Committee on Distinguished Teaching  
Annual Report to the Riverside Division  
May 22, 2007

To Be Adopted:

The Academic Senate Committee on Distinguished Teaching recommends that Professor Chris Amrhein (Department of Environmental Sciences), Professor Wendy Ashmore (Department of Anthropology), and Professor Michael Marsella (Department of Chemistry) be recipients of the Distinguished Teaching Award for 2006-2007. All have established themselves as consummate educators that have enriched our campus community.

Professor Chris Amrhein

“Soil science with an attitude” aptly unites the uniform praise for Professor Amrhein’s teaching accomplishments. The lecture hall, the laboratory, and the field all provide settings in which Dr. Amrhein has profoundly impacted UCR’s lower and upper division undergraduate and graduate students, as well as students beyond the UCR community. Professor Amrhein offers a wide variety of core courses in both the undergraduate Environmental Sciences major and in the Soil and Water Sciences graduate program, and through the infectious enthusiasm he brings to his instruction, the popularity of these courses has escalated. At the lower division level, Environmental Sciences 2/2H (Introduction to Environmental Sciences: Environmental Quality) have been revamped by Dr. Amrhein and now play to rave reviews: “I wish I would have taken this class my freshman year…I probably would have wanted to change to ES” and “He really touched us emotionally…he made us view the world’s environment [in] a different perspective” are common themes through his reviews for this course. One TA for this course comments that “…he encouraged creativity and was rewarded by documentary style videos, skits, and mock debates that addressed topics with thoughtfulness and clarity…students had actually changed their behavior towards environmental issues

Dr. Amrheins efforts in ENSC 100 and 100L are particularly noteworthy. The class (and particularly the laboratory component of the course) had fallen into disarray. Believing that this was the single most important soils course taught at UCR, Professor Amrhein undertook the task of reclaiming and renovating this entire course set. His efforts in the lecture and laboratory components of ENSC 100/100L, including hands-on delivery of the laboratory, have generated compelling praise. One Environmental Sciences major exclaims “…I detested I had to take a class about soils for my major…I entered the class with a chip on my shoulder…little did I know that by the end of the quarter, my attitude would be completely opposite. In 100L, one colleague explains that “…he spends the entire laboratory period working among the students, the first one to arrive and the last one to leave.” Another ENSC 100L student reminisces that “I am able to
recall back to the material that I learned from his class and actually apply it to every day activities."

Professor Amrhein is committed to the “complete” training of students. He was intimately involved in the conceptualization and implementation of two professional development courses (ENSC 191 and SWSC 401) that mentors undergraduate and graduate students in how to exploit their environmental science skills within academic, industrial or government settings. This full-service approach extends to Dr. Amrhein’s own research laboratory, where his open door policy has nurtured UCR students at the undergraduate and graduate levels, as well local high school students and industry professionals. One local 9th grader relates how Dr. Amrhein became her research mentor for a science fair project and then went on to win a series of blue ribbon regional prizes and placed 4th in the California state competition. She is now a UCR student and explains that “My decision to reject scholarships at schools such as USC, UCLA and Berkeley was entirely based on my experience with Dr. Amrhein.” A current member of a local Water Quality control board who earned a Ph.D. at UCR fondly looks back on Dr. Amrhein’s influence when he served as a qualifying examination committee member “…By setting an extraordinary example himself, he helped me develop a serious attitude towards science…he is an awesome teacher, knowledgeable and inspiring.”

Superior performance in the lower division, upper division and graduate classrooms, in the laboratory, and in the field, and his ability to inspire students to meet and go beyond their potential, make Professor Amrhein a most deserving recipient of the 2006-2007 Distinguished Teaching Award.

Professor Wendy Ashmore

Multiple, prominent themes define Professor Wendy Ashmore’s teaching acumen: a unique ability to communicate complex issues, a teacher who encourages critical thinking, the ability to engage students into such dialogue, and accessibility that she and her students define as “...copious free time.” In a remarkably uniform set of letters, both contemporary and legacy in nature, these traits were repeatedly heralded. Even more remarkably, Dr. Ashmore’s influence on her students is truly national in flavor, having impacted the success of many students at her previous institutions, Rutgers University and the University of Pennsylvania.

Educators across the nation, and students here on campus, consider Professor Ashmore their role model in the classroom, in the field, and in how they project themselves as present and future professionals. One former graduate student and now a new assistant professor at a renowned liberal arts college explains that her “...teaching has literally shaped an entire generation of archeologists.” This sentiment was stridently echoed by another educator “I readily admit to having blatantly modeled my own teaching style and techniques after Wendy’s
because she is the finest role model I have encountered...I know I am only one of countless students [who feel the same way]."

Much of Professor Ashmore’s success in the classroom stems from her skill at bridging such diverse fields as biology, art history, and women’s studies; her courses are populated with students from a wide variety of majors. In both undergraduate and graduate settings, she asks her students to think critically in a carefully-crafted, comfortable atmosphere that facilitates group dialogue. As one staunch supporter offers “...she is a gentle teacher; her lectures are about the material, not about her personal views.” This sentiment was echoed by another nominator, who reminisced that “...she has a unique ability to engender critical thinking, challenging students to consider original and more nuanced ways of thinking about the human past.” In short, Dr. Ashmore has impressed her students by presenting alternate theories, and then leaving it to the students to evaluate and then accept or challenge them.

