

# GS COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

## PETER AWN

### CELEBRATES 10 YEARS LEADING GS

BY BETH KWON

It's easy to get caught up in Dean Peter Awn's enthusiasm as he describes the objets d'art that crowd his homey corner office in Lewisohn Hall. Visiting him is almost as if you've happened upon a well-stocked New York City antique shop and its proprietor is happy to give you a private tour. Among Awn's collection are a 16th-century Turkish plate decorated in the intricately-patterned Iznik style, a mid-1800s Chinese-Islamic

incense burner with delicate Sini (Chinese Muslim) script that Awn found on eBay, and a hand-painted burlap tapestry from India that he proudly admits he discovered at a flea market, only to see a similar one in a Sotheby's catalog.

Awn's eye for the unusual

and even eclectic item is part of what makes him perfectly suited to serving GS's unique student body. "The students are interesting because while they are looking for a rigorous, Ivy League education, they've come to it in a very nontraditional way," says Awn, who has been dean for 10 years. He jokingly refers to the GS Honor Society, a group of current and former students with 3.8 GPAs or better, as the "tutus or Uzis," owing to the preponderance of retired dancers and former members of the military, two groups of people who have gravitated to GS.

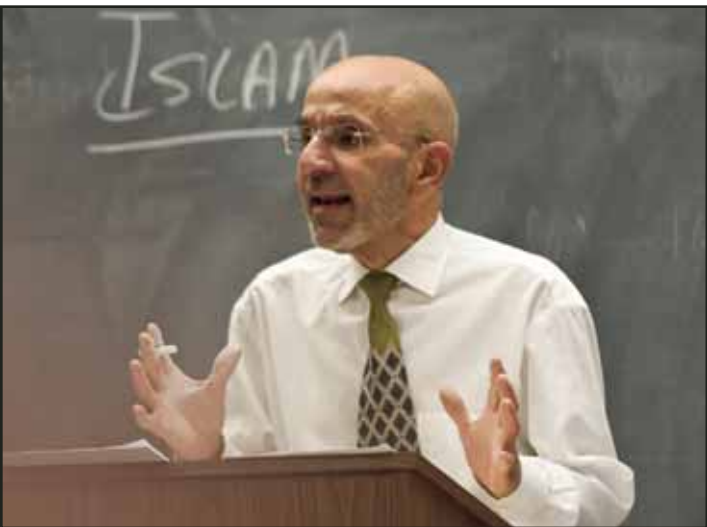
Kidding aside (although Awn's wit is rarely absent in conversation), he is passionate about making GS a place for students who have found their way to school despite sometimes very challenging odds. "Students often have to support families," says Awn, who is also a professor of Islamic religion and comparative religion. "And we are very welcoming to recent immigrants. We

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had a valedictorian who, when he arrived in New York, couldn't speak five words of English."

Awn's primary focus in his ten years as dean has been to integrate GS courses with the rest of Columbia's undergraduates. "We went completely counter to the patterns in adult education that had existed for half a century, and argued that students should be fully and completely mainstreamed," Awn says. "Students should be in classes with all of the other undergrads, be held to the same standards — and earn the same degree." To achieve this, Awn largely did away with adjunct-taught night classes, and required students to attend classes during the day. Fees are comparable to what a full-time Columbia College student pays per course. "If you want the 'real thing' as I would argue, you're going to have to pay the same price as everybody else," Awn says. "If you're good enough to be a part of this intellectual community we ought to treat you absolutely the same way." Awn hopes to eventually capture the same level of financial aid for GS students as well as housing opportunities that other undergraduates are eligible for.

When he's not expounding enthusiastically about GS, or trolling flea markets for items to add to his office collection, Awn still manages to find the time to teach. In the fall he teaches a seminar on classical Sufi texts, and in the spring he leads an introduction to Islam course. "I love it, and it's important for students to see that, as dean, I still know what the university is supposed to be about, which is education."



*Photo by Alan Orling*