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Teaching, research, service drive Eberwein

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

In teaching, scholarship and service to Oakland University, few faculty members have been as exemplary as Distinguished Professor of English Jane Eberwein.

Hired by OU in 1969 after receiving her doctorate in American civilization from Brown University, Eberwein has introduced countless students to the pleasures of early American literature and the complex and wonderfully engaging poetry of Emily Dickinson.

"Jane's fiercely loyal to her students. She takes a joy in learning and in her work, and I think that's communicated to her students," said Bruce Mann, chair of the English Department. "She's not an easy teacher. She's very demanding, rigorous, expects good reading and expects her students to give 110 percent. At the same time, Jane's very aware of her students' needs, particularly when early American literature or 19th-century literature is oftentimes completely foreign to them. She has good organizational skills, tremendous knowledge of her subject, and practices meticulous preparation for her classes."

All of these qualities were apparent to Linda Johnson, a non-traditional student who earned a B.A. in general studies with a minor in American studies last June. Eberwein worked with Johnson as a mentor and adviser through an unconventional program of study and encouraged her to pursue graduate work in American studies, which she hopes will lead to a museum career.

"Professor Eberwein is brilliant. I don't know how else to put it," Johnson said. "She's extremely professional, an excellent listener, and is very open to new ideas and interpretations of doing things. She was very helpful to me as a non-traditional student and encouraging. She was instrumental in helping me edit a 30-page research paper I worked on as part of a fellowship in early American material culture in Deerfield, Massachusetts. And I worked with her in an independent study in colonial literature, which led to her being my academic sponsor in a presentation I gave at Meeting of the Minds. Professor Eberwein honored what I was trying to do and helped me focus my goals."

Eberwein has published three books, including "Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation," which established her as one of the pre-eminent authorities on the 19th century poet. In addition, she has written about 50 essays or book chapters, 18 reviews and presented about 30 conference papers. Throughout the majority of her career, Eberwein has served on many university and department committees, including the University Senate, for which she was secretary for 15 years.

Despite all the demands these endeavors have had on her time, Eberwein always has been available as a mentor to her students and colleagues.

"What a treasure Jane is," Mann said. "Her teaching is exemplary, her research is internationally recognized, and her service to the university is over the top. But in doing it all, she remains a resource for all of us. She's incredibly generous in her mentoring of students and faculty. A lot of us go to her for counsel. I think everybody is impressed by what she's done."

You also can count Oakland University as another Eberwein admirer. Since attaining the rank of full professor in 1984, Eberwein has earned the distinctions recognized by the Oakland University Research Excellence Award (1988), Marion Wilson Award (1988), Michigan Association of Governing Boards Faculty Recognition (1989), inaugural Oakland University Faculty Recognition Award (1996) and Judd Family English Department Faculty Achievement Award (1997). The latest honor came last April when she, Professor of Political Science Shelly Appleton and Professor of Education Ron Cramer each were named Distinguished Professors. The three join just seven other OU faculty members who have been honored with this prestigious award.

"Being named a Distinguished Professor is a tremendous honor, and I'm glad the appointments have been resurrected," Eberwein said. "I'm glad to be linked with the other two men. There are probably a lot of people who could have been honored over the years."

After sustaining such a high level of excellence in scholarship, teaching and service for over 30 years, the question remains – how does Eberwein do it?

“Those things sort of feed into each other,” Eberwein said. “I turn to different things at different times. I focus on scholarship during the summer because teaching becomes dominant during the fall and winter. And at times when I might become a bit discouraged in the classroom, I’ll receive an engaging e-mail from a fellow Dickinson scholar from somewhere in the world and become charged up again. At other times, I’ll walk into a classroom and it’s possible to talk with my students and become uplifted. And university service is part of the profession – the role of the faculty in academic governance is special to those at a university.”

Much of Eberwein’s work has been devoted to the study of Dickinson’s poetry. Representative of her authority on the subject, the Greenwood Press invited her to edit “An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia,” a massive undertaking that was published to international acclaim in 1998. Eberwein’s initial reaction was to shy away from the daunting project, which combines over 100 years of Dickinson scholarship. But after talking it over with her husband, Bob, a fellow professor of English at OU, she decided to immerse herself in the endeavor.

“It’s special to have a collegial marriage,” Eberwein said. “We kind of spur and encourage each other, and it intensifies our loyalty to the university. He was very encouraging when it came to editing the Dickinson encyclopedia. He said ‘What better person to do it than you?’ And that helped me a great deal.”

Unlike many who study Dickinson, Eberwein said she is not “caught up in a love affair with the person,” but rather with the poetry itself and what Dickinson does with the language.

“From childhood, I always liked poetry and things that rhyme,” Eberwein said. “Dickinson’s poems are often printed in children’s books. I was certainly interested in her work and later on liked teaching her work. I started writing about a lot of different authors. But eventually, I thought the only way I was going to deal with her as an author was to write a book about her.

“Dickinson is the poet of the consciousness of the human mind pushed to extremes. She can plant phrases in the brain that stay with you. She can open one’s awareness – you begin to see and hear things differently through her poetry.”

After more than 30 years of engaging her students through inspired teaching, Eberwein says some of her fondest OU memories come from the questions her students answered through their own research.

“So many of my memories deal with interactions with students,” Eberwein said. “We have wonderful students at Oakland and many have become my friends. A lot happens in the classroom and a lot happens after they leave. Several have become professors themselves and that’s wonderful to me. Some of my happiest moments have been listening to their presentations.

“I really enjoy being a part of this university and am proud of this university. I like the Oakland University sail and what it stands for. There’s a lot of aspiration on the part of the faculty and the students.”

SUMMARY

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