Dr. Ashmore’s influence extends well beyond the classroom setting. One former student was profoundly influenced by her willingness to “...teach me how to read like a scholar and to discuss professional literature at a professional level.” Another relates that she “...personally invests in her students to an unparalleled degree...to the extent that my approach to teaching, mentoring, research, and collegial interactions have been shaped by the lessons I learned from Wendy.”

Professor Ashmore co-developed and teaches in the three quarter graduate core sequence in UCR’s Anthropology Graduate Program. She has also authored a highly visible introductory Anthropology text, and has developed new undergraduate courses ANTH 115x (Ancient Oaxaca), ANTH 173 (Social Meanings of Space), and ANTH 178 (Gender and Archaeology). Course reviews consistently state that Professor Ashmore possesses the enviable ability to distill complex topics into interesting and accessible information. One noteworthy comment from a former student illustrates this skill “...[she] was able to effectively synthesize 4 million years of world prehistory within the span of one semester.”

In summary, the Committee on Distinguished Teaching enthusiastically agrees with one student who shares “What sets her apart is her capacity to care for the lives and well-being of students, in and outside of the classroom.” For this reason, and many others, Professor Ashmore is a most admirable recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award.

**Professor Michael Marsella**

Organic Chemistry courses have been described as “feared”, “notorious”, and as one nominator explains “...a subject that can leave even the most intelligent students feeling bewildered.” Professor Marsella is universally acknowledged as
a rare educator that has the uncanny ability to dissolve these negative perceptions and make Organic Chemistry accessible to all his students.

Dr. Marsella’s contributions to the Chemistry 112A, B, C sequence are recognized across the UCR campus. His teaching methods enable both undergraduate and graduate students to view science, as one faculty peer states, “...not as collection of facts but as a process in which a few basic principles could be used to construct a framework for understanding chemical structure and reactivity.” A graduate student echoes this assessment of Dr. Marsella’s teaching strategy: “Memorization offered me only the possibility of solving problems I’d seen before. If I could derive, I could solve anything.” Another former undergraduate summates the opinion of many: “His instruction the first quarter of organic chemistry at UCR carried me through the whole year...[he] constantly encouraged us to seek patterns and principles that we could apply throughout our study of organic chemistry. Even as I was taking the last final in CHEM 112C I was using what he [previously] taught me to succeed.” Dr. Marsella impacts his students because of his “...incredible ability to simplify concepts in a new light.” As another student remarks, with his “...gift of explaining otherwise dry material and engaging students in his lectures”, Professor Marsella is able to convert skeptics of the discipline into self-confident students. As one disciple explains, “Before taking the class, chemistry was not my best subject. Now it is not only my best [subject], but my favorite, and I know countless others who feel the same way.”

Clearly, Dr. Marsella is deeply concerned about the success of all his students. One student comment expresses this quality with eloquence: “He not only cared about the students who ‘got it’ but he tried to help everyone succeed...[he] is an outstanding example of how one should help others, academically and otherwise. He was not just a chemistry teacher, he was a role model.” His concern for enriching the UCR student experiences travels far beyond the walls of the classroom. He is committed to solving the problem of high attrition rates among Science, Mathematics and Engineering majors. To this end he established the highly visible InSTEP Residence Hall, a residential community for like-minded CNAS undergraduates. As faculty director of CAMP-UCR, he is intimately involved in enriching the academic experience of those students whose ethnic origins are underrepresented in STEM fields. This has resulted in a large grant entitled the “Bridge to the Doctorate Program” to expand the pipeline for students of color into graduate degree programs. Dr. Marsella also enhances K-12 education by participating in the Copernicus Program Summer Science (Chemistry) Institute, developing hands-on exercises that will enrich our local middle and high school science chemistry classrooms.

The Committee on Distinguished Teaching enthusiastically agrees with a former student who regaled “...[he] represents a truly unique breed who continually impacts the lives of people in a positive manner, whether it be in a white coat in his research laboratory, at the front of a classroom with chalk all over his hands
Students at all levels have responded passionately to Professor Marsella’s instruction, and because Dr. Marsella tirelessly responds to his student’s needs in creative ways, Professor Marsella is a most worthy recipient of the 2006-2007 Distinguished Teaching Award.

Other business conducted by the Committee on Distinguished Teaching during the 2006-2007 academic year:

1. The Committee on Distinguished Teaching refined a “User’s Guide” first developed in the 2005-2006 academic year to help faculty develop the strongest possible nomination files for deserving candidates. This guide was forwarded to all department chairs and program directors twice during the academic year.

2. The Committee on Distinguished Teaching offered a workshop on March 1, 2007, designed as a supplement to the User’s Guide to further describe how to assemble a nomination and more fully describe the Committee’s deliberation processes.

Robin DiMatteo
Subir Ghosh
Bradley Hyman (Chair)
Neal Schiller
Timothy Paine