



UNIVERSITY OF
ST. THOMAS
HOUSTON

UST'S PHILOSOPHY PROGRAM WOWS AT HOME AND ABROAD

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Philosophy graduate student at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas

By all accounts, representatives from UST's Center for Thomistic Studies are making an extraordinary impression at philosophy conferences nationwide and internationally.

"It's a small program," noted PhD candidate Brian Jones, "but every time we go to conferences, they say we are the top students they've seen at the conference."

Melissa Prazak, who graduated this year with an M.A. from the Center, would agree.

"We would go present at conferences, and people would say, "Oh, you're from St. Thomas—that's why your paper was so good," she remembered.

As the only U.S. graduate philosophy program focused on the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, the Center is renowned for its prolific scholarly

contributions, rigorous academics, strong Catholic identity and exceptional postgraduate job placement, according to John Skalko, a PhD candidate and adjunct philosophy professor at the Center.

Recent graduates, he noted, include Daniel De Haan, PhD, who accepted a post-doctoral fellowship at Cambridge University. Sr. Anne Frances Ai Le, O.P., PhD, has joined the faculty of Corpus Christi College in British Columbia, while current PhD candidates such as Jones and John H. Boyer are fast becoming fixtures at well-established online publications.

"If you really want to study Aquinas, come here. If you want to become a really clear thinker on the concrete issues of today, come here," Skalko said.

"It's incredibly successful."

PhD candidate Catherine Peters, who holds a B.A. in philosophy from Sacred Heart Major Seminary and an M.A. from the Center, said other institutions raved to her about UST's philosophy professors and graduates.

"People all over the place were recommending I come here," she said.

'A Definite Advantage'

Francisco Plaza, who is pursuing a PhD in philosophy and teaches in Spanish at St. Mary's Seminary, said he first heard about UST from his father, who had also been impressed by the Center's contributions at a philosophy conference.

Unlike other graduate philosophy programs, which often hold a cynical view about objective truth and the human capacity to grasp it, Plaza said the Center espouses not simply "an open-ended, vague pursuit of knowledge," but rather "a definite focus."

"We do think there is something we can know about the world," said Plaza, who already has an M.A. from the Center and received the American Maritain Association Graduate Student Award in 2015.

"That's a definite advantage we have."

PhD student Brian Jones said he was also attracted by the Center's vibrant Catholic community. Like Franciscan University, where Jones received a B.A. and M.A. in theology, the life of faith at UST "isn't something external, but comes into every facet of the intellectual life," he observed.

That's because Catholic universities recognize that "faith isn't something that hinders intellectual pursuits, but [rather] frees them, and makes them more robust," he said.

Like other students from the Center, Peters said she became hooked on philosophy because the discipline seeks answers for life's essential questions regarding meaning, happiness, truth, and knowledge.

"I found in philosophy a structured study aimed at answering questions I had had my entire life," said Peters, who serves as adjunct philosophy instructor for both St. Mary's Seminary and the Dominican Sisters of Mary Immaculate Province.

"I considered law and medicine, but my interests always came back to a philosophical level."

Prestige, Rigor and Friendship

It's a level at which Peters excels: like most of the Center's graduate students, she can already point to an impressive list of publications in peer-reviewed journals and respected Catholic publications; a packed schedule of presentations at prestigious national and international conferences; and mastery of numerous foreign languages (Peters spent last summer studying Arabic at the University of Michigan, and speaks American Sign Language in addition to German, French, Italian, Latin and Greek.)

"I've found the discipline that I'm really interested in," she said.

All of the students interviewed said they were struck by both the program's unrelenting rigor, but also by the strong sense of friendship and support among the Center's students and faculty.

"It's harder than I expected, but also more rewarding," Plaza said. "The main thing that's gotten us through the difficulties of grad school is that we all feel called to teach and write about these things. We feel what we have to offer and what we are teaching will always be valuable."

"Vocationally speaking, God was calling us," Jones said of his decision to move to Houston and pursue a PhD despite a growing young family.

"My wife and I both have loved UST and the community here."