Great faculty: Inspiring students, increasing knowledge, helping others

This University is known internationally for its outstanding faculty, who excel at not only teaching, but research, innovation, vision and dedication to helping the state of Nevada, the nation and beyond become something better than what they are today. By inspiring students to learn, conducting research to gain new knowledge and applying that knowledge to solve problems at home and abroad, the University of Nevada, Reno is, at its core, an engine that propels young and old toward a brighter and more prosperous future.

To honor and acknowledge top faculty who have raised the bar in their fields, the Board of Regents, the University, and local and national organizations bestow awards and acknowledgements. This year’s slate of award winners are richly deserving of their honors.

Scott Mensing
Nevada Professor of the Year, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching/Council for Advancement and Support of Education

Geography professor Scott Mensing is one of only 46 professors in the nation to receive the State Professor of the Year honor for 2010, and he is the eighth professor from the University of Nevada to receive the honor in the past 10 years.

The Professor of the Year winners are chosen for their extraordinary dedication to undergraduate teaching. Mensing is also the recipient of this year’s Mackay Faculty Achievement Award.

Mensing, a biogeographer and paleoecologist, has been teaching since 1987. He joined the College of Science faculty in 1993.

“I have two basic premises: motivate and engage the students; and don’t assume that people understand what you’re saying,” he says. “In a lecture class there must be activities to keep students focused, and I try to use the class time to get them thinking by developing an exercise where they can demonstrate understanding of a principle and then apply it.”

Mensing’s research focuses on the progression of ecological change over time.

Over the years, Mensing has been honored with other distinguished teaching awards, including the 2007 Regents’ Teaching Award, the 2006 F. Donald Tibbitts Distinguished Teacher Award and the 2005 LeMay Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Eric Rasmussen
Regents’ Teaching Award

English professor Eric Rasmussen, internationally recognized Shakespeare scholar, has a knack for passing along his passion for the Bard to his students. Rasmussen, who just last year received the University’s highest award for teaching excellence, the F. Donald Tibbitts Distinguished Teacher Award, has received the top teaching award for the entire Nevada System of Higher Education, the Regents’ Teaching Award.

Students have called his teaching “cutting-edge,” “brilliant” and “flawless.” Rasmussen attributes his success to “being able to take 400-year-old texts and make them relevant for 20-year-olds today.”

Rasmussen was one of two scholars chosen by the Royal Shakespeare Company to edit the complete works of Shakespeare. He makes sure, however, to involve his students in his
Foundation Professors

John Cushman is a nationally recognized research professor in the field of molecular biology of plants in response to abiotic stress who joined the University in 2000. He has built the plant molecular sciences at the University, using his considerable influence in the field to attract additional outstanding researchers here. In addition to his research, Cushman serves as director of the Graduate Program in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology and played a key role in the first INBRE, a $17.3 million program.

Kathleen Keef is a professor in physiology and cell biology, with expertise in renal physiology, fluid and electrolyte balance, and acid-base balance. Since joining the University in 1987, she has published more than 60 scholarly manuscripts in top, peer-reviewed journals. Keef’s work on extramural research grants has brought countless dollars to the University. She was awarded the School of Medicine’s Outstanding Teacher of the Year Award in 1997. In 2002, she received the University’s Outstanding Researcher of the Year Award.

Kwang Jin Kim is an internationally known leader in the research fields of active materials and energy systems who joined the University in 2001. For the past four years, he has served as chair of the Department of Mechanical Engineering. His pioneering scholarly research work has been well-documented in a large number of archived journals, papers and invited lectures. He was elected a fellow of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers in 2007. Kim is an excellent instructor, developing a teaching method that emphasizes direct interaction with students.

Leonard Weinberg

Leonard Weinberg joined the Department of Political Science in 1967. He is an internationally respected figure for his scholarship regarding the causes of political violence and terrorism. His theories about the causes and correlates of violence are considered groundbreaking. He has been asked by governments throughout Europe to address the growth of radical, violent elements in Europe and the Middle East. He has been awarded Fulbright and Guggenheim grants, as well as numerous recognitions from European governments and UNESCO. Weinberg has published 14 books and close to 60 articles and chapters. Weinberg was awarded the University’s Thornton Peace Prize in 1999, and was named a Foundation Professor of Political Science in 1996.

Richard Davies

Richard Davies joined the University in 1980 as vice president for academic affairs and later joined the Department of History. He is considered one of Nevada’s finest authors and one of the nation’s most respected experts on the social and cultural impact of sports on American society. His prolific body of work includes 15 books on modern American history that he has written, edited or co-edited. This list includes three co-edited volumes for the University’s Core Humanities program, as well as the award-winning Main Street Blues: The Decline of Small-Town America (1998), and his latest book, Rivals! The Ten Greatest American Sports Rivalries of the 20th Century (2010). He was named a University Foundation Distinguished Professor in 1999.
Sergiu Dascalu
F. Donald Tibbitts Distinguished Teacher Award

Sergiu Dascalu, an associate professor of computer science and engineering at the University for nine years, has earned a reputation as a professor who grabs his students’ attention, not through theatrics, but through an elegant pedagogical simplicity that makes even the most complex problem seem elementary once he has explained it.

