Committee on Distinguished Teaching
Annual Report to the Riverside Division
May 19, 2009

The Academic Senate Committee on Distinguished Teaching responded negatively to the Senate Reorganization Proposal that was sent out for committee’s comment in October of 2008.

The committee reviewed the Distinguished Teaching nomination files and recommends that Professors Larry Wright (Department of Philosophy) and Jodie Holt (Department of Botany and Plant Science) be awarded the Distinguished Teaching Award for 2008-2009.

**Professor Larry Wright**

Professor Wright has been influencing the way people think for more than 3 decades at UC Riverside. As one colleague put it - “He is one of the founders of the “critical thinking” movement, a set of pedagogical concerns and values which has been adopted universally.” He has literally written the textbook on this topic (published by Oxford University Press and used in his introductory class). The Committee was impressed that his pedagogy extends from 1st year undergraduates, to graduate students, and even to faculty colleagues. Each of these constituencies reported on Professor Wright’s excellence and we were extremely taken by the extensive letters of support provided with his dossier.

For young undergraduate students, Dr. Wright’s influence can be felt in PHIL 007: Introduction to Critical Thinking, a large introductory lecture class. This class is a daunting undertaking for any professor – scheduled at 8:00 am, mostly taken as a breadth requirement for students with little or no interest in philosophy – capturing and holding the student’s interest is quite a feat. Yet year after year Professor Wright does just that. He is a model of erudition and clarity, making presentations which are subtly nuanced, forceful and elegant. He uses many real world examples to make his points and holds the students to high standards. It is impressive to read students’ comments – often admitting that their interest in initially taking this class was moderate to low but then ranking Professor Wright highly in categories reflecting him as effective, respectful, clear and understandable.

This large lecture class uses a number of TAs and Professor Wright spends quite a bit of time training them to be effective instructors. He involves them in the teaching process in a very deep manner – what one colleague described as an “intense apprenticeship program for teaching”. This has made a strong positive impression on his TAs, which not only makes them more effective in his class and others that they may subsequently TA in, but positively influences their future marketability (since being able to teach a high-quality critical thinking class may improve their chances of landing a permanent teaching position). One of his former TA’s wrote: “Larry Wright is one of the most dedicated, original, hardworking, caring, and effective teachers anywhere, ever.”

His excellence in instruction extends into graduate training in seminars and dissertation supervision. The Committee read several outstanding letters from former
graduate students, now faculty members themselves, singing praises for Professor Wright’s unflagging support and mentorship. One former graduate student put it this was – after reviewing written comments about his work, and after meeting with Professor Wright for several hours, “I always left these meetings inspired.” Another wrote: “Most of what I know about doing philosophy came from Larry.”

Finally, Professor Wright is known for fostering reading groups for colleagues. A good example is a 20-year long reading group on the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, once a week in the evening in Professor Wright’s home. Participants range from current graduate students through faculty members to various visitors. Again the Committee was impressed by the faculty colleagues’ high praise for this and other reading groups which Professor Wright has fostered. This regular intellectual consortium provides an amazing format for dialogue and inquiry which serves as an attractant for excellent students into the PhD program, as well as engaging and promoting colleague excitement and collaboration.

Professor Jodie Holt

Teaching large introductory classes on any topic can be a challenging assignment – for students who have little or no real interest in plants, BPSC 104 (formerly BPSC 130) is often the only class in this area they may experience. This upper division class is quite often selected simply to fill an upper division science unit requirement. However, many students later remark that “the course proved to be far more interesting that I ever thought it would be”, or “I learned a lot and it was fun!”, or “I loved this class! I was hesitant to take it, but I am happy that I did. Thanks!” These responses and others document how an outstanding professor like Professor Holt can make their subject come to life and impress students. This is, in fact, the essence of teaching.

Professor Holt has accumulated a distinguished teaching career at UC Riverside over the past 25 years, instructing students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. She has taught courses ranging from Freshman Discovery seminars, to Biochemistry 100, to small specialty undergraduate courses in plant ecology, to a variety of graduate courses in her areas of expertise. As the Chair of the Department of Botany and Plant Science Department, we are sure that Professor Holt could have her pick of any of the courses she might desire. That she has repeatedly elected to teach this large introductory BPSC class since 1999 is a reflection of her own passion for teaching students and prompting their enthusiasm for plants.

We can get a sense of Professor Holt’s teaching style from reading many of the student comments. Students repeatedly mention that her lecture style is clear and organized, that she is very approachable. Descriptors such as “amazing”, “caring”, “encouraging”, “passionate”, “excellent” and “dedicated” are found often among the many comments we reviewed. It was also quite common for students to say that she was “the best professor I have ever had”. She brings an intense enthusiasm for the subject which is clearly infectious. Students appreciate her hands-on demonstrations that she brings to lecture in her “show and tell bucket” and the real-world examples she provides. Several students mentioned that this class had cured their “plant blindness” - that they are now much more aware of their surroundings and enjoy the plant life more. One student put it this way – “I think I don’t have plant blindness because I actually stop and smell the roses and look to see if it’s monocot or dicot”. As a committee we were very
impressed that even at the end of the student written responses on teaching evaluations, where one often finds the most critical comments, we found very positive supportive comments concerning Professor Holt.

Her dedication to instruction includes her attending each and every lab section each week to maintain contact with the students and ensure that the labs are running smoothly. This dedication often surprises the students (“…Professor Holt knew my name!”) and they clearly appreciate her efforts. As one of her graduate students and a teaching assistant for her courses stated it – “The most admirable quality … is her personal commitment to the success of every student in her classroom, including 80 students per quarter in General Botany!”

Professor Holt has also been noted for her very supportive mentorship of her doctoral degree students and for attracting top postdoctoral students from around the country to her lab. One of her postdoctoral scholars put it this way – “I chose Professor Holt’s lab not only because she was nationally recognized as among the finest researchers in Weed science but also because she was among the most inspirational educators that I had the experience of hearing in seminars, workshops and conferences”.

UC Riverside is privileged to include Professors Wright and Holt among its top teachers and this Committee is proud to nominate them for this year’s Distinguished Teaching Award.

John Bawden (GSA)
Robin DiMatteo
Scott Fedick
Michael Marsella
Yenna Wu
Neal Schiller (Chair)