

**TABLE TALK WITH
BARBARA EGGERS '66 (HON.); P'89, P'91** | By Beth Brosnan

Glancing at a copy of her Exeter curriculum vitae—a lengthy, single-space list of positions held, dorms supervised, committees chaired, clubs advised, sports coached, honors received—Barbara Eggers shakes her head and says, “Seems like I can’t hold a job.”

She’s joking, of course. Eggers came to Exeter in 1982 as a part-time history instructor. Two years later, she became a full-time faculty member; in 1995, chair of the history department. And for the past six years, until her term concluded on June 30, she held one of the biggest jobs there is at Exeter: dean of faculty. (The first woman in Academy history to be appointed to the post, Eggers was succeeded on July 1 by the second: science department chair Kathleen Curwen.)

At Exeter, “the dean of faculty is responsible for the well-being of the faculty,” a short but sweeping charge that includes everything from hiring, evaluating and reappointing faculty members to overseeing their dorm and committee assignments and tending to their ongoing intellectual growth—while also serving as “the principal’s chief adviser in academic and curricular matters.”

Or as Eggers puts it, “You’re an agent of the institution, but also an agent of the faculty. It’s important to balance those two goals”—to find faculty who are a good match for Exeter, and then to recognize them for the good work they do and provide them with the resources to do more. “There are some amazing talents here,” she says of Exeter’s close to 200 faculty members. “You stand there wide-eyed, and hope you can support them in some way.”

Eggers’ respect for good teaching probably stems from the fact that she has spent most of her life in school. She grew up in western Massachusetts, attended Cathedral High School in Springfield and completed two years of college before she and her husband, Jim, an Air Force officer, had the first of their two children, both of whom would later attend Exeter. Lt. Cmdr. Jeffrey Eggers ’89, a Navy SEAL executive officer who has served in Iraq, was recently named a White House Fellow; Jennifer Eggers Chaudhari ’91 is a physician who lives with her family in Concord, NH.

When she returned to college in the 1970s at UNH, it was with the intention of getting a degree in business—until she was assigned some readings in Chinese philosophy as part of a course on managerial thinking. She was, she says, fascinated by this window on an ancient civilization, then in the midst of tumultuous change. “Growing up in the cold war era, you want to know, How did we get to where we are today?” She signed up for a history course on modern China “and never left the history department,” earning her B.A. in 1980, and, two years later, her M.A. in American history with a concentration in both Chinese and Russian history.

At Exeter, she teaches courses in American and Asian history. “To me, Harkness is the ideal way to study history,” Eggers says, “because it gets students involved in the analysis,” whether the topic is China’s ongoing evolution or the history of slavery in America. That analysis begins with questions, and at the Harkness table Eggers poses a steady stream of short queries—“Is this believable?” “Can we draw any conclusions?” “Can we step back?” “Can we go a little deeper?”—that enable students to better address really big questions like “What allows one people to enslave another?” While she is careful to keep discussions on track and to flag faulty conclusions, Eggers rarely steps in to supply her students with answers. “You have to let them wrestle with the material,” she says.

Giving faculty the chance to be students once more was a priority for Eggers in her role as dean, including an off-site program this summer that took 13 Exeter faculty members to Mystic Seaport to study *Moby Dick* with English instructor Harv Knowles. And last summer, Eggers was one of 16 Exeter faculty members who traveled to Beijing, Nanjing and Shanghai as part of a three-week study tour organized by former trustee Phil Loughlin ’57; ’76 (Hon.)—“an amazing educational opportunity,” says Eggers of her first trip to China. She also takes satisfaction in the great strides the Academy has made in improving faculty housing, and in the appointment of an associate dean, history instructor Ron Kim, to oversee faculty recruitment. “Ron knows the life of an Exeter teacher, and can

explain it well and fairly,” she says.

Yet Eggers’ tenure was also marked by tragedy: the untimely deaths of history instructors Addie Aquilino and Marcia Carlisle, and of English instructor Rex McGuinn—losses felt deeply by their colleagues and students. And then there was the day-in, day-out challenge of balancing the Academy’s multiple needs with those of its faculty—not always an easy job, and the one most likely to keep her up at night. In June, she was recognized for her “distinguished and faithful service” when she received a Radford fellowship, one of the top honors given to Exeter faculty and administrators.

But Eggers’ greatest reward remains the thing that drew her to history and teaching in the first place: helping students explore how we got to where we are today. She’ll spend her sabbatical year reading and reflecting, planning curriculum for her courses, and catching up with family. But then it’s back to school, which is just how Eggers likes it. “It’s great fun to work with the students,” she says. “I’d rather be in the classroom than anywhere else.”



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