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Halverson-Wente '88 receives MSCU Educator of the Year award

Summary: Halverson-Wente 2010 teaches communications at Rochester Community and Technical College.

(October 15, 2010)-Lori Halverson-Wente '88 received the 2010 Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Educator of the Year Board of Trustees Award for Excellence in Teaching. A communications professor at Rochester Community and Technical College in Rochester, Minnesota, Halverson-Wente has proven herself to be a skilled teacher, having developed a solid background as a student at Morris.

“I appreciated the small classes and the immediacy of the professors,” says Halverson-Wente. “My professors cared about me as a person.”

In fact, Professor Alberto Gonzalez, then a Morris faculty member, encouraged Halverson-Wente to add a speech communication major to her political science major. “I decided to double major due to [Professor Gonzalez’s] attentiveness. I hadn’t thought of it prior to that discussion, and now I teach within this field of study.”

During her time at Morris, Halverson-Wente was also involved in University organizations, calling Morris “a hotbed of student activism.” She called Lutheran Campus Ministry her home and served as chairperson for both Student DFL and MPIRG. “My participation in MPIRG helped me form a sense of civic responsibility and gave me an outlet to not only express my views, but to find specific actions to help find solutions.”

This sense of duty and community service would show in Halverson-Wente’s career and teaching style.

“We were above the curve at UMM. We had small classes, and students were active in service. One teacher, Dr. Dawn Braithwaite, required her students to ‘do’ something with their assignment for our Small Group Communication class. She expected that we would not only research a problem we faced, but also localize it and create an action plan.

“Our group looked at the problem of AIDS. The 1980s was a scary place as far as that topic goes. A respected member of our UMM community was open about his HIV positive status and became a strong advocate on the topic of HIV-AIDS research. We were motivated by his story and brave choice to become open about the devastating effects a person faces with HIV. We decided to address the issue of ‘safe sex’ on campus. Dr. Braithwaite had high expectations and pushed us to do more than just a class presentation.” In answer to this challenge, Halverson-Wente’s group decided to push the limit, starting with getting MPIRG and LCM involved. “We organized ‘condom give-aways’—that was radical then! I am sure our campus pastor, Eric Bakken, got some mail on this (no e-mail yet folks!). This story illustrates the expectations Dr. Braithwaite had for her students to ‘become involved!’ When teaching a small group unit, my students do the same assignment—25 years later.”

Braithwaite also required a student research project, now called a “capstone project,” a rare assignment at the time. “When I applied for graduate school, this experience, the service I was required to do, and being a teaching assistant contributed to a competitive application! I received a full ride and even an assistantship.” Halverson-Wente attributes

her graduate school success to the “great work” of Morris faculty, staff, and administrators.

This passion for engaging herself and others in helping within the community has made Halverson-Wente stand out among educators. Crediting the professors of the Morris political science and speech communication disciplines with sparking her desire to teach, she shows just as much enthusiasm on working with students as she does her philanthropy.

“The idea that by sharing information with another person you could make a difference inspired me to teach. I wanted a job that would let me be interactive and involved with people’s lives. I love interacting with my students!”

Love of teaching also pushes Halverson-Wente to find ways to infuse her pupils with the same excitement she has for her class. “I find that if I enjoy what we are doing, my students are more likely to pick up on my passion for the topic. I teach a mandatory class—how many people would take public speaking if it was not required? Therefore, I need to create a class where students not only learn a skill, but also find a way to integrate the skills into their lives.”

Expounding further on her teaching philosophy, Halverson-Wente says, “I have something to offer students and they have something to offer me. Teaching is a guided conversation. The educator brings expertise to the classroom, and a process to personalize it, but the students bring it to life.”

For anyone looking to complete a degree in speech communication, now called communication, media, and rhetoric at Morris, Halverson-Wente has a few words of advice: “Become involved in service and civic engagement activities that will give you a taste of what you would like to do with your degree. This degree allows a student so many career choices, volunteer work, job-shadowing, internships and other ‘hands on’ applications will help you better understand the theory you are studying but also will prepare you for your future in this field. I also would suggest to practice what you are studying. Effective communication is not a static theory it is a skill that you can apply to each part of your life.”

Halverson-Wente is from Cotton. Along with her husband and children—among them Morris student Naomi Wente—she is active in the Cambodia Travel Study Service Trip and program, with the next trip being this winter break. Last year, the program won the National Award for Excellence in Collaboration and Civic Engagement for Two-Year Schools. She earned a masters of arts in communication studies and a master of arts accreditation in women's studies at Northern Illinois University.

Above: Halverson-Wente

Enjoy a [slideshow](#) of Halverson-Wente's travels to Cambodia with her students.

Editor's note: The former Morris speech communication major is now called the Communication, Media, and Rhetoric major.

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