grabar (“he was one of the great teachers... at a time when many were teaching Art History by identifying art and dating it, he was interested in the social and political meaning of the art”), she summed up with quiet conviction: “He made art thrilling to me. That is my life’s work.” #