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Summary: Two University of Minnesota, Morris faculty are among eight recipients systemwide of this year’s Horace T. Morse University of Minnesota Alumni Association Award for Outstanding Contributions to Undergraduate Education. Janet Schrunk Ericksen, associate professor of English, and Barry McQuarrie, associate professor of mathematics, have received the award.

(March 24, 2008) Two University of Minnesota, Morris faculty are among eight recipients systemwide of this year’s Horace T. Morse University of Minnesota Alumni Association Award for Outstanding Contributions to Undergraduate Education. Morris faculty Janet Schrunk Ericksen, associate professor of English, and Barry McQuarrie, associate professor of mathematics, have received the award, which honors faculty who excel in teaching, research, creative activities, advising, academic program development and educational leadership.

Students and faculty colleagues offer high praise about the work of McQuarrie and Schrunk Ericksen in these areas, but both recipients are humbled to have been selected for the award.

“I felt honored that I was selected for such an award,” said McQuarrie, “knowing how many tremendously gifted faculty we have at UMM who deserve such recognition.”

Schrunk Ericksen echoed the sentiment: “I fully expected NOT to receive the award this year, and I think Jenny Nellis (studio art faculty) and Pieranna Garavaso (philosophy faculty) deserve more praise than I do for their efforts in preparing the nomination and their mentoring of me.”

McQuarrie describes his teaching philosophy as one of “scaffolding learning and building bridges of communication both between students and myself and between students. I see my role…as a guide, someone who has traveled the road before…I structure course activities to encourage students to talk with me…It’s a balancing act of providing enough structure to help students succeed yet leaving enough freedom for student expression and opportunities for growth.”

A former precalculus student shared: “I can finally say that I have had a math class I enjoyed. The enthusiasm in [McQuarrie’s] teaching and relating to the students made me want to learn more! It’s great to have someone who focuses on the ‘whys’ and not just the typical ‘memorize this because you need to.’”

Another student said of McQuarrie: “…by no means an easy teacher, but a very good one, possibly the best I’ve had in high school and college.”

Governing everything she teaches, said Schrunk Ericksen is “my desire to convince students to think, to pay attention to the world around them and what ideas, attitudes and events led to their language, their perceptions, their attitudes and ideas. I know at least some of my students tire of my insistence that everything is interesting and that if they become bored, it’s because they aren’t thinking enough, but I stick with that position.”
“UMM students, in my experience, possess remarkable intellectual energy,” said Schrunk Ericksen. “They’re willing to study a thousand year old form of English or the structures of medieval religious narratives and at the same time to be involved in student government or in finding ways to end world hunger or in third world injustice or in teaching inner-city children. They tend to value learning and see it as part of a way to improve the world, and I think they genuinely and actively seek to connect to the two. The number of UMM students who do so constantly impresses me.

“I’d much rather live in a larger town, preferably nearer a large body of water, but I can’t imagine ever finding better students to work with than those at UMM,” said Schrunk Ericksen.

The courses she teaches in topics such as Norse or Icelandic Sagas, Grammar and Language, and Old English are “much sought after,” say her colleagues, “and students often take classes simply because she is teaching the material.”

A senior chemistry major who needed humanities credits to complete her General Education requirements found only one course, recommended to her by UMM Professor of Chemistry Jim Togeas, that fit her schedule—Schrunk Ericksen’s course on Norse Sagas. She hesitated, wondering how an African-American, pre-med woman from Chicago could find the Norse Sagas relevant to anything in her life. She took the course and fell in love with it, later teasing Togeas that had he recommended the course to her earlier, she’d have major in English, not chemistry.

“UMM has students who are ready to engage with material at a deep, meaningful level and enjoy grappling with new and interesting concepts,” added McQuarrie. “They are well placed to work with faculty and staff in a variety of ways, extending from coursework to research to teaching assistantships to peer mentors as tutors or campus ambassadors. The opportunities for students at UMM are rich and varied.”

A former student, advisee and current biostatistics graduate student said: [McQuarrie] was always willing to interrupt what he was doing to talk to a student. Further, when I had to leave school due to military obligations, he directed me to the appropriate personnel and helped me plan classes/registration before my return.”

“McQuarrie’s clarity in teaching, passion for his subject and commitment to students’ academic success create a synergy which results in one of the University’s best teachers,” said his colleagues.

The award ceremony for award recipients Universitywide will be held April 28 in the McNamara Alumni Center on the Twin Cities campus.

Photo: Barry McQuarrie

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