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Nic McPhee Receives 2013 UMMAA Teaching Award

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Nic McPhee Receives 2013 UMMAA Teaching Award

Summary: Nic McPhee, professor of computer science, received the 2013 University of Minnesota, Morris Alumni Association Teaching Award.

(April 3, 2013)-Nic McPhee, professor of computer science, received the 2013 University of Minnesota, Morris Alumni Association Teaching Award. This award honors individual faculty members for outstanding contributions to undergraduate education by calling attention to educational philosophies, objectives, and methods.

Since joining the campus community in 1991, McPhee has, in the words of the nomination committee, “served as a beloved teacher and influential mentor for hundreds of students, played a vital role in shaping an outstanding computer science program, [and] created and taught dozens of excellent and enjoyable courses based on principles of liberal arts education...” Bart Finzel, vice chancellor for academic affairs and dean, affirms this statement, noting, "[McPhee] enthusiastically engages students in the continually changing field of computer science, preparing them well for the challenging and ever-changing world after graduation, with tools to be lifelong learners. He is a dynamic and skilled teacher, highly deserving of this recognition."

Claiming that, “for [him], learning is about engaging with the material and building things,” McPhee notes that creating opportunities for students to complete hands-on projects is his primary classroom objective. His courses focus on allowing students to complete tasks in the company of their peers, as he believes practical experience working in teams is a vital skill for all students, both majors and nonmajors, to acquire.

McPhee notes that his courses must also prepare students to be lifelong learners, given that the field of computer science changes so rapidly. He argues, though, that these lessons transcend academic disciplines, as students and scholars in all fields will confront enormous amounts of change as they work to define and maximize new technologies. McPhee believes that part of his role as a computer science professor is to help students understand the vast range of technologies they encounter each day.

McPhee is humbled by this recognition, noting that the effort put forth by his nominators is most appreciated. Recognizing the caliber and number of faculty members nominated this year, he adds that it is a particular honor to be recognized with co-recipient Timna Wyckoff, associate professor of biology. He adds that, “at the end of day,” he is just grateful to be a part of the campus community.

“As long as there are bright students who want to do stuff, I’m a happy guy. For any of us to succeed as teachers, it’s made easier by having really good students.”

In 1985 McPhee completed a BA in mathematics at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. He went on to earn both a MS and a PhD in computer science from the University of Texas. His areas of expertise include evolutionary computation, artificial intelligence, and software design and development.

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