

Best in Their Class

UL Lafayette Foundation salutes faculty for exemplary teaching, research

FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE UL LAFAYETTE Foundation honored two faculty members with its Dr. Ray P. Authement Excellence in Teaching Award in April.

It typically presents one teaching award and three Distinguished Professor Awards every year, based on the recommendations of a committee composed of faculty members.

This year, the field of candidates for outstanding teacher was narrowed to two:

Dr. Russell Hibbeler, a professor of chemical engineering, and Dr. Mary Farmer-Kaiser, an associate professor of history.

“When the committee voted, there was a tie. That says a lot about the caliber of these professors. The Foundation’s board of directors decided to honor both,” said Julie Bolton Falgout, executive director of the UL Lafayette Foundation.

Distinguished Professor Awards were presented to Dr. Christine DeVine, associate professor of English; Dr. Devesh Misra, professor of chemical engineering; and Dr. William Rieck, professor of curriculum and instruction.

Honorees receive a stipend and their names are inscribed on plaques that are permanently displayed in Edith Garland Dupré Library.

The Distinguished Professor Award was established in 1965. The Excellence in Teaching Award, which began in 1992, was renamed the Dr. Ray P. Authement Excellence in Teaching Award in 2008.

SENSE OF URGENCY DRIVES ENGLISH EDUCATOR

Dr. Christine DeVine

Dr. Christine DeVine is a popular professor whose students give her high marks.

She has nurtured a small in-house seminar for graduate assistants and new professionals into an annual conference that featured speakers from across the nation and overseas this year. She has developed some new academic courses.

But there’s more. “Dr. DeVine has been one of the most productive scholars in the English Department since joining the faculty ... and has built a national reputation as a scholar of Victorian literature,” wrote Dr. James McDonald, professor and head of UL Lafayette’s Department of English, in a letter of recommendation for the



Dr. Christine DeVine

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UL Lafayette Foundation's 2009 Distinguished Professor Award.

DeVine's list of accomplishments is especially noteworthy because she began her academic career only eight years ago. "I came to this profession late in life, so I feel as though I'm trying to hurry along to get all done that I want to get done before I retire," she said in a recent interview.

A native of England, DeVine and her husband owned a small ad agency in Chicago for many years. Many of their clients were small and medium-size candy companies in the area. In the late 1970s, huge European candy manufacturers stepped in. "Overnight, we lost something like 75 percent of our business, bought out by these big global concerns," she said.

While helping to run the ad agency, she had taken some creative writing courses and spent a year researching and writing a screenplay about the Bloomsbury Group, a collection of British writers and thinkers who were influential in the first half of the 20th century. When the agency closed in the early 1990s, she took the opportunity to seek a bachelor's degree.

"I started at DePaul and in my first semester there, I went to my advisor and said, 'What I'd really like to do is go to graduate school and become an English professor,' and she thought I was crazy," DeVine said, chuckling at the recollection. "She thought I was just some bored housewife who had suddenly gotten this strange notion into her head."

But DeVine knew she belonged on a college campus.

McDonald summarized her contributions by noting that she "brings a keen mind, an impressive work ethic, and important international and interdisciplinary knowledge and insights to her work."

VETERAN PROFESSOR 'PAYS IT FORWARD'

Dr. William Rieck

As a professor of curriculum and instruction, Dr. William Rieck helps students become teachers.

One of the courses he teaches, for



Dr. William Rieck

example, is classroom management and instructional design. He shows future instructors how to map out detailed lesson plans and offers insights gleaned from his 45-year career as an educator.

"I tell my students, 'When you're teaching, you have to be reasonable.' Not all students are the same. They have to be treated as individuals. I do the same with my students."

In a letter nominating Rieck for the UL Lafayette Foundation's 2009 Distinguished Professor Award, Dr. Gerald Carlson, dean of the College of Education, said he is "demanding, but fair.

"Students have commented that they have been successful in passing the final Praxis exam because of what they learned in his class. Students are fortunate because he includes his scholarship and research in the classroom, which serves as a model for students."

Dr. Christine Briggs, head of Curriculum and Instruction, said Rieck's high expectations for teacher candidates serve as a guide for them to become highly able

teachers. "In speaking with graduates of the program, many share that his courses are challenging but upon completion of these courses, the candidates refer to the experience as pivotal in their teacher preparation process. These testimonials speak to the type of teacher he is and how he 'pays it forward' to his students," she said.

Rieck also encourages high school students who are interested in becoming teachers. For nine years, he's been organizing a Future Teacher Day for area high school students who are interested in earning an education degree. It's part of an education class they can take while still in high school that counts for college credit.

Rieck began his career as a high school chemistry teacher in the 1960s and later served as an assistant professor at Trenton State College in New Jersey. He spent two years as an area manager with DuPont Chemical but returned to his first love of teaching in 1972. Rieck came to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 1991.

Almost 20 years later, he still enjoys his work.

"As long as I'm capable of teaching, I'm going to be teaching," he said.

SMALL-SCALE EFFORTS YIELD BIG RESULTS

Dr. Devesh Misra

An anonymous quotation is posted on Dr. Devesh Misra's office door in Madison Hall: "The spirit of knowledge is an enviable thing; those who possess it are forever refreshed, forever challenged, forever rewarded and forever young."

"I really believe this is true," he said in an interview. "Knowledge – seeking knowledge – it keeps us energized. When new ideas are bubbling up, that makes life exciting."

Misra is full of new ideas – and excited about sharing them with colleagues and students.

