

Spring 3-2017

# Dr. David Sweet: Staying the Course with a Liberal Arts Education

Rachel Fountain

*University of Dallas*, [rfountain@udallas.edu](mailto:rfountain@udallas.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.udallas.edu/oralhistory>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Fountain, Rachel, "Dr. David Sweet: Staying the Course with a Liberal Arts Education" (2017). *Oral History Interview Projects*. 22. <http://digitalcommons.udallas.edu/oralhistory/22>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education at UDigital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral History Interview Projects by an authorized administrator of UDigital Commons.

1 Rachel Fountain: So my name is Rachel Fountain and I am sitting here with Dr. Sweet the  
2 associate professor and chair of the Classics department at the University of Dallas. Thank you  
3 so much for allowing me to interview you. Once again do I have your permission to record this  
4 interview with the full knowledge that the recording and transcription will be housed in the  
5 University of Dallas Oral History Repository?

6 David Sweet: By all means, Rachel, happy to do it.

7 RF: Perfect. The first question I wanted to ask you is what is your background in education?

8 DS: Do you mean where I did I go to school?

9 RF: Yeah.

10 DS: I went to a boys' school in New Hampshire called Exeter. And I went to Harvard for a B.A.  
11 in English, then I went to the University of California at Berkeley in English and got an M.A.,  
12 but then in the middle of that I had come to realize that I needed to revive my Latin, a little of  
13 which I learned in high school, and start Greek. I had an experience as a Junior in college with a  
14 very kind man...my roommate and I were in a dining hall saying foolish things about Plato's  
15 *Republic* and he very kindly interrupted our conversation and demonstrated quickly to us we  
16 didn't know what we were talking about. We'd been taking a course in the *Republic* from an  
17 eminent philosopher, who didn't like Plato, and we simply absorbed his incorrect opinions.  
18 [Laughs]

19 RF: [Laughs]

20 DS: And this man who corrected us was very kind. He said to us—we were both English  
21 majors—"you don't know how to read." This was startling. We were sure of course we read very  
22 well. "In any case I'll prove it to you. I am free Thursday afternoons from two to five, and let's  
23 read a Platonic dialogue, *Ion*. It's only seventeen pages long, and I'll translate it for you, and  
24 we'll talk about it." That's what we did for a whole semester, and of course very quickly we both  
25 realized we didn't know how to read; it became also clear that we couldn't go further in life  
26 without knowing Greek, so that's what I did when I went to grad school. And at one point in  
27 what I guess was the middle of my third year, my advisor looked at my schedule for the next  
28 semester and said "I don't see any English on your schedule—it's all Latin and Greek. Are you  
29 sure you're an English student?" [Laughs] And I said, "Well actually you're probably right." So  
30 I switched. [Laughs] — That is where I got my Ph.D. in Classics. And I taught at Berkeley for a  
31 while as an instructor and I taught at Ohio State, and then I came here where I have been  
32 extraordinarily happy [Laughs]; this place actually cares about Classics as a university. Berkeley  
33 and Harvard and Ohio State and so forth--they all had very good Classics departments but they  
34 weren't central to the curriculum in the way in which Classics here is. There are so many core  
35 texts which were originally in Greek and Latin and so many departments that cooperate with us  
36 and we have lots of double majors and so forth. So one doesn't feel as if one is in an isolated  
37 discipline. The Classics department was on the third floor of the library in the back end of it at  
38 Berkeley, and no one ever went there unless they were in Classics; here people come by all the  
39 time. So it's a very healthy environment for somebody in Classics.

40 RF: How long have you been a part of the faculty here?

41 DS: I came in 1979--1980 with another young teacher, Wayne Ambler, and he and I shared many  
42 experiences. *[Laughs]* In those years—we were even going to write a book on the university,  
43 which is such a wacky place, then even more so than perhaps now, but loveable. We never wrote  
44 that book because we knew it would just be filled with anecdotes and everybody would know  
45 whom they were about *[Laughs]*

46 RF: *[Laughs]*

47 DS: And we would be fired...so... But in any case it was a wonderful time to come here and a  
48 real refuge for so many faculty who had taught elsewhere, and when they came here, then they  
49 realized this is rare. And increasingly so as education at the tertiary level deteriorates.