“I strive in my teaching to make things simple,” says the native of Romania. “Sometimes the subject matter is very complicated. The key for any good teacher is to try to make very complicated things look very simple.”

Yaakov Varol, chair of the computer science and engineering department, says his colleague is an extremely hard-working individual who enjoys student-teacher interaction.

“Sergiu’s a very caring teacher,” Varol says. “He devotes a lot of time preparing for his classes. He has a very strong research portfolio that helps him in passing along the latest knowledge to his students. He’s a believer in spending a lot of time with his students, to having an open door policy. Students can knock at his door anytime.”

Dascalu is also the recipient of this year’s Outstanding Undergraduate Research Faculty Mentor Award.

Iain Buxton
 Regents’ Researcher Award

Iain Buxton, professor of pharmacology at the University of Nevada School of Medicine, is this year’s recipient of the top research award for the Nevada System of Higher Education, the Regents’ Researcher Award. His research focuses on causes of pre-term birth and the behavior of breast cancer cells.

Buxton’s research, which has often led to discoveries that were breakthroughs against the prevailing scientific thought in the field, has garnered national attention and more than $6 million in grants from the National Institute of Health, the March of Dimes and the Department of Defense. Most recently, Buxton was awarded a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Global Health research grant, the first in Nevada. In 2008, he received the University’s Outstanding Researcher Award. He also received the 2011 Graduate Student Association’s Vada Trimble Outstanding Mentor Award.

Monica Miller
 Regents’ Rising Researcher Award

Monica Miller, associate professor of criminal justice and social psychology, is this year’s recipient of the Regents’ Rising Researcher Award. In 2009, she was also awarded the Vada Trimble Outstanding Mentor Award.

Miller’s research interests include jury decision-making, judicial stress and justice in family issues. She has published more than 60 articles, several book chapters and four books. She is currently writing a book on stress, trauma and well-being in the courtroom, looking at how various groups—lawyers, judges, victims, jurors, etc.—experience the legal system and what changes could be made to improve those experiences.
Michael Webster
University Outstanding Researcher of the Year

Michael Webster, professor and associate chair of psychology, has demonstrated excellence in his area of research by conducting transformative investigations in color and form perception and how these are shaped by adaptation to the natural visual environment. Surprisingly, he has found that how the world appears depends largely on what one has recently been looking at. His impressive list of more than 80 publications includes four in the prestigious *Journal of Nature*. Webster has received close to $2.5 million in external funding since joining the University in 1994. He is widely recognized as the leading expert in his field.

Jennifer O’Neil ’02
Regents’ Academic Advisor Award,
Undergraduate

Jennifer O’Neil ’02 (general studies), academic adviser, contributes to the success of students in the College of Engineering by taking a “hands-on” approach, continuously reaching out to the more than 500 students she advises. She was recognized for her dedication to students with this year’s Regents’ Academic Advisor Award for Nevada System of Higher Education excellence in advising undergraduate students.

O’Neil began her career at Nevada in 1989 and started advising in 2006. Faculty say that because of O’Neil’s advisement, the student experience has been greatly enhanced, and the college has seen high levels of student retention.

Thomas Harrison
University Graduate Academic Advisor Award

Thomas Harrison, associate dean of the College of Education, has been a professor and chair of the Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Human Development. He has been advising master’s and doctoral degree students since 1988 when he began his career at Nevada, averaging about 15 master’s advisees and three doctoral students each year. He has successfully recruited numerous students through advisement strategies such as planning programs of study, advising prospective students about places and ways to plan and obtain financial aid, and providing accurate and incisive information related to different licensing programs (making timely and appropriate referrals to other departments on campus). In addition to his responsibilities as associate dean, he continues to advise students on a regular basis.

Diane Barone ’89Ed.D.
Distinguished Outreach Faculty

Diane Barone ’89Ed.D. (curriculum and instruction), professor of educational specialties, won the 2010 John Manning Public School Service Award from the International Reading Association, the largest professional organization in her field. She was selected University Foundation Professor in 2008 and was also a former recipient of the Excellence in Research Award, as well as the Outstanding Researcher, 2001, for the College of Education.

Since she began her career at Nevada in 1994, the majority of Barone’s outreach work and research has occurred over time in schools that are identified as “low performing.” At each site, she meets with the principal and the school’s leadership team to collaboratively decide the focus of her work. As a result, the professional collaborations with each school are unique. Her outreach work has made a difference for teachers and children and has added to the stature of the University as a leader in education. In addition, Nevada was the only state without National Board certified teachers in the early 1990s. Barone worked with the Nevada Department of Education and provided classes to support teachers in Las Vegas and Reno. In a six-year time period, significant numbers of teachers became National Board certified in the state.

—Melanie Robbins ’06M.A. and staff reports