He dreams big, but works on the scale of the tiny, using nanotechnology

in materials science. Nanoparticles, made atom by atom, are measured in nanometers, one billionth of a meter. These bits of manmade matter can be just a few nanometers wide. A human hair, for example, is about 80,000 nanometers thick.

Misra is especially interested in the use of nanotechnology to develop biomaterials. In January, he received a patent for a new drug delivery system that uses magnetic nanoparticles created in UL Lafayette laboratories.

In 2004, he established the Center for Structural and Functional Materials. “Materials science and engineering form a bridge of knowledge between the basic sciences, such as chemistry and physics, and the engineering disciplines: chemical, mechanical and electrical engineering,” he explained.

In developing the center, Misra has brought eight post-doctoral fellows on board.

“Their presence on campus has helped the center become more competitive and to make rapid progress in research.”

The interdisciplinary center has also created what he calls a “synergistic environment.” Says Misra, “We work together, we share ideas and talk. There’s a real feeling of team spirit.”

The results speak for themselves.

Since the center was established, Misra has managed and executed research projects totaling almost \$4 million.

In 2002, he received a patent for a fine-grained steel. Two more patents – one for nanorods that could be used for digital storage and another for an enhanced drug-delivery system – are pending.

Misra has developed two materials science courses. By teaching students hands-on fundamentals and simultane-

ously exposing them to cutting-edge research, Misra sees himself helping to lay the groundwork for his students’



Dr. Devesh Misra

careers and their future success.

“To get to work in an emerging field, that’s very exciting for students. They are excited about the opportunity to work with new ideas.”

‘HER DEDICATION IS UNIVERSAL’

Dr. Mary Farmer-Kaiser

While Dr. Mary Farmer-Kaiser was earning a bachelor’s degree in history, she kept her career options open. Her interest in politics and government was heightened during an internship in Washington, D.C. So she considered attending law school or taking a job with the federal government.

Then she discovered that she might be able to find a career that

related to history. So she applied to graduate school. She entered a policy history studies program, knowing that as many of its graduates found work as legislative researchers or in government as in academia.

“I didn’t start teaching until I was in my Ph.D. program, so I always kind of feared I wouldn’t like it or I wouldn’t be good at it,” she recalled in a recent interview.

She shouldn’t have worried. The associate professor of history can’t imagine a more rewarding career and is an exceptional teacher.

“Her classes always fill early and all of her students consistently evaluate her as a challenging, caring, devoted, passionate and thoughtful instructor,” wrote Dr. Bob Carriker, head of UL Lafayette’s History Department, in a letter recommending that she receive the 2009 Dr. Ray P. Authement Outstanding Teaching Award.

“Furthermore, her academic/scholarly magnetism pertains to every

level of student, from the marginal to the honors and graduate students. Her dedication is universal.”

Farmer-Kaiser makes no distinction between undergraduate and graduate classes. “I want to teach my freshman classes and I want to teach those upper level undergraduate classes and the graduate students. All of those different layers are really important to understand when you’re teaching,” she said.

Farmer-Kaiser also sees value in helping high school history teachers.

She “has made herself a point person for Teaching American History grants from the U.S. Department of Education. Through those grants, she positions herself to instruct secondary school teachers of Acadiana in new approaches to teaching history,” Carriker noted.

Farmer-Kaiser said UL Lafayette

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has a duty “to produce good teachers in our community. It only benefits the university and I think we have an obligation to produce graduate students who not only know history but understand that historians teach, too. And whether you’re teaching graduate students, undergraduates or teachers in the community, it’s about understanding how people learn and presenting the subject matter in a way that is going to hook them.”

The trick, she added, is to help others learn, “without realizing that they’re learning.”

PROFESSOR KEEPS STANDARDS HIGH

Dr. Russell Hibbeler

Dr. Russell Hibbeler became an educator because he enjoys teaching.

“Part of that enjoyment is figuring out the best way to get students to learn and improve their skills,” he said. The civil engineering professor received the UL Lafayette Foundation’s 2009 Dr. Ray P. Authement Outstanding Teaching Award.

Hibbeler was working at Argonne National Laboratory in Illinois before he came to UL Lafayette in 1973. He only stayed a semester before moving to Chicago to work, but it was enough time to get hooked on Acadiana’s quality of life.

While attending a conference in New York in the late 1970s, he ran into Dr. James Reeves, then dean of UL Lafayette’s College of Engineering. “I told him that if there ever was a job open, to let me know,” Hibbeler recalled.

Not long after, he was about to accept a position at North Carolina State University when he received a phone call from UL Lafayette. Would he like to return?

Hibbeler has taught at UL Lafayette ever since.



Dr. Mary Farmer-Kaiser



Dr. Russell Hibbeler

The kindness of the people of south Louisiana and the region’s culture were strong draws. “I think the people down here are just wonderful,” he observed.

Hibbeler primarily teaches undergraduate classes. He has a reputation for giving heavy doses of homework and weekly exams to students taking his fundamental course in engineering. He said he wants to ensure his students are grounded in the concepts and principles of the course so they will be successful in upper-level classes, in graduate school and in their professional careers.

“We need to do the best we can to educate and guide them. When a student finishes here, if he does not know his skills well, that’s a reflection on the school and everyone here,” he said.

Hibbeler has written four engineering textbooks that are used throughout the world as standard texts in engineering mechanics, mechanics of materials and structural analysis. Several are in their 12th edition. He hopes to finish a fifth textbook, about fluid mechanics, this summer.

Dr. Mark Zappi, dean of UL Lafayette’s College of Engineering, describes Hibbeler as “one of the most globally recognized engineering educators.” His books, Zappi continued, “are considered the bible of how to teach basic engineering mechanics to undergraduate students.” ■