Cynicism. We hear about it all the time. The level of public discourse has gotten so low, so mean-spirited, that it is turning off people who might otherwise want to participate in the public sphere. The Wesleyan Media Project, led on campus by Assistant Professor of Government Erika Franklin Fowler, did a great job this fall of tracking and analyzing the enormously increase in political advertis- ing, much of it negative in tone. We can all see a general decline of confidence that any meaningful discussions are to be found in the public sphere. Should we describe this decline of confidence as the growth of cyni- cism, or as an intelligent reaction to our contemporary context? Cynics are no fools, and one might even describe cynicism as the effort to protect oneself from appearing foolish. One of the hallmarks of contemporary cynicism (with ancient roots) is the rejection of conven- tional standards. The cynic delights in re- jecting the criteria of those with power and engaged this rejection is often mixed with contempt. Cynics know “that the es- tablished order is wrong—corrupt, unnatu- ral and unjust—and their knowledge can give them a sense of superiority. We reject the established ways of the world because we know better. But cynicism about politics and the public sphere does not lead them to change the way things are. Instead, it leads to a with- drawal from public life, a withdrawal that is justified by the cynic’s belief in his or her own superiority. We cynics know better, and we know that participation in public life is for those who just don’t understand the ways things really work.

Another dimension of cynicism is the belief in one’s own self-sufficiency. Cynics don’t have to engage in the public sphere because they have developed a way of life that doesn’t require engagement. They have nothing to gain from interacting with others who don’t share their views, and they find reinforcement from other cynics who also reject this kind of interaction. A community based on rejection reinforces its members’ autonomy from the dominant culture and their proud alienation from it. They feel they don’t need to engage because their cynicism gives them a sense of self-righteous autonomy. Cynicism may be particularly prevalent among young people, and psychologists even have a specific measure for adoles- cent cynicism, A-cyn2, on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. As an educator, I find this youthful attitude to be particularly worrisome, because above all it protects students from learning. Behind the facade of the knowing rejection of the status quo, behind the defense of the self-sufficient community, is the fearful refusal to engage with new possibilities. Cynics have already made up their minds, and people who have made up their minds believe they have noth- ing to learn.

When you participate in the public sphere, you have to open yourself up to the views of others, and real engagement means being open to change. That’s why civic participa- tion should be part of every student’s edu- cation. Participation is a public experiment through which you discover things about the world, about yourself and about the possi- bilities for change. Public engagement is challenging because you may be surprised that the people or systems about which you’ve already reached conclusions are more complex than you’d ever imagined—more complex and more important for shaping the future.

I am so pleased with our efforts thus far to build on the educational value of Wesleyan’s traditions of civic engagement. Our students are working in so many contexts—from hos- pitals and homeless shelters to regulatory agencies and public schools—and then re- flecting on their experiences when back on campus. They are learning that the liberal arts aren’t just relevant to the four years of college, but that our broad education can have an immediate connection to the work they are doing in the public sphere.

In this age of degraded political dis- course and anonymously funded attack ads, it’s easy to see the reasons for the cynical withdrawal from public life. But when students turn themselves off to en- gagement and participation, they are cut- ting themselves off from learning as well as depriving our public sphere of their energy and ideas. At places like Wesleyan we turn back the tide of cynicism, our students re- sist the temptation to withdraw from pub- lic life in jaded self-satisfaction, we remind them that if they don’t engage in shaping their future, somebody else will do it for them. Students at Wesleyan discover that stimulating and rewarding work is to be found by engaging with others in trying to make the public sphere a more meaningful environment for all of us. We not only wish them well. We depend on them! UPRIGHT

“...our students resist the temptation to withdraw from public life in jaded self-satisfaction…”

**BEST OF THE BEST**

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is par- tnering with Judy Hussie-Taylor, execu- tive director of the Danspace Project, and Pamela Tatge ‘84, MAL ’10, director of the CFA, in a month program intended for early- and mid-career working professionals. Through a close examination of the practical and theoretical concerns of per- formance work, ICPP students will deepen their knowledge and skills, enhance their professional relationships, and become better advocates for performance in the marketplace.

The ICPP was founded in 2010 by its di- rector, Samuel A. Miller ’75, and Pamela Tatge ’84, MAL ’10, director of the CFA, in partnership with Judy Hussie-Taylor, execu- tive director of the Danspace Project. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation is par- tially funding the program.

“The ICPP aims to understand how per- formance can function within multiple land- scapes, by building new models for under- standing contemporary performance prac- tice,” explains Tatge. “The ICPP will serve as a meeting point for artists, principals, Mech students and students to share ideas and resources in both formal and informal ways. By creating a rigorous and creative learning environment, enhanced and energized by the outside activ- ities of its students and instructors, the ICPP will provide students and instructors with a base for their future professional endeavors.”

Currently there is no postgraduate pro- gram in the United States that is dedicated to addressing curatorial practice in perfor- mance. The ICPP looks to fill this gap, as an interest in contemporary performance con- tinues to thrive even though the recent eco- nomic recession has hit arts organizations particularly hard. uHop

**‘BEST OF THE BEST’**

The American Physical Society award- ed Chia Wei “Wade” Hsu ‘10 this year with its prestigious LeRoy Apker Award for his achievements while at Wesleyan.

Only one student from a PhD-granting institution receives the award each year. Reinhold Blümel, the Charlotte Augusta Ayres Professor of Physics, calls it a “mini- Nobel Prize.”

The award provides encouragement to young physicists who have demonstrated potential for scientific accomplishment.

“This means that Wade out-competed students from MIT, Stanford, Harvard, Princeton and CalTech,” says Hsu’s former adviser Francis Starr, associate professor of physics. “He’s the best of the best.”

Hsu was elected to the Connecticut House of Representatives.

John Hickenlooper ’74 was elected Governor of Colorado, and Michael Bennett ’87 was elected Senator from Colorado.

Peter Shumlin ’79 won the race for Governor of Vermont.

Kathleen Clyde ’01 was elected to the Ohio State House of Representatives.

**ELECTION DAY WAS A GREAT DAY FOR WESLEYAN ALUMNI CANDIDATES**

MATT LESSER (in-process) was re- elected to the Connecticut House of Representatives.

Dan Wolf ’79 was elected to the State Senate in Massachusetts, representing Cape Cod and the Islands.

And Brian Frosch ’86 was reelected to the Maryland State Senate.