To Be Adopted:

The Academic Senate Committee on Distinguished Teaching recommends that Professor Susan Straight (Department of Creative Writing) be the recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award for 2007-2008.

Professor Susan Straight

“Instructing students is not simply standing before a classroom and venting opinions and fact; it is the act of giving – giving of oneself, one’s ideas. … Teaching, for Susan Straight, is generosity and sacrifice.” This statement, from one of the students who wrote in support of Professor Straight’s nomination, captures the spirit of many of the comments our committee read. Professor Straight does not simply teach, she inspires! Each of us were very impressed as we reviewed her teaching career at UC Riverside, well laid out and documented in the dossier which her Chair forwarded on her behalf. Excerpts from this dossier and student letters are used below to illustrate the strength of Professor Straight’s case for receiving this recognition.

Professor Straight began her career at UC Riverside as a creative writing lecturer in 1988, well before the Department of Creative Writing was created in 2000. Her very first teaching evaluation was a 6.55 on a 7-point scale; most of the other 68 courses she has taught since then are as good or better. This includes evaluations from lower division to upper division to graduate classes, in seminars and workshops, in her primary discipline (fiction) and secondary field (nonfiction). Rarely does a professor demonstrate such teaching excellence across the breadth of classes and over such an extended period.

Student comments are numerous and laudatory throughout – many demonstrating that Professor Straight is more than an instructor, perhaps better described as a mentor and friend, both challenging the students and counseling them through the rough patches. Here are just a few representative examples. From her Introduction to Creative Writing Class – “Susan is simply a jewel of an instructor who not only carries out her craft as a professional, but sincerely helps students to learn and gain a lot from the course, whether they are writing majors or not. Bravo!” In her Beginning Fiction Workshop, one student wrote: “Professor Straight was an absolute joy! Most definitely I would take her again! BRAVO UCR. She’s the Bomb!” Another student seemed to capture the sentiments of many others when s/he wrote this comment from an Advanced Fiction Workshop: “It boggles my mind how a person so busy can be so helpful to so many people … A true mentor and a wonderful instructor. She deserves a statue … and a parade. And I’m serious.”

Working with Professor Eric Barr in the Department of Theatre, Professor Straight served as co-creator and founding co-chair of UCR’s MFA Program in Creative Writing and
Writing for the Performing Arts in 2001. Graduate writing programs are recognized by a) the literary reputations of their faculty and b) the book publications of their graduates. Professor Straight is well known as a gifted writer, and has garnered numerous awards for her eight novels and recently the 2008 Edgar Award for her first mystery short story, but what impressed our committee most was her ability to translate her skills into successful mentorship of her students who have in turn won their own awards.

Professor Straight has supervised an estimated 40 senior theses, has directed seven completed masters theses and is currently on seven other MFA thesis committees. The MFAs from the past year and current second year class have a total of seven books in press or under contract, including 4 works of fiction or non-fiction, each of which began in a Susan Straight workshop.

Graduate student letters of support echoed her inspirational style. One student writes: “Professor Straight deserves this award because she is an incredibly hard-working, patient, funny and wise teacher.” Professor Straight inspired this current MFA student to submit her own work to the Atlantic Monthly student fiction contest and she won first place! Another MFA student credits Prof. Straight’s gentle bullying style with his success in getting his story published in Zyzzyva, one of the most prestigious West Coast literary magazines. Finally, this MFA’s comment seemed most appropriate: “Nurtures, in fact, might be an understatement; at times she is more mother than mentor, enlightening us not only about the world of fiction but the real world.”

Professor Straight is known to be extremely generous with her time and expertise for her students. We were struck by the Chair’s comment that because of the usual long line of students waiting outside Professor Straight’s office to meet with her to discuss their work, her MFA students actually bought some plastic lawn chairs to place in the hallway so that the students would be more comfortable waiting for her. Amazing!

In short, Professor Straight is a gifted writer, educator and scholar who generously shares her skills and her crafts with both undergraduate and graduate students. By giving of herself, mentoring, nurturing, prodding and inspiring, she helps her students achieve their highest potential. Professor Straight exemplifies the true spirit of the “Distinguished Teacher” and this Committee could not think of anyone more worthy of this recognition in 2007-08. We are delighted to unanimously recommend Professor Susan Straight as this year’s recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award. Both faculty and students at UC Riverside are fortunate to have such a distinguished scholar and educator as a colleague.

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Nathan Manning (GSA)
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