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Professor's passion for film inspires others

By **Tim Moran**, contributing writer

During 35 years at Oakland University, nine of them as chair of the English Department, Bob Eberwein has helped elevate film studies from an intriguing course to a demanding concentration, authored numerous articles and reviews and four books on film and film criticism (with a fifth in the works), and established a national scholarly reputation in film studies. He also profoundly influenced the development of OU's academic environment during the university's formative years.

In April, Oakland University named him a Distinguished Professor, a honor bestowed upon only a handful of faculty members.

Today, from his book-enfolded office where most flat surfaces are crowded with piles of active projects, it's easy for Eberwein to laugh about the challenges of making recognition of film a legitimate study area. Back in the early 1970s, when Eberwein and Professor of English Brian Murphy proposed a serious class in film criticism, their team-teaching concept faced some skepticism from a dubious faculty.

Film, after all, was entertainment, not material for serious study.

"We had one colleague...who said 'you might as well propose a course about comic books.' Little did he know!" said Eberwein, his eyes creasing with amusement. Students, apparently, didn't feel the same. The two professors were astounded to find that more than 150 students signed up for the first film classes. Some of the students made an equally astounding discovery; studying film could be tough and challenging work.

"I don't remember thinking 'Oh, this is the start of a film major,'" Eberwein said. "The idea at the time was to get worthwhile works that would draw in kids." But Scott Higgins, CAS '90, now assistant professor of film studies at Wesleyan University, said one of Eberwein's gifts was the ability to show students that intellectual struggle can be gratifying.

"Bob has cultivated a terrific environment for learning. Only now, when I face the daunting prospect of balancing advising, committee work, teaching and scholarship, can I truly appreciate the heroic effort and energy that he brought to his work with students," Higgins said. "He has built a first-rate program and has cultivated a terrific environment for learning."

Bruce Mann, associate professor and former English Department chair, said Eberwein's work was part of a national shift in English scholarship in the 1970s to begin treating film as a matter for serious attention.

"Bob was one of the pioneers," Mann said. "No university in the 21st century should be without a strong film studies program. That's part of learning about our field today, and Bob has worked to make us multidisciplinary at Oakland University."

Mann began working with Eberwein in 1985 and quickly realized that the professor was a remarkably generous and focused person. Eberwein would often go out of his way, for instance, to consult with other faculty about film or video versions of subjects they were likely to teach.

"I really can't say enough about his generosity to his colleagues and students," Mann adds. "He really does 'model' the ideal scholar."

The concentration in film studies is far from an isolated bubble deep within the English Department. Other co-sponsoring departments are Art and Art History; the Center for International Programs; Modern Languages and Literatures; Music, Theatre and Dance; Rhetoric, Communication and Journalism; and Sociology/Anthropology. Some of the courses satisfy undergraduate requirements for ethnic diversity and for general education.

Eberwein is well known for setting high standards and his courses teach skills that go far beyond understanding montage and a director's intentions.

"We aren't positioning this as 'take our courses and get a job,'" warns Eberwein of the film concentration. Instead, it's a case of learning to handle the tools needed for a lifelong intelligence. Among them is the ability to do quality research.

Intellectual rigor in the program is supported by a remarkable collection obtained by Eberwein and Murphy, including more than

500 books on film, directors, actors, individual films and the history of the industry from the late Robert Malcomson, well-known film enthusiast and book collector.

"We have a remarkable collection, not just for an institution of our size, but for any institution. For a school our size, it's amazing. Those at Classroom Support and Instructional Technical Services are very patient with me. I should be a better person about reserving things, but I haven't been," Eberwein said.

It's unlikely that Eberwein's last-minute requests for a particular film or book cause much ire on campus. The distinguished professor has cultivated not just a program of study, but a community that reaches far throughout the university — one that knows and values him.

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SUMMARY

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