Sleep research awakens students to a basic need

“Everybody has an interest in sleep and can relate to it,” says J. Roxanne Prichard, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Bates. “But we really don’t know why we need sleep or what it does for the brain and for the body. Sleep research is a fascinating, untouched field with ubiquitous human interest.”

Prichard brought the topic to Bates in 2005 with the Short Term unit “Explorations in Sleep Research.” Her students visited a sleep clinic at nearby St. Mary’s Regional Medical Center, observing how disorders like sleep apnea and narcolepsy are measured. They also traveled to the Chronobiology and Sleep Research Laboratory at the nation’s first psychiatric hospital for children, Bradley Hospital, a facility directed by Brown University sleep expert Mary Carskadon.

The students did their own sleep research, too, including a sleep-deprivation study that kept members of the class and other volunteers awake all of one May night. They measured the effects of sleeplessness on their physical vital signs and on such academic skills as note-taking and problem-solving.

If everyone is curious about sleep, the subject is of particular interest to people of high school and college age. Her students, says Prichard, are “coming from a high school environment where they got a lot of consistent sleep. Now they’re thrust into Bates, where they’re up until 3 or 4 a.m. and have to do rowing practice at 5. They’re experiencing a lot of sleep debt.”

In fact, research is bearing out something students have known about themselves for years: Adolescents and young adults just aren’t at their best early in the morning. “They’re still at an age when they’re more evening types or undifferentiated types, rather than morning types,” Prichard says.

One of her thesis students researched variations in students’ cognitive ability at different times of day. “There’s a very significant time-of-day effect on when students are better able to respond quickly and appropriately to basic cognitive tasks,” Prichard says.

“I know students prefer to take classes later in the morning and in the early afternoon,” she says, “and tend to avoid 8 a.m.”

Meet David Scobey

Bates established the Harward Center for Community Partnerships in 2002 to coordinate the College’s diverse community-outreach efforts, including the service-learning program, student volunteerism and the Bates-Morse Mountain Conservation Area.

Last spring, David M. Scobey came from the University of Michigan to head the center, joining the faculty as the Donald W. and Ann M. Harward Professor of Community Partnerships. Known for his work in community-based learning, Scobey was the founding director of the university’s Arts of Citizenship program, which harmonizes academic and community interests.

Scobey sees a twofold mission for the Harward Center. “One part is engaging in community partnerships and collaborations, based on dialogue with our community, that add to the well-being of the community,” he says.

For the second part, he says, community engagement in higher education “excites students and activates their learning. It generates new questions for faculty in their research. It leads to reflection and progress in terms of educational values and practices.”

“So for me, the center is a 50-50 proposition between civic engagement on the one hand and educational transformation on the other. They feed each other.”
When Will Boe-Wiegaard ’06 was looking at colleges as a teenager, he harbored no doubts about his tennis-playing abilities. It was his academics that made him nervous.

“I never paid too much attention to schoolwork when I was in high school,” said the Georgetown, Conn., native. “I had terrible study habits. I looked at places like Bates or Middlebury, and I didn’t know if I could handle the academics.”

Still, Boe-Wiegaard was intent on coming to Lewiston after meeting Bates’ tennis coach, Paul Gastonguay ’89. Gastonguay, who went on to play professional tennis and for a time as a hitting partner with the legendary Ivan Lendl, made an immediate impression on Boe-Wiegaard with not only his resume as a player, but also his forthrightness and knowledge of the game.

“Paul is such a great coach. We’re lucky to have him,” said Boe-Wiegaard.

With Gastonguay’s guidance, Boe-Wiegaard has shown progress in his game every year, to the point where he reached the NCAA Division III singles finals last spring and is Bates’ third-ever All-American, after Gastonguay and Buddy Schult ’81. He finished the fall 2005 season by slicing through the singles field at Bates’ annual Wallach Invitational, winning the semifinal and final rounds by a combined score of 24-1 over opponents from Tufts and Amherst.

A history major, Boe-Wiegaard now takes equal pride in overcoming academic challenges. “That was such a big thing for me, learning how to do the work and proving to myself that I could do it,” he said.
Everything seems crisp and enduring on a fall morning at Bates.