



Are We Reading?

Why and how do Milton students learn to love reading, and to read “properly and well”? Does that love of reading continue in the Milton “afterlife”? How does reading fare in the lives of Milton graduates today?

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Alethia Jones—a specialist in American urban and ethnic politics—always wanted to teach at a public university. She was eager to give back to society, after having received scholarships to Milton, Columbia and Yale. “A Better Chance” scholar, Alethia came to Milton from a Brooklyn public middle school, having lived in the United States only two years at that point.

Alethia has taught and researched at MIT, University of Virginia and Yale, while holding numerous fellowships, and also taught at Mt. Holyoke College. Now, teaching upper-level introductory courses in public policy at the University at Albany (UA), she has had reason to refocus on her own learning process at Milton. Many of her students transfer to Albany after their second year in a community college; this is their first year in a four-year institution. “These students want to learn,” Alethia says, “but they have not yet developed the basic critical thinking skills that I have taken for granted since high school. I am learning what it means to teach students who did not attend a ‘college prep’ high school: College is the place where they will learn those skills.

“My ‘aha!’ moment about Milton came at graduation when I realized that my brain had expanded. Previously, I had been taught to be a good worker and follower; to comprehend what was asked and perform assigned tasks well and thoroughly. My brain felt larger because I had somehow acquired the ability to question everything in a disciplined way, to ask big questions, to determine what should be done, not just do what I was told. This was the cumulative result of Milton’s educational enterprise in my life. I had no idea how the faculty accomplished it. Now I needed to help my students do the same thing. The Ph.D. is a research degree, not a teaching degree. I



found myself thinking, 'How did they do that?'—thinking more about pedagogy than ever before.

"My focus is helping my students learn to think critically and write effectively, so that they can learn how to meet a new set of high expectations. I use a Portfolio system, which allows them to practice their writing skills without fear of grades. At the end of the term, they have a dozen pieces of writing, mostly one-page essays and summaries based on the readings. Writing summaries reinforces a fundamental skill: comprehending an author's key arguments and recounting them succinctly. To write, they have to read closely. They must understand and take seriously the authors' concepts, and rework—for the purposes of the paper—what the author has said. They're welcome to give their own opinions *only* in conversation with what the authors have said in the text. This represents a hefty set of challenges for students with divergent skills, and without exposure to processing of this sort. They're very eager to give their opinions; but those opinions aren't very meaningful when they're not connected to the text, or to reading.

"In academic writing, the arguments and concepts of others must be engaged and applied in a meaningful way. Replicating in class the arguments they have with friends is not sufficient. Instead, they must enter into a conversation with authors they have read. One's self-expression is disciplined by situating it within arguments and evidence presented by scholars.

"One of the most insidious of cultural expectations is also possibly the greatest barrier to their making progress. That is, they are wired to find out the 'right' answer. The related corollary is 'What does that professor want?' I explain that the reason for the expectations of them is to assist them in navigating the world. The analytical essay format builds skills

that employers expect college graduates to possess; it is not an idiosyncratic torture device invented by Professor Jones.

"I try to guide them to discern the main argument, and to identify the critical evidence, because authors are certainly not trying to keep that a secret. Their anxiety, though, is that they don't know what to read *for*. This point helps to explain why I use the Portfolio. It is also part of the right/wrong orientation. Instead of engaging with the readings and trusting that they understand what the author is saying, some students always wonder whether they are getting what the professor wants them to get from the reading. I want them to get what the author is trying to convey. A strange circular thing occurs: They look to me to tell them the answer and I look to them to tell me what they learned from the reading.

"Teaching requires finding and inventing techniques that allow students to build new skills while reducing their anxiety. Each year I learn something new. I developed the Portfolio when I realized students needed a way to practice new writing skills and deepen their engagement with the reading. My teaching assistant and I ultimately decided to identify the key words from the reading for students at the start of each lecture. While I hesitated to do anything that might strengthen that right/wrong dynamic, that move lessened students' anxiety,

and at the same time provided a point of departure for productive discussions that clarified meanings and vetted contradictions. Next time, I'll incorporate the key words into the syllabus, to anchor and direct their reading.

"The choice of readings is one of those meaningful things. I try to find case studies where the content (and therefore the knowledge they both bring and take from it) is consequential—where the policy choices are important. That helps everyone get engaged. For example, so many [of my students] are from Long Island, I assign segments of Robert Caro's book *The Power Broker*, about the politics surrounding the creation of the Triborough Bridge, the Long Island Expressway, and many of the bridges, tunnels and parks that shape the New York metro area. I also assign excerpts of *The 9/11 Commission Report* and ask them to analyze the day's events in light of classics such as Weber's definition of the modern bureaucracy as a rational, hierarchical order run by experts.

"Am I enjoying this role? I'm grateful. I've become a better teacher. Learning rests less in what I 'cover' and more in what they retain, in what sticks. I try not to give them answers. Instead, I seek to place dilemmas and contradictions before them and ask them to reason through and create informed assessments."

