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Lawrence receives prestigious award

Summary: Pareena Lawrence is a 2006 recipient of the Horace T. Morse Award, which honors faculty who excel in teaching, research, creative activities, advising, academic program development and educational leadership.

(March 21, 2006)-Pareena Lawrence, associate professor of economics and management, is a 2006 recipient of the prestigious Horace T. Morse—University of Minnesota Alumni Association Award for Outstanding Contributions to Undergraduate Education. The award honors faculty who excel in teaching, research, creative activities, advising, academic program development and educational leadership. Lawrence has made her mark in all of these areas.

“We are absolutely delighted that Professor Pareena Lawrence is joining the distinguished—and long—list of UMM faculty members who have received the Horace T. Morse Award,” stated Sam Schuman, University of Minnesota, Morris chancellor. “This is the University of Minnesota’s highest recognition of teaching excellence, and it is recognition that Pareena richly deserves as an exciting, innovative, caring and effective educator.”

A love of teaching

Lawrence discovered her love of teaching at Purdue University where she served as a teaching assistant while completing a doctorate in economics. “I did well,” she remembered, “earning honors for the best graduate student instructor at Purdue. I loved teaching. I knew it was a strength.” As reflected in her expertise in the area of development economics, her initial career goals were focused on working for the World Bank in West Africa, but academia was to be her calling. She began her UMM career in 1994.

“I love teaching economics,” shared Lawrence. “I absolutely delight when students can connect with the subject matter of economics and finally understand what it is that we are trying to explain or model and one how one must always be careful that sometimes it is the assumptions of the model that may lead to the outcome of that model. Economics is an exciting and evolving field.”

An innovative classroom

Lawrence holds fast to three basic teaching principles: treat students as active partners in the learning process communicate high academic and personal expectations for students and model and teach critical thinking skills. Fundamental to her teaching technique are daily assignments at the end of each class period. The assignment, which might involve a group activity, a problem solving exercise, discussions, simulations or a service-learning project, provides an immediate opportunity to apply concepts presented in lecture. While the students work on their assignments, she circulates within the room, assisting students in an informal, one-on-one manner. And she keeps it fun.

“I teach some of the driest courses in economics,” stated Lawrence with a smile. “It is very important that we have fun.” In the classroom she shares many stories about herself and about alumni she has taught over the years. She reminds her students that even though she is a professor now, not everything came easily to her either during her undergraduate

years. “I also tell them about students who bitterly complained about the difficulty of my classes,” shared Lawrence. “In their professional work or in grad school, those same students e-mail me saying, ‘I am so well prepared, thank you for driving us crazy!’”

Service learning and giving back

Some of the courses taught by Lawrence focus on the fundamental of economics, statistics and rely on equations and formulas. She noted that it is very important to give her students real examples of how the information they are learning is applied. Service learning opportunities provide an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the various practical uses of econometric analysis and to encourage civic responsibility.

The Regional Fitness Center (RFC), located on the UMM campus, has benefited from students in Lawrence’s economics and management classes. Econometrics students developed a survey to assess the RFC and analyzed the data generated. The marketing class conducted focus group discussions with community members and leaders, and researched similar fitness centers across the region to develop a marketing plan for the RFC.

“Service learning provides students with an opportunity to apply what they are learning. It makes it more relevant,” said Lawrence. It also reinforces a belief that touches Lawrence deeply, a conviction that she models for her students: “You can’t live in isolation. Others have underwritten your education and contributed to your success—your community, state and your country—and you have benefited. Service learning instills the idea of giving back.”

Research as a teaching technique

Involving students in research is also a high priority for Lawrence. “Research is vital to an undergraduate education,” she stated, “even if you don’t go to graduate school. It allows a student to dig deeper into a problem. It is a wonderful teaching technique, and it helps my own research, too.”

Recent graduate Sandra Castro-Pearson ’05 conducted research with Lawrence in a project, titled “Government Intervention in the Informal Sector: A case study of Guayaquil, Ecuador.” Stated Castro-Pearson: “Pareena not only teaches her students the material for class, but also lets us know why it is important and how it can be used outside of school. She is great at connecting students with resources, getting us to work in groups and pushing us to do our best. I would have never thought of doing undergraduate research, taking more stats and math classes, or presenting a paper if it wasn’t for her advice. These are great skills that I am using right now in my job and will hopefully use in grad school in the near future.”

An article co-authored by Lawrence and Castro-Pearson, “Government Intervention in Street Vending Activities in Guayaquil, Ecuador: A Case Study of Vendors in the Municipal Markets,” will be published in the April 2006 issue of the Mexican journal *Problemas del Desarrollo*.

Teaching a study abroad course

Last December, Lawrence taught a UMM study abroad course, Globalization: Examining India’s Social and Economic Development, in her native country of India. Twenty-one students traveled with her throughout urban and rural areas of India. While the course focused on globalization, Lawrence also wanted to show her students that 50 percent of India’s people have not been touched by globalization or have been negatively affected by it. It was the first study abroad trip she has facilitated, and she can’t wait to do it again.

“Study abroad is a core element of a liberal arts education. From this small, rural community of Morris, our students are going out to experience the emerging nations of the world,” stated Lawrence. “For me, the India trip was amazing, taking a step back and looking at my country through the eyes of my students.”

The UMM experience

Lawrence shared that UMM provides a wonderful teaching environment. She is very appreciative of her colleagues both within and outside of her discipline. Often her research and that of her students' overlaps with other disciplines like political science, statistics and sociology. "Interdisciplinary work is valued here," said Lawrence, "and I have great support from my colleagues."

In and out of the classroom, students bring Lawrence great joy. "UMM is an amazing place and I am truly blessed to be in this community," she stated. "It is like a big family here. When my first son was born, there was a shortage of daycare facilities for newborns in the community of Morris. Seven students volunteered to watch Aaron, taking turns throughout the day so that I could do my job on campus successfully," remembered Lawrence. "For three months, they took care of him all over campus. Sometimes he even went to class with them asleep in his car seat. Where else would that happen?" Today, her students are still a very important part of her broader family. "They watch my boys when I have late evening meetings, come to my home for dinner when they are homesick during Christmas and Thanksgiving break. They laugh at my culinary skills though as most of the food served is cooked by Sara Lee and other better-known corporate names."

Lawrence will formally receive the Horace T. Morse Award on April 24 during the all-University Distinguished Teaching Awards Ceremony and Reception on the Twin Cities campus. She will also be honored April 27 during the UMM Recognition Dinner on the Morris campus. Recipients of the Horace T. Morse Award are inducted into the University of Minnesota Academy of Distinguished Teachers and receive the title "Distinguished University Teaching Professor." Academy members provide important leadership to the University community serving as mentors, advisers and spokespersons for the University's teaching mission. Lawrence is also the recipient of the 2005 UMM Alumni Association Teaching Award.

Lawrence earned a doctorate in economics in 1993 and a master of science in economics in 1990 at Purdue University. She received a master of arts in economics in 1989 at the University of Delhi in Delhi, India, where she also completed her undergraduate degree in 1987. During the 2002 academic year, she served as interim director of UMM's Multi-Ethnic Student Program. She makes her home in Morris with husband Todd and children Aaron (9) and Joshua (6).

Through personal and academic discovery, the University of Minnesota, Morris provides opportunities for students to grow intellectually, engage in community, experience environmental stewardship and celebrate diversity. A renewable and sustainable educational experience, Morris prepares graduates for careers, for advanced degrees, for lifelong learning, for work world flexibility in the future, and for global citizenship. Learn more about Morris at morris.umn.edu or call 888-866-3382.