High Times and High Spirits at High Table Dinner

By Brittany Young
Co-Editor

Last Wednesday evening, students and faculty gathered together for a night of good food, good company, and good conversation. Each quarter, Warren College’s Provost Steven Adler hosts High Table Dinner as an opportunity for students and faculty to interact outside of the classroom, laboratory, and office hour environments. The event was first hosted by Provost Adler in the spring of 2005 and has seen few changes since its creation. The only notable change made between then and now has been a slight increase in size to accommodate more students and faculty.

As its official description will tell you, the concept of the High Table Dinner “is loosely based on the Oxford and Cambridge tradition, where college faculty and students dine together in a formal and intimate setting.” During the night, Professor Lisa Cartwright from the Department of Communication compared High Table to the faculty table in the Hogwarts dining hall familiar to many students from the fictional Harry Potter series. Professor Douglas Magde from the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry made a similar comparison between dining at High Table Dinner and being invited to dine at the Captain’s table of a cruise ship.

In any case, the setting is more formal than the usual student-faculty interaction with multiple forks and fancier dress, while the atmosphere remains curiously more relaxed than that found in an expressly "High Table" continued on page 2
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Academic setting. There were no concepts to cover or material to memorize with these professors. With roughly a 2:1 student-to-faculty ratio and no academic agenda, conversation flowed easily from topic to topic.

As both a participant and Warren Briefs reporter that evening, I chatted with Provost Adler, Professor Magde, and Professor Samuel Rickless (of the Philosophy Department) throughout the course of the evening. Topics of conversation that I encountered ranged from post-graduation plans to Jewish culture. Also in attendance were Professors Darren Schreiber, Kevin Quest, Jin-Kyung Lee, Jerry Doppelt, Jim Bunch, and Doug Nitz, representing disciplines across campus including political science, engineering, literature, philosophy, mathematics, and cognitive science respectively. From what I was able to overhear, it seemed that some groups discussed professors’ scholarly research but many conversations centered on subjects beyond both professors’ and students’ own areas of academic expertise.

In truth, the goal – and realization – of High Table Dinner goes far beyond the nametags and formal place settings. As Provost Adler puts it, “I want students to know that faculty are accessible and interested in them. They attend on a completely voluntary basis and do so because they are interested in creating that relationship… outside of the usual student-faculty interaction.” And the professors do care. Just like the students, they come for the company and conversation. They come for the chance to meet new people whom they otherwise may never have run into. As High Table Dinner veteran Professor Jim Bunch of the Mathematics Department even noted with a chuckle, “This is the only time I talk to people who aren’t math majors!” If nothing else, the High Table Dinner is a way to help students understand that professors are people too.

When I asked other students in attendance how they felt about High Table Dinner, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. As Hayley Hansen, currently a first-year political science major, noted, “I think it’s great to meet new people and would really recommend it for freshmen and sophomores who are still intimidated by their professors.” First-year students Park Tuan and Paul Paik echoed their recommendations of the event, adding that “It’s nice to have some good food” – food which, the on-campus students at High Table Dinner agreed, is better than that available in the dining halls.

As the evening ended, a number of faculty and students approached Provost Adler to express their thanks and appreciation for the event. “I really got a lot out of this,” said first-year bioengineering pre-med major Ryan Nock. Third-year psychology major Samantha Knobloch also added that, as far as meeting new faculty goes, the event was “a big help, being a transfer student.” For faculty and students alike, the dinner was, as usual, a success.

If you’d like to take part in a future High Table Dinner, keep an eye on the weekly Warren Events emails for more information. You can also email in your name, major, PID, and email address to waprovost@ucsd.edu