TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Patricia Devine takes her psychology class outside to the Memorial Union Terrace. Devine is one of the UW-Madison teachers recognized for honors this year.
Top UW faculty honored

By Mike Doraher
Higher education reporter

It's a bright, mild May day and the wind is whipping up Lake Mendota, splashing students huddled around three picnic tables at water's edge on the Memorial Union Terrace.

But Patricia Devine is in her element. She's teaching.

"Trish," as she insists her psychology students call her, is one of several bright young stars among the 11 faculty members honored with UW-Madison's 1994 Distinguished Teaching Awards. At the other end of the spectrum is Professor James Nelson, a 32-year faculty veteran who learned the teaching ropes from the English department's grand dame, Helen C. White.

Uniting all 11 of the distinguished teachers — along with four faculty winners of the Hilldale Awards, seven recipients of the Graduate Student Excellence in Teaching Awards, and six winners of academic staff awards — is one thing: a deep commitment to help students advance their thinking.

"I see the classroom as an active place," Devine said after holding the final meeting of her Prejudice and Intergroup Relations class on the shore of Lake Mendota. "My job is not to teach content, it's to elic it active thinking."

Toward that end, Devine cites a wide range of research findings, including several of her own, without ever referring to notes.

"A lot of teachers just get up and lecture, but with her it's a cooperative process with the students," said Sean Cofey, a graduating senior who enjoyed Devine's class on prejudice.

"She steers the conversation," said Gail Ghoha, a junior in that class, "but she doesn't control what all the output is. She questions what we say, but she never says we're wrong."

Devine, however, doesn't hesitate to correct students on their writing and punctuation, which she has made a major component of her psychology classes. Her students are expected to write-term papers and regular responses to their research readings, all with so much as displacing the apostrophe in "it's."

"I set my expectations extremely high," Devine said. "At first they hate it, but I think they come to like it because they see improvement."

Devine, 35, teaches two classes per semester, but also supervises 30 undergraduate students working on psychology research projects, and carries on her own award-winning research. Teaching and research, she insisted, "don't have to be seen as mutually exclusive efforts."

Devine credits her success to a naturally dynamic style and an unwavering love of teaching. "I have the ability to listen to myself from the perspective of an introductory psychology student," she said, "so I never get bored with teaching."

Nelson, 64, also has yet to get bored with teaching. As a senior faculty member, he is involved in multiple committees and mentors a handful of teaching assistants each year, along with three or more doctoral students writing their dissertations. But he always teaches two undergraduate English classes each semester.

"You sort of look forward to the time when you can walk in and give the same lecture, but it's never really happened for me," Nelson said, "I'm still as uptight as ever getting ready for class meetings. I find that you rewrite everything, every year."

"I like students. I think that's pretty important," Nelson added during an interview in his office in Helen C. White Hall. "They're at a refreshing age, not completely formed. You can make an impression on them."

The impression Nelson leaves on his students is that of a fatherly Mr. Chips, gently calling their names in class and welcoming them to his office for academic advice.

"He cares about everyone in his class," said Lesly Oxlley, a junior in Nelson's class on "Intellectual Opinion in 19th Century England." "He makes James Nelson

everything interesting — even Charles Dickens."

When Nelson started teaching, most professors stood behind a lectern and read their notes, he recalled. But he soon discarded the lectern so he could walk around the classroom and hold students' attention — even when he's teaching Dickens at 8:25 a.m. in a windowless basement classroom of the Humanities Building.

"You've got to stand right there, up close to them, and move around," he said. "You've got to keep their eye on you, and to do that you've got to keep your eye on them, which means memorizing your notes."

In recent years, Nelson has seen renewed emphasis on teaching at UW-Madison, he said. Some faculty members are studying films of expert lecturers at other universities, and teaching ability has become an increasing large consideration in evaluations, he noted.

"I don't think this university is soft on teaching at all," said Nelson, who has still found time in his career to write four books and dozens of articles. "I think this university gives the best buck for students: teaching and research."

Nelson and Devine, picked for profiles at random, are just two leaders of the teaching renaissance at UW-Madison. All of the award winners have been chosen by their colleagues as exemplary teachers. Thumbnail sketches of them follow.

Emily Auerbach: Associate of English and liberal studies, UW System Underkoffer Award.

Chances are, lovers of literature across Wisconsin have taken in at least one of Emily Auerbach's courses on slavery, Dickens or Shelley.

Quite possibly, their introduction to her came through the mail, through a correspondence course on the Victorian novel or American Indian fiction. They may have made her acquaintance at a lecture given at a retirement center or public library.

