

Miller Wins National Teaching Award

January 01, 2010



Miller

APS Fellow Richard L. Miller of the University of Nebraska-Kearney has been named Outstanding Master's Universities and Colleges Professor of the Year in a joint award by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). Each year, just four professors in the United States are selected as national level winners of this prestigious prize. Miller was singled out for his focus on research in the classroom. For each class he teaches, Miller develops an optional lab group where students conduct a complete research project from design to testing to reporting the results, which have often ended up published or presented at conferences. Miller recently shared some thoughts with the *Observer* on teaching and this latest honor.

APS: What is your vision for the undergraduates in your classes?

Miller: In 1901, the psychologist Hugo Munsterberg wrote that the difference between high school and the University is that in high school, the role of the instructor is to provide the student with a good understanding of a knowledge base, whereas at the University, the professor must teach the student to critically evaluate the knowledge base and to master the skills to extend it. My greatest satisfaction has been in finding ways to involve undergraduate students in that critical examination and expansion of the knowledge base. In a rapidly developing field like psychology, I believe it is important to impress upon students the tentative nature of behavioral science. By emphasizing the experimental approach in class, involving students in the research process and encouraging a range of research interests, I believe that I have begun to teach students what psychology is and what it can be to them in the future.

APS: You emphasize research as a teaching tool — why do you think this is an important element of education?

Miller: The greatest joy I have in teaching is the process of mentoring undergraduate research. During my time at UNK, I have mentored over 200 undergraduate research projects that were presented at

regional or national conferences. My students and I have very similar goals — to discover that which we did not know before. We tend to avoid replications and extensions and often take risks in examining little known or at least little written about phenomenon. As a result, we have published over 20 articles together in professional journals and they have published 27 articles as sole authors. Many students identify this experience as one of their most significant academic endeavors, and I find that my lectures have become enriched with examples drawn from the many student research projects that it has been my privilege to mentor. At this point, there are very few topics that I teach about that I can't bring in the results of a student research project to expand students' knowledge of the subject matter. And don't think that that doesn't affect their attention — its pretty cool to realize that fellow students can contribute to the knowledge base.

APS: What does this award mean for you both personally and professionally?

Miller: One of my favorite quotes is by baseball great Jackie Robinson, who said, “Our lives are unimportant, except for the influence we have on others.” For me, this award allows me to recognize three teachers who stand out as having made a real difference in who I have become. The first was my junior high school orchestra director who, with a bachelor's degree from Julliard and a doctorate from Columbia, was once asked why he taught junior high. His answer was that it was the “last chance to have a real impact on people's lives.” He was a teacher who inspired us to be better than we ever thought possible. Gary Carson, my mentor at Weber State College, taught me how to become involved in students' lives beyond the classroom. When I ran out of money the end of my freshman year, he and his wife LouAnn took me in and they remain close to this day. Philip Brickman at Northwestern taught me that real teaching often happens outside of the classroom — in informal settings where ideas can be nurtured, coaxed, and molded into clarity. Summer get-togethers at the beach on Lake Michigan were the setting for many a dissertation topic. For whatever successes I have had working with students, I owe a large debt of gratitude to these outstanding teachers.

Gurung Receives State Award

Richard Miller wasn't the only APSer to be honored by the Professors of the Year Award Program. In addition to the four national winners, state level winners are also chosen each year. This year, APS member Regan A.R. Gurung, Chair of Human Development at University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, received the state level award for Wisconsin. Gurung co-directs UW-Green Bay's Teaching Scholars program, which works with faculty of all levels in a yearlong program to improve teaching and develop teaching research. He also serves on the University of Wisconsin System Office of Professional and Instructional Development Executive Committee that works to improve teaching across the entire UW System state-wide.