50 RF: And then you are chairman of the Classics department so what are your duties as the  
51 chairman?

52 DS: Oh, to keep my door open and talk to people—that's pretty much it. *[Laughs]*

53 RF: *[Laughs]* Yeah and when did you become chairman? Is that something...?

54 DS: Well I was director of the Classics program when we were part of foreign languages—  
55 modern and classical languages were all part of one department, and then I became graduate  
56 dean, Braniff dean in oh maybe 2001...something like that...and gave up the position of the chair  
57 of Classics. And then when I stopped being dean whenever that was in 2013 or so, then I became  
58 chair of Classics, replacing Karl Maurer who was a fantastic member of our department and  
59 chair for the period from 2006 to 2012 something like that... did you know him?

60 RF: I did—I met him for a short time.

61 DS: He was a splendid teacher—really got a lot of people to do things like study the Neo-Latin  
62 poet, Jacob Balde, who is practically unknown and is a wonderful poet. And Dr. Maurer had a  
63 keen ear, loved poetry and knew an enormous amount of it—probably more than anybody in the  
64 university, a lot of which he had in his marvelously retentive mind, and he wrote penetrating  
65 articles on poets, but what his great achievement was—was the translation of the *Georgics* into  
66 English verse—a beautiful poem in itself, which we need to get published. I hope.

67 RF: ...which is the class you are teaching this semester...the *Georgics*.

68 DS: Yes, this would ordinarily be the class that Karl would teach and we can't give it up. But it's  
69 very hard to duplicate—he actually made people decide to change their lives by studying the  
70 *Georgics*. We have several grads who did senior projects on the *Georgics* and so forth. And he  
71 was a kind of Pied Piper; he'd play his tune and get everybody to march wherever he wanted to  
72 take them. He was a great teacher.

73 RF: And so what is your philosophy and what do you see to be the main goal of education?

74 DS: Oh, to enjoy life—to understand and enjoy life, of course. What else is there to do but read  
75 and think and talk about all the things that you find in great literature and philosophy, theology

76 and history...whatever... I like Classics because you can do it all. You do have to stay within  
77 antiquity but the classical tradition of course is rich and you can browse around in it, enjoying  
78 everything and knowing much more than people who don't have that background in Classics.  
79 You can't read most English poetry with the same eyes if you don't know Latin and sometimes  
80 Greek. Because everybody until the last century or well into it was raised on Latin from the age  
81 of five or six, Greek from the age of ten or twelve. All education was for three or four centuries  
82 was Classics: Greek and Latin. And of course it worked because classical texts covered the  
83 whole range of what we call academic disciplines, so it's a treat—you're automatically  
84 interdisciplinary and that was one reason I switched I think. I really love English literature and I  
85 also like philosophy, poetry, theology and history.