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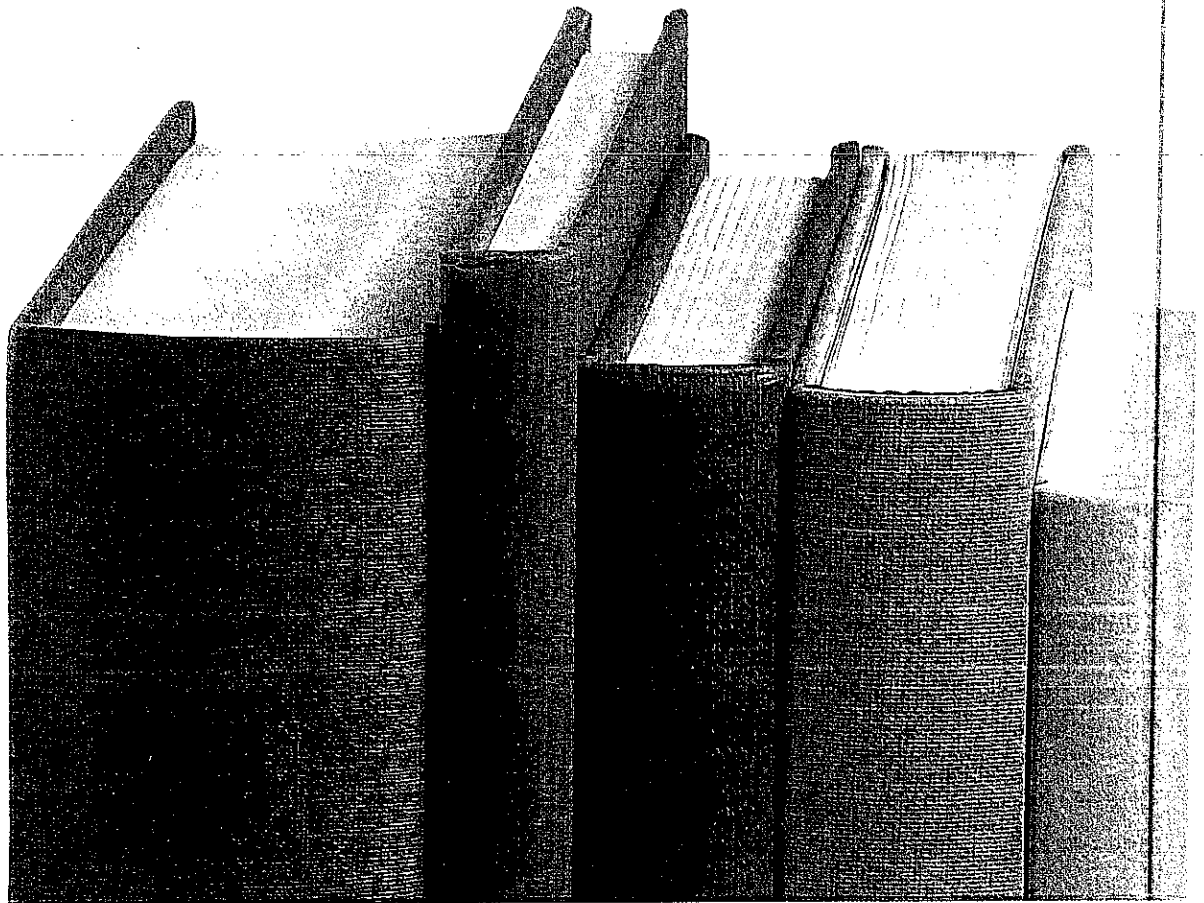


Alethia earned M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in political science at Yale University (2005). Her primary teaching and research interests are in the fields of American politics, particularly urban and ethnic politics, the politics of the policymaking process and American political development. She studies how public policy integrates immigrant communities into U.S. society. Her book manuscript, From Liability to Asset: Immigrant Social Networks and the Politics of Community Banking, 1900–2000, identifies how new laws relied on social networks of Jewish, Eastern European and Haitian immigrants to build linkages between socially marginal immigrants and government-regulated banking institutions, such as credit unions, neighborhood banks, Fannie Mae mortgage financing. She has received research fellowships from the Ford Foundation, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the University of Virginia, and the Center for the Study of Race, Inequality and Politics at Yale University. She served as senior research associate for the Community Renaissance Fellows Program, a HUD-funded comprehensive community development program headquartered at Yale University.

The Art and Power of Reading

“What will life be like if people stop reading?” Caleb Crain asks in his *New Yorker* essay “Twilight of the Books.” Reading for pleasure by young Americans as they progress from elementary through high school to college has fallen off, just as it has among adults. The National Endowment for the Arts, having analyzed data from diverse sectors like the Census Bureau and the federal labor and education departments, released these findings at the end of 2007. Announcing the study, “To Read or Not to Read,” then NEA chair Dana Gioia described the data as “simple, consistent and alarming.”

The share of proficient readers at twelfth grade in America declined from 45 percent to 35 percent between 1992 and 2005. The NEA found that since 1982, “the percentage of Americans who read literature has declined not only in every age group but in every generation—even in those moving from youth into middle age, which is often considered the most fertile time of life for reading,” according to Mr. Crain.



The publishing industry is in decline; increased television viewing has been documented to worsen performance in reading, science and math; and video is growing as an element in the Internet mix.

At the same time, Milton alumni frequently sound the theme we heard from Liz Forward, Class of 1998: "One thing I got from Milton doesn't translate directly to any single outcome. I learned how to read: properly and well, for pleasure and enjoyment, and for learning. It was an excellent gift. It was a key part of any career success I've had."

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Cathleen D. Everett