Wrote one satisfied customer, "Professor Auerbach has the rare gift of speaking to the sophisticated student and the relatively unschooled in the same sentence, and triggering love and understanding of literature in both. Furthermore, she ... has pioneered ways to send the classroom to any student anywhere."

Some of Auerbach's distribution methods include producing series for public radio and organizing conferences and workshops. She has also written instructional guides and journal articles on a variety of topics.

James Burt: Associate professor of geography; Chancellor's Award.

It's not easy to gain popularity while teaching quantitative methods, climatology, computer cartography and physical systems of the environment, but Burt has managed to earn student applause and gratitude.

According to his department chair, Tom Vale, Burt's secret is creative use of computer technology. According to one student, Burt makes "a rather dry subject fun to learn." Another said, "The university is very fortunate to have Professor Burt. He is a class act in and out of the classroom. He is an individual that I would like to model myself after."

Please see FACULTY, Page 9G

Geography Associate Professor James Burt, right, shown here with doctoral student Dan Maher, uses computer technology to add interest to his course material.

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Robert Clasen, extension professor of educational psychology, meets with Sun Prairie reading teachers about long-range planning. Among other duties, Clasen coordinates non-credit courses for school teachers and administrators.

Robert Clasen: Extension professor of educational psychology; Van Hise Outreach Award

Clasen is a teacher's teacher, as coordinator of independent study efforts and director of Madison Education Extension Programs (MEEP). Classes coordinates 129 non-credit classes a year. Teachers and administrators from public and private schools across Wisconsin are the primary customers.

With enrollment between 1,500 and 2,000 each year, Clasen has employed a number of strategies to keep the courses fresh. He has made extensive use of television-based correspondence courses, purchased by more than 100 colleges and universities throughout the English-speaking world. Clasen holds a 20 percent appointment in the School of Education, where he directs gifted and talented outreach. Department of educational psychology Chairman Frank Baker says Clasen's teaching excellence grows out of two beliefs: Teaching has changed until the student has not occurred until the student has heavy on modeling. In other words, the "bow" of teaching is as important as the "what."
Criticism. She is the author of a newly published study, "Defining Women's Freedom: The Case of Cagny and Lacy."

Underwood also distinguished herself in the classroom by inspiring her students — many of whom were managerial or administrative assistants — to apply critical legal concepts to issues challenging contemporary society. Underwood also makes regular and frequent use of instructional technologies such as televised distance learning and computer-assisted instruction.

Witnesses to her technique observe that she begins and ends each class with an overview of key concepts and how they fit into the whole course. Notes one enthusiastic student, "Highly organized and well-balanced between principles of law and application to practical 'real life' school issues.

Underwood's research nourishes her instruction, keeping it cutting-edge and relevant. Her specific concentration is on students' constitutional rights, the rights of disabled students, and the roles of state educational authorities in ensuring equitable school finance.

Douglas Kelly, professor of French and Italian. Wedding historical erudition to modern method, the scholarly past can present convergence in Kelly's contributions.

During more than 20 years in his department, Kelly has emerged as one of the world's most revered scholars of medieval French literature during a period of rapid and decisive change in the field. Kelly has devoted the bulk of his critical scholarship to the art of literary composition in the high and late middle ages. He has written extensively on the imagination as source of artistic inspiration in the middle ages; he also investigated the art of medieval French romance.

In addition, Kelly has taught French and Italian courses, and has worked with graduate students in medieval literature. He has also chaired the French Graduate Studies Committee and the department's Awards Committee since it began in 1968.

Stanley G. Payne, professor of history. During his 26 years at UW-Madison, Payne has emerged as one of the world's foremost scholars of Spanish and Portuguese history in the 18th century. He received his Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley, and has held various academic positions in the United States and Spain. He has written extensively on the history of Spain and Portugal, particularly in the 18th century, and has made significant contributions to the study of European and Latin American history. His work has been widely recognized and has brought him numerous awards and honors.

Teaching assistants

Seven recipients of the UW-Madison Graduate Student Excellence in Teaching Awards were selected for their sustained excellence and creativity in their teaching, their contributions to better teaching in the departments and colleges, and the quality of their work as graduate students.

The winners include: Mirebadi Abrahamian, a computer science student; Andrew Irving, a French and Italian student; Marcus Hakola, a political science student; Erin Smith, an English student; Christopher Stephens, a philosophy student; Jennifer Snyder, a mathematics student; and Katy Ziegler, a geography student.

All of the teaching assistants who were nominated for these awards were chosen by their department chairpersons. The Best TA "I Ever Had" was chosen by their students.

"I've never seen anyone but Charles Read," said Charles Read, associate dean of the Graduate School and chair of the selection committee. "Many of them have already been honored by their"