86 RF: What changes have you seen in education over the years?

87 DS: Unfortunately, at the primary and secondary school levels the education that one gets now is  
88 far inferior to what we had fifty years ago, and I just see it getting worse. There's fortunately a  
89 movement to try to restore some sanity in education. To my mind education is simply reading  
90 good books, reading them with the help of the teacher, discussing them, reflecting on and  
91 learning how to write by using them as models. It's the best way to learn how to write. The  
92 Adams, Abigail and John Adams, everybody who becomes acquainted with them sooner or later  
93 finds the letters that they wrote to each other which were fascinating. He in Philadelphia, she up  
94 in Quincy, Massachusetts, where the family had their private home and it's interesting to know  
95 it's a historical site and a place fun to visit. They wrote letters to each other a lot; and they're  
96 online, you can even see facsimiles of them and of course they have beautiful handwriting. And  
97 they discussed everything, and she was very intelligent and learned. And on July 4<sup>th</sup> I think in  
98 1776 in fact—maybe July 5<sup>th</sup>...they exchanged letters about how to teach their children how to  
99 write. And it's a letter about cultivating the epistolary style, and the advice was that's a good  
100 style to use to learn how to write. Of course it gives you more latitude--you can be anecdotal,  
101 you can describe, you can use colorful language and so forth so it's a little different than an  
102 analytic paper you might write in Lit Trad I. And what did they recommend as models? Pliny.  
103 And Cicero. What Pliny? John just happened to mention two letters on the eruption of Vesuvius  
104 that Pliny wrote and sent to Tacitus. That's how one should learn to write English, that is to say  
105 by reading very high level letters by Latin authors, and that's still my opinion. That's the way to  
106 learn to to write--by reading good models. I think of course, as you know, people ought to be  
107 learning Latin at an early age and then learn Greek as a treat later on, and after you have had a  
108 considerable amount of Latin, Greek is not so tricky—it's got a huge verb system, but essentially  
109 it behaves in many of the same ways as Latin. Unfortunately, certain obvious verities have been  
110 forgotten. Irving High School--my kids went to Irving and MacArthur--the high schools here, in  
111 the darkness of the night that envelops them, dropped Latin and German so they only teach  
112 French and Spanish now. At a certain point, they even said for the English classes Shakespeare is  
113 too tough—no Shakespeare. *[Laughs]* And I think one of the UD grads taught English there and  
114 she disobeyed; she got her junior class to read Macbeth—they loved it. And then she got  
115 them...I'm told this anecdote I hope it's true *[Laughs]*...she got her students seriatim—to stand  
116 up on chairs in the cafeteria at lunch reciting portions of the play, and everybody quieted down  
117 and was transfixed wondering “what is going on?” and people immediately were charmed. It's

118 hard not to be. It's just ridiculous to say "no, Shakespeare's too difficult." Good things are  
119 difficult of course, but you live with them, and they just have a power and beauty that is  
120 irreplaceable. Don't dumb down the curriculum. And that happens all the time or it becomes  
121 politicized unfortunately—the history, the teaching of history is in shambles because of this  
122 notion that you've got to have politically correct texts and so forth. And the result is the most  
123 important dimensions of history are neglected and looked at through very biased lenses. That's  
124 slavery. That's what it is. So...and the teachers are enslaved who teach this. We had a great  
125 corrective program here when the U.S. Department of Education at one point in the...I guess it  
126 was early 90s...or later 90s, had a lot of money that they were able to award for what they called  
127 the teaching of traditional American history. It had to be document based and oriented around  
128 the notion that as citizens we need to know what was in the minds of those who put together our  
129 government. It was really traditional. And we got an award...I don't know; it was a lot, about  
130 660,000 or something... for three summer programs in which we prepared the ground for  
131 teaching American history; one was classical sources and one was modern, reading Locke,  
132 Rousseau, and so forth. And the third was founded on the basis of the Federalist papers, just like  
133 Politics 1311 and on to Tocqueville and so forth. It was very successful, the teachers— a lot of  
134 them came; they loved it. It was so refreshing from what they had been doing or required to do,  
135 and it was needed. Now that was some time ago, we probably need to do that continuously— but  
136 the government does not see fit to supply the money continuously. This was a big program, there  
137 were hundreds of schools and colleges who applied for the grant. We were told ours came in  
138 third best. It was a really good program. That kind of thing is a sign though, and this was quite a  
139 while ago, more than two decades ago, a sign of real deterioration in this instance in secondary  
140 school education. But we're holding the fort I am glad to say—more and more lonely though. I  
141 don't know how many colleges now have no requirements; famous places like Brown, Bowdoin,  
142 and so forth—none. And those that do have requirements, they tend to be distribution  
143 requirements. Very few places have curricula for instance in which there are fifteen courses that  
144 everybody takes and that have a stipulated reading list so all of you who are undergrads share  
145 this enormous wealth of magnificent texts and the lenses through which you can look at life—it's  
146 very hard to see life straight on. It is very helpful to have lenses through which to look at it, and  
147 that's what a good book is. So it's great if you share, as you do, a certain number of them. I  
148 enjoy—I've taught Lit Trad III in Rome from time to time-- I really enjoy the bus trips, and one  
149 of the reasons I do is to listen to the conversations that are going on behind me on the bus. And  
150 they are on a very high level, they are very spirited and they are about things that are very  
151 interesting. And they are about books—and that you don't find in very many places. So that's  
152 why I really like being here. And any faculty member thinking, not just about the humanities,  
153 would say that's right. What makes this place distinctive and so lovable is the core. Plus the good  
154 students that come here—they're a real treasure our students are. They like to learn amazingly  
155 enough. And they're not cynics, they don't think that there's no point in inquiry into the truth  
156 because there isn't any; it's all just self-satisfaction of one kind or another and small pleasures.  
157 And that is a shame... It means that life becomes unintelligible. And we're fortunate never to  
158 have lost it—I was at Berkeley and of course that place collapsed. Ohio State, Harvard—they  
159 have all lost any coherent curriculum that they used to have. I think kids really need help; it's  
160 good that they actually have to read. They have the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid* [Laughs] in

