

Graduate Student Spotlight



Kirsten Kumpf

PhD - German

*BA, German and Communication Studies -
Luther College*

MA, German - The University of Iowa

**Winner of 3rd Place in the Humanities
Division at the 2007 James F. Jakobsen
Graduate Conference**

Please describe your thesis project in a short sentence.

My thesis focused on the writings of Anant Kumar, an Indian author living in Germany and writing in German. It examined a long history of literary interaction between Germany and the East and particular attention was devoted to two of Kumar's recurrent literary themes: "movement" with reference to progress and "the establishment of identity" through the use of language.

How did you decide to go to graduate school?

After finishing my BA at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, I interned for a year as an assistant to the director of International Studies at a technical university in southern Germany. Many of the students whom I advised and counseled were pursuing advanced degrees. Thus, I had the opportunity to witness learning through the eyes of many international students. During my stay in Germany, my curiosity to learn beyond the undergraduate level peaked. My fascination with foreign languages and literatures coupled with a deep interest in European, more specifically German, culture led me to apply to graduate schools. I realized that I would only feel fulfilled if my future included teaching and learning in a university setting as well as a constant focus on internationalism.

What made you decide to go to graduate school at Iowa?

Throughout the years, I have developed a special connection with the state, Iowa. By attending a liberal arts college founded by Norwegian settlers and located in a community, which prides itself on its Norwegian heritage, I encountered a strong passion for international cultures and languages at the undergraduate level. Although often underrated for its heterogeneity, Iowa has filled my life with many moments of diversity both in the classroom and in the community. In discussing my options with my German professors at Luther (both of whom received their Ph.D.'s at Iowa), I was encouraged to apply to Iowa. My communication with The University of Iowa's German Department was very rewarding. Immediately, I recognized a very personal and supportive department, which welcomed and encouraged me. I was excited about the many opportunities including the possibility of a year-long teaching position in Germany. In this sense, decision-making was easy.

What are some of your interests outside of school?

Running, family & friends, traveling, reading, attending concerts and cultural events, maintaining friendships abroad, learning how to be a better cook



What are your long-term goals beyond your graduate degree?

My expected date of graduation is in the spring of 2009. I have a strong commitment to teaching and scholarship and thus hope to find a position, which would allow me to contribute in both areas. My area of specialization includes 19th century and contemporary German literature with an emphasis on film and female authors. Ultimately, I would like to teach at a liberal arts college much similar to my alma mater, Luther College. Throughout my career, I desire to be very active in study abroad programs and would welcome the opportunity to take student groups to German-speaking countries. Having taught at the University of Dortmund, Germany for one year, I also can envision teaching at a European university should the opportunity arise.

How has being a graduate student at Iowa prepared you to achieve those goals?

During my four years as a TA, I have acquired new teaching methods, developed my own teaching persona and philosophy, and I have achieved a greater sense of creativity and structure with regard to pedagogy. Most importantly, I have established a greater level of self-confidence, which will help me as I teach in the future. My positions as graduate student and research assistant have prepared me equally well. My professors have encouraged and supported me to seek conferences where I can showcase my work while simultaneously gaining additional perspectives concerning my research interests. Academic conferences and guidance from my professors have influenced me greatly and have shaped me into a more knowledgeable, well-rounded scholar.

Do you have a particular mentor who has played an important role in the development of your thesis or your career trajectory?

It is very difficult for me to name only one person who has influenced my career trajectory. Throughout my life, I have been very fortunate to receive vocational guidance from so many individuals, and I am thankful to each and every one of them.

You are a winner of one of the top awards at the Jakobsen Conference in a previous year. What did you enjoy most about the Jakobsen Conference experience?

After having attended conferences outside of Iowa, I looked forward to presenting my work amongst friends and colleagues. The atmosphere at the Jakobsen Conference was one of pride, excitement and extreme support. Recognizing the many talents and ideas, which are present right here at our very own university was exciting to me, and it reaffirmed my respect for and admiration of our institution. Oftentimes the collective talent gets overlooked as each graduate student strives to succeed on his/her own. This conference, however, underscored how each student's contribution in a graduate school environment is equally significant; all graduate students are involved in making Iowa what it is, and we should celebrate all efforts. I was very honored to participate in such a conference.

Are there any particular challenges you've faced as a graduate student at Iowa?

Facing many different tasks is challenging. Life as a graduate student requires one to juggle many things simultaneously which can seem rather daunting. At the same time, however, successfully accomplishing these various responsibilities results in feelings of success. Sometimes I wake up in the morning wondering how it all will get done and yet it always does. The great challenge lies in the ability to organize, prioritize and successfully to distinguish between the 'big' and the 'small' things. When I first started grad school, I frequently felt a bit overwhelmed with the amount of different expectations. Now, I feel much more in control; I welcome serving on another committee, staying an extra hour or organizing a departmental event because I have become much better at organizing and prioritizing my schedule.