

Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



May 2021

The biographical sketches were written by staff and
colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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In the Nation's Service and the Service of Humanity

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MICHAEL JENNINGS



Michael “Mike” Jennings, the Class of 1900 Professor of Modern Languages, professor of German, and longtime chair of the Department of German, will transfer to emeritus status this spring after four decades of distinguished service on the Princeton faculty. Mike is a beloved teacher, a tireless University citizen, and a renowned interdisciplinary scholar of German literature, intellectual history, and critical theory. His name is closely associated with that of the German-Jewish philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, whose English-language reception he single-handedly shaped as a translator of numerous canonical works, as editor of the multi-volume edition of Benjamin’s Selected Writings at Harvard University Press, and as the co-author of a massive and much-lauded intellectual biography of Benjamin. Indeed, so striking was the impact at Princeton of Mike’s scholarly and pedagogical commitment to Benjamin and the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School that an esteemed former colleague in visual arts would often jokingly refer to Mike’s department at Princeton as the Center for Walter Benjamin Studies.

Born in Columbus, Ohio, Mike grew up in Tuscon, Arizona, and then went east to pursue his undergraduate studies at Dartmouth College, where he graduated with a bachelor of arts in comparative literature in 1972. After two years living and working in Germany, he decided to pursue a master of arts in religion at Yale Divinity School, where he met his future wife Susan Constant, before going on to do his graduate work in German literature at the University of Virginia.

Mike came to Princeton in 1981 as an assistant professor in what was then called the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures. He was granted tenure in 1987 and promoted to full professor a decade later. A devoted undergraduate teacher and advisor, Mike spent nine years during the 1990s as the popular head of Rockefeller College, one of Princeton’s residential colleges. His tenure there with his wife Sue, raising two young children amidst the cacophonous intensity of daily life with a few hundred undergraduates, is remembered for, among other things: the particularly vibrant program of faculty fellows that he nurtured; the active encouragement of musical performance in the life of the college, which he promoted by purchasing a Steinway grand piano that is to this day a resounding centerpiece of the “Rocky” common room; and his intervention, together with Professor David Carrasco,

then head of Mathey College, that led to the abolition of the “Nude Olympics,” a feat long thought to be unimaginable.

As chair of the soon-to-be-renamed Department of German from 1999 to 2012—following numerous stints as both director of graduate studies and director of undergraduate studies—Mike worked to shift the department from its longstanding traditional focus on literature to one that was more vibrantly interdisciplinary, and with a faculty that was both younger and increasingly marked by gender parity, thereby helping it regain its status as one of the top departments in the field. Like many of his colleagues, Mike’s scholarship and teaching was wide-ranging and robustly interdisciplinary, a fact acknowledged by his appointment as an Old Dominion Professor in the Council of the Humanities and his being selected for the Graduate Mentoring Award for outstanding Ph.D. supervision.

Mike’s scholarly corpus is framed by two important volumes, both of them devoted to the life and work of Walter Benjamin. The first, his 1987 monograph *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Literary Criticism*, a milestone in the exegesis of this notoriously complex thinker, remains a foundational text in the now vast secondary literature on this figure. The second, the nearly 800-page *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, co-authored with Howard Eiland, was published to huge acclaim in 2014 and was translated in Italian, Korean, and Russian, with Dutch, Chinese, Spanish, and German editions forthcoming. But his enormous impact on the English-language reception of Benjamin may equally be due to a series of collections of canonical Benjamin texts that Mike edited for classroom use, including *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*; *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (co-edited with Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin); and *One Way Street*.

Mike is currently working on yet another major intellectual biography, this one devoted to the vast output of the prolific writer, lawyer, filmmaker, and television director Alexander Kluge. Based on hundreds of hours of interviews with Kluge and his contemporaries, it promises to be a cipher for the complex cultural-historical landscape of postwar Germany.

An exceptionally engaged citizen of the University, Mike was a member of a wide and extensive range of committees and task forces including (but by no means limited to) the Steering Committee on Decennial Accreditation, which he co-chaired from 2011 to 2014; chair of the Task Force on Dining and Social Options (which

completely reformed the University Dining System); the Committee on Appointments and Advancements; the Priorities Committee; as well as the following committees—Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences; Admissions and Financial Aid; International Experience; the Library and Computing; Grading; Language Teaching and Learning; the Firestone Library Renovation; Humanistic Studies; and Undergraduate Life. He was also a member of the Executive Committees of the Council of the Humanities and the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program in the Humanities.

On top of Mike's service to the University, he was also the director of the Alexander Kluge Research Collection at Princeton University and the co-director, with Ben Morgan and Anthony Phelan, of the Oxford-Princeton Research Collaboration in German. He served as co-chair of the Executive Committee of the International Walter Benjamin Society, sits on the Executive Committee of the International Uwe Johnson Association, and is an editorial board member of the journals *Vermischte Nachrichten: Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch*; *Transit: A Journal of Travel, Migration, and Multiculturalism in the German-Speaking World*; *Rivista di letteratura e cultura tedesca*; and *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy and Culture*.

Mike was also very generous in his public service to the larger Princeton community, sitting for many years on the boards of the Westminster Foundation, the Princeton Youth Fund, the Princeton-Blairstown Center and the Cetana Educational Foundation (which provided support for the education of young people in Myanmar), and Princeton AlumniCorps. He served as the Convener of the Robeson Interracial Working Group on Public Education in Princeton, and through his engagement, in collaboration with his wife, assisted in the resettlement in Princeton of a series of refugees from Bosnia, Sudan, Iraq, Burma, and Syria.