161 their first semester, suffer through these things together. Where else can you read the *Republic*  
162 and the *Ethics*, and those three epics, as freshmen? It's a treat. And it means for faculty--it's a  
163 privilege because you can teach with the knowledge that people have some acquaintance with  
164 those texts and you start connecting things. Everybody talks about the great conversation and  
165 that's right. Authors are conversing with their predecessors; it's particularly clear in Classics  
166 because you can see everybody talked to Homer. Herodotus complained about Homer, he  
167 corrected him. Thucydides complained about Herodotus, corrected him. Plato talked about  
168 Thucydides, Herodotus, and Homer—corrected them. That is to say they are engaging them in  
169 conversation. That's what this curriculum does for us. Do you agree?

170 RF: I do agree, yeah. *[Laughs]*

171 DS: *[Laughs]* I don't know any UD student who doesn't agree. We get a lot of cooperation from  
172 students. And I think the students here are nice to each other—they form fast friendships of  
173 course, but I've seen students elsewhere, and they're not so nice to each other. And we're not a  
174 politicized campus; we don't think it's important that every now and then we march down Main  
175 Street and throw bricks through bank windows, which happens at many universities. They shut  
176 down for political reasons. But not here. I used to and I suppose I still do think it might have  
177 something to do with the fact we're in Texas, which tends to be a little more conservative than  
178 say San Francisco or New York, if I may employ meiosis.

179 RF: Right.

180 DS: And the pressure on the university to give up its core never developed to the extent that it  
181 did elsewhere, which was really fortunate. We were a young university and the core was new,  
182 but we didn't have political riots here. There was a "sit in" once, I'm told. It was rather late in  
183 the semester—spring semester. And some of the boys thought "sit ins" were going on  
184 everywhere and we needed to have one of these to maintain self-respect.

185 RF: *[Laughs]*

186 DS: So they went into the office of the person then who was the dean of men, Jim Fougrouse.  
187 It was on a Friday afternoon. And they explained to him they were going to sit in. He said, "Fine,  
188 let me send out for some beer," so they got some beer and he talked for a while. Then he said,  
189 "Well now I've got to go home. So I will see you on Monday." And he left them in his office,  
190 and he went over to facilities and said, "Turn off the air conditioning." *[Laughs]* They were out  
191 of there pretty soon. *[Laughs]* So much for a sit in.

192 RF: *[Laughs]*

193 DS: So for one reason or another I think we didn't suffer the pressure in the 70s and the 80s to  
194 change. There's this wonderful National Association of Scholars report on Bowdoin, and it's a  
195 devastating indictment of what is going on. Bowdoin—a very respected, solid liberal arts  
196 undergraduate college—in 1967 had a new president. He came--a Rhodes scholar, brilliant, and  
197 he came in and said "we are going to do things differently...we're going to get rid of all  
198 requirements." That's what they did way back then. And it was the National Association of  
199 Scholars that—an organization very interested in understanding what's gone wrong with college

200 education--asked itself how are we going to study the decline and how are we going to document  
201 it. And this was one way of looking through one lens at one college which is representative—it's  
202 a long document, three hundred pages or so. It really shows you what the effect is when you do  
203 that. And there was, of course, a huge difference between the graduates from before then and  
204 those now. And the graduates from before then are terribly distressed of course at how their  
205 beautiful college has been ruined. *[Laughs]* And that's going on—has gone on—in so many  
206 places--giving up the whole notion of liberal education and also becoming simultaneously  
207 politicized.

