PROFILE

PETER JORGENSEN
PROFESSOR
GERMANIC LANGUAGES

A summer job with Lufthansa Airlines in Nuremberg between his sophomore and junior year at Princeton University changed Peter Jorgensen's career plans and altered his outlook on life.

"Before that summer, I was just a geo-chemistry major who had to take German in order to graduate," says Jorgensen, now a professor of Germanic languages.

"But during the first semester of my junior year — right in the middle of an experiment in X-ray crystallography — I decided that I could work extremely hard and become an average scientist or I could work just very hard and become a good linguist."

And a good linguist is what he became — one who is fluent in German, Icelandic, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish, as well as a number of extinct Germanic languages.

Jorgensen's life-changing experience in college and post-graduate studies in Vienna and Copenhagen, convinced him that traveling and studying abroad is a vital aspect of a complete education.

That is why as coordinator of the UGA Foundation Fellows Program, Jorgensen pushes the Fellows to take advantage of their annual stipends to travel and study. "When I first took over as coordinator nine years ago, only a few of the Foundation Fellows had ever left campus," he says. "We were able to expand the program, and this year we have 28 using their stipends and going to places like Hong Kong, Rome, Egypt, Tunisia, Korea, Germany, France, England and Austria."

Once Jorgensen starts talking about the Foundation Fellows, there's no stopping him. "I love this part of my job," he says. "My goal is to recruit the best college prospects from around the nation. Our national search also enhances the academic image of UGA by showing people around the country how serious our university is about attracting the very best students here to Athens."

These scholars, whose SAT scores are well over 1400, are selected each spring after two days of interviews on campus. They are chosen based on high school averages, leadership abilities, extracurricular activities, letters of recommendation and community service.

"We are looking for well-rounded individuals who we can snatch from the clutches of the Ivy League schools," Jorgensen says. "These Foundation Fellows serve as role models for the other students in their classes. And they keep our professors happy because it's challenging and fun to teach really bright students."

From more than 300 applicants across the United States, a selection committee of faculty and UGA Foundation Trustees narrows the list to about 10 new Foundation Fellows annually. The 1993-94 Fellows will be announced later this month.

Once the new Fellows are on campus, Jorgensen says it's his job to see that they get the equivalent of an Ivy League education. "We do this through the annual travel grants, dinner seminars several times a quarter with a wide variety of speakers, special field trips and many gatherings and events so the Fellows can learn from each other while here and become a close-knit group."

Jorgensen also feels responsible for sending the Foundation Fellows off to the "best graduate schools" in the United States. "This will greatly enhance our reputation when it becomes known that the best students in the field have undergraduate degrees from the University of Georgia," he says.

It was the large number of graduate students in Germanic languages at UGA that helped to lure Jorgensen from the University of California at Riverside in 1976. "There were enough so that at least a few might become interested in taking the somewhat esoteric courses I teach here like German Dialectology and Germanic Heroic Literature," he says.

After graduating magna cum laude in Germanic languages from Princeton University in 1963, Jorgensen studied German dialects for a year as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Vienna. But when he heard that the "world's greatest" Scandinavian linguist had moved to Harvard University, he decided to study linguistics and foreign languages for seven more years.

During two of those seven years, Jorgensen studied in Europe — one year at the University of Copenhagen and the Armamagnae Institute with a George C. Marshall Fellowship and one year at the University of Vienna. His wife, Else, a native of Austria, says her husband would still be a student "if he hadn't needed to support a family."

After receiving a master's degree in linguistics and a doctoral degree in Germanic philology, Jorgensen finally switched his classroom role from student to teacher — a job he's well-suited to as evidenced by the number of teaching awards he's amassed over the years.

Jorgensen also has received the M.G. Michael Award for Research and the Creative Research Medal from the UGA Research Foundation.

Every year Jorgensen braves the cold, wind and rain of Iceland for a month of research, which ranges from identifying and editing medieval Icelandic manuscripts to searching for 18th-century saga forgeries.

In his spare time, Jorgensen pursues a quirky hobby: in his backyard, in a fenced-in area and a pond made from a sunken bathtub, he provides living quarters for homeless land and water turtles.

"Call it my reversion to childhood," says Jorgensen of the reptile foundlings he's collected since he first moved to Georgia. He says his turtle population ranges between 10 and 20. His students, who accidentally found out about this diversion, obligingly bring him any turtles they find.

"Well, they're multiplying in my backyard, so I guess that indicates they are happy in their new home," he says. "After all, I don't eat them."

—Muriel Pritchett

PETER JORGENSEN

E D U C A T I O N

Doctorate in Germanic philology, Harvard University, 1972.

Master of arts in linguistics, Harvard University, 1971.

Bachelor of arts in Germanic languages and literatures, magna cum laude, Princeton University, 1963.