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SEPT. 18, 2012 | 125-12

Two Laurier profs win prestigious OCUFA Teaching Awards

WATERLOO – Laurier Psychology Professor Eileen Wood and Associate Professor of Chemistry Stephen MacNeil have both earned a 2011-2012 Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) Teaching Award for their innovative efforts to engage and mentor students.

"These are two extraordinary teachers who have taken an approach to learning that has consistently been lauded by their students and their colleagues," says Pat Rogers, associate vice-president: Teaching and Learning. "The fact that two Laurier professors have earned this provincial award out of a total of five winners illustrates how the university and its faculty are increasingly becoming known for excellence in teaching."

Wood – who has been teaching introductory psychology and developmental psychology at Laurier for more than two decades – believes that although learning can be challenging, it should not be hard.

"I believe in using hands-on activities and real-life experiences to make learning meaningful for students," says Wood. "I want my students to understand the material and that means taking the time and varying the instructional approach to ensure learning has an opportunity to occur. By providing different ways for students to learn and by adding humour, I hope to pique students' interest, engagement and enjoyment."

Julie Mueller, an assistant professor in Laurier's Faculty of Education, has known Wood for 10 years – first as an instructor, then as graduate supervisor, and now as a collaborator.

"Eileen's concern for 'people' rather than 'papers' is one of the reasons that I have continued to work with her following my doctoral studies," says Mueller in her nomination letter. "She puts more confidence in me than I do myself and sets up every opportunity available to build my academic career."

MacNeil has also earned kudos for the innovative ways he shares his in-depth knowledge of organic chemistry with his students. Paul Jessop, dean of Laurier's Faculty of Science, says MacNeil has a natural way of engaging students in the classroom, and is respected for his hard work and approachability outside of class.

"His faculty peers also expressed admiration for his work," says Jessop in his nomination letter. "He provides us all with powerful examples of best practices in undergraduate teaching and the highest praise from his colleagues is their recognition that his ideas could be of benefit to them."

During a sabbatical in 2009/2010, MacNeil created a blended-approach to teaching organic chemistry that mixes classroom activities with online delivery of course material and learning opportunities. This includes videos MacNeil has developed and created to promote self-directed learning.

"Instead of using class time primarily for information transfer, my current approach is to provide students with ample on-line resources to teach themselves many of the course concepts," says MacNeil. "Then when students come to class I can lead them through individual and group exercises to help them fully grasp the concepts they are struggling with."

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In 2011, MacNeil won the Wilfrid Laurier University Award for Teaching Excellence in the full-time faculty category. Wood received this same award in 2010. In 2012, Wood was awarded the Hoffmann-Little Award of the Alumni Association for Excellence in Teaching, Research, and Professional Endeavour.

This is the first time two professors from Laurier have earned the OCUFA award in the same year. In 2006, Carol Duncan, associate professor and chair of Laurier's Religion and Culture Department, received the OCUFA award.

OCUFA, the Ontario Confederation of Faculty Associations, represents 17,000 university faculty and academic librarians across Ontario. It has been providing teaching and librarianship awards since 1973. It will hand out this year's awards Oct. 27 in Toronto.

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