208 RF: Is there anything you would say that you agree with in modern education? Because I know  
209 you used the word unfortunate...

210 DS: Well I guess that depends on where. One thing I like to see is at the primary and secondary  
211 school levels, I like the Great Hearts academies. I think Hillsdale is also doing what they can  
212 with their founders' academies. Those tend to be traditional in their approach to the curriculum,  
213 mainly reading good books, and not being afraid of their being too difficult--obviously  
214 sometimes when one introduces good books too soon you have to be careful about how you do  
215 that, but don't underestimate the capacity of kids to respond to something that's a fantastically  
216 good book. I had a friend who used to substitute teach just for the fun of it in Irving. And when  
217 he—when he was called, it was very often to deal with intransigent boys who were very difficult  
218 to deal with and of course misbehaved. My friend--actually what he'd do is he would take them  
219 out to the track where there were stands for people to sit in. And he'd read Shakespeare's sonnets  
220 with them. And they really liked them. They have to do with love problems, you know, the kinds  
221 of things high school boys have lots of problems with; they were very interested in them. It can  
222 be done. It's, you know...what is it Alder's: "What's good for the best is good for everybody"—  
223 something like that. That's a principle on which we live, makes a lot of sense to me. They do the  
224 work for you—good books often. This pabulum that often replaces them drives kids crazy. You  
225 know the Latin in Rome program we have in the summer gets very good high school kids. We  
226 typically ask them, "Well, what have you been asked to read for the summer? Do you have any  
227 summer reading?" And they laugh, saying, "This stuff is junk. We don't read it." *[Laughs]* To  
228 mention again the National Association of Scholars--they collect summer reading lists just out of  
229 curiosity to see what the books are, and what they are looking for are what they would call  
230 "Classics"—things that have been a staple in education, good books. And they found the first  
231 one they would call a good book was Number 123—it's was Sophocles' *Antigone* and it was  
232 only there because it was a feminist tract—crazy. *[Laughs]* So I appreciate having the  
233 opportunity to ask high school kids—they're good students—what's going on. And they have  
234 this ability to say "that's junk." *[Laughs]* You're asking them to read stuff that's so dull it's  
235 drippy, and I know all of that and it's also you're treating me as if I'm full of prejudices and that  
236 I need to have all these cleaned out somehow. I'm not. *[Laughs]* It's boring—give me something  
237 good and I'll read it. *[Laughs]* So we give them lots of good stuff in Latin... Yes, it's sad—those  
238 are signs of the time I guess.

239 RF: Then the next question I had for you is why should someone study foreign and classical  
240 languages?

241 DS: Oh, otherwise your brain goes dead. You have to. There's no way in which you can  
242 understand your own language adequately if you don't triangulate it. And among the languages  
243 that are most useful for triangulation would be Latin and Greek. Then you can add French in the  
244 middle and German over to one side. There are languages of course that are very close to English  
245 for one reason or another historically and illuminate the language, but in order to understand  
246 language, especially grammar, you have got to learn Latin and Greek. Grammar is a Greek word.  
247 They're the first ones who took the instrument—it's all we've got to confront the phenomena  
248 with—language. And they took that and said the phenomena are very difficult to understand  
249 when you look at them directly, but look at them through speech. So we are going to study  
250 Greek. And they are the first grammarians, the first ones who made the distinction between a  
251 noun and the verb. And they did it on the basis of what's static and what's kinetic. It's a  
252 philosophic basis—it's the difference between above the divided line and below the divided line  
253 in the Republic. And that comes right out of Greek and you can see that's what Plato did,  
254 Socrates, and others before him—they looked at their own language in order to understand the  
255 phenomena by understanding how language worked. So you have to have a foreign language,  
256 and I recommend of course Latin and Greek because they are the foundation of Indo-European  
257 grammar analysis.

258 RF: Then what do you envision to be the direction of future education?

259 DS: Downhill. Without the help of—a lot of parents of course have really good instincts and they  
260 are becoming dissatisfied with education. And of course they are looking for alternatives. And  
261 homeschooled kids of course come here in great numbers for that reason. Whatever else is  
262 available to them, their parents think is inadequate. But you definitely want schools to be a big  
263 help so you hope they can be revived in a way that existed not so long ago. My knowledge of  
264 small towns in Texas is that the whole education program there worked because of a couple of  
265 teachers in primary and secondary school. And especially Latin teachers--there were a lot of  
266 them and of course they have been disappearing and hard to replace—that's a huge loss. It  
267 doesn't take much studying of the history of education to see how fundamental Latin was. For  
268 that reason you can see kids who come here to UD--they don't know any grammar. Maybe  
269 they've gone to a good parochial school, might have gotten a nun whopping them on the  
270 knuckles with a ruler, telling them you've got to learn the parts of speech. Yeah... So everybody  
271 agrees if you've got a couple of good teachers in your background, that's enough to get you  
272 started on the right track. So I'm hoping to keep the public school system solid, but I think that  
273 one of the ways to do it is to have it demonstrated to school boards and superintendents that their  
274 system isn't working. But there is a way that is working awfully well and my example of course  
275 is Great Hearts—I don't know when they started--what? twenty years ago in Phoenix? Recently,  
276 there was a study of the top fifteen high schools in Arizona and eight of them were Great Hearts,  
277 and they based that simply on SAT scores since those were standardized. And at Great Hearts  
278 they don't teach to the tests, they're just reading, and it seems to work. And they do start Latin in  
279 the 5th grade and Greek in the 11th. Of course I think that there's something about Greek and  
280 Latin that is good for the brain—it makes it work better. Sometimes I have a parent come to me  
281 and say "Is there anything you can do to convince my son or daughter not to major in Classics?"  
282 And I send them to our website where we show them who does best on the GRE, LSAT, the

283 MCAT and so forth—it's Classics majors. Not the nuclear physicists—although they do very  
284 well on the analytical, but not so well on the verbal. And the Classics majors do pretty well on  
285 the analytical and they blow away the verbal. So something is going on in the brain that is good  
286 for it, and you can see that not everybody agrees with me...even in this building. "Oh, French  
287 and German are just as good for the brain" Maybe... *[Laughs]*

288 RF: Is there anything else you might like to add to this?

289 DS: Oh that's a pail full of stuff. Yes, well I would say that it's very important that the world  
290 know the University of Dallas and that we not let it change. Of course, we are all worried about  
291 change to accommodate ourselves to the audience that we are seeking to draw here. I do think  
292 the word beacon has been used many, many times. And we surely are one, but we're not  
293 sufficiently well-known. We're getting to be better known because of where our grads go. In  
294 Classics I know when they go off to Ph.D. programs, they compare themselves with students  
295 who are coming from other universities, a lot of them of course ivy leagues and so forth. And our  
296 students are better. They know more. That is to say the core has given them a general liberal  
297 education and then their major is one that they practice with great skill and authority. We have  
298 these wonderful stories about...do you know Rebekah Spearman? Were you here when Rebekah  
299 graduated?

300 RF: Maybe at the end...

301 DS: Yes, she went to Chicago which gave her a huge fellowship of \$24,000 a year for five years.  
302 And she came in a class with a bunch of people from the Ivy League and they all had a  
303 qualifying exam after two years in Latin. And the faculty came to Rebekah afterwards and said,  
304 "Rebekah, we're embarrassed that you did so much better than everybody else, we don't want  
305 them to know, but we would like you to know." And that's a story that I've heard from a number  
306 of different universities where we've sent kids. Our grads know the big books better, and they  
307 also know Greek and Latin better. So it's important to me that we retain what we have, not dilute  
308 it. And there are some other good schools who have joined us in this endeavor--you know  
309 Hillsdale, something like that, but we're better. Go in to ask Andrew Moran and other people  
310 who have taught at Hillsdale and here, and like Hillsdale, but can definitely say why they prefer  
311 UD. Yes...so... my exhortation: stay the course.

312 [DS: Have we got a class coming up?

313 RF: I believe we do.

314 DS: Yeah, later, mhm. Good... Anything else I need to do...

315 RF: No, I think that is all...

316 DS: ... to make this a satisfactory event for whatever you need?

317 RF: It was plenty satisfactory, thank you...

318 DS: Sure.

319 RF: ...so much. I'll go ahead

320 DS: By all means.]