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Dedicated teaching inspires Appleton

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

After more than 40 years at Oakland University, it's no secret that Shelly Appleton is fiercely dedicated to teaching. It's what earned him the honor of being named the first recipient of OU's Teaching Excellence Award in 1982, and what inspired OU's Board of Trustees to appoint him **Distinguished Professor of Political Science** last April. Appleton, Professor of Education Ron Cramer and Professor of English Jane Eberwein join just seven other faculty members who have been honored with this prestigious award.

But you don't have to look at plaques or awards to know how good an instructor Appleton is – you just need to talk to his students.

"As a professor, he's been a true inspiration to me," said senior English major Jill Steinkraus, who's also a political science minor. "He's very interested in what his students think and in drawing them out in class."

Gena Hintz, a junior secondary education majoring in history and minoring in political science, said Appleton not only sparked her interest in politics but also helped her become a better student.

"Appleton's the best professor I've ever had," Hintz said. "He helped me learn to improve my writing skills and how to convey an idea to an audience. I walked away from his class thinking, 'Wow. I really learned a lot.'"

It's all par for the course for Appleton, who came to OU in 1960 before he even finished his graduate degree because he had a golden opportunity to teach courses in his specialty – Chinese and American Political Culture and Socialization. Then-university chancellor Woody Varner offered the 26-year-old Appleton an assistant professor position before he had completed his doctorate.

"Oakland was a new university that embodied my ideals. It was the first school in the country to require its students to study foreign cultures and was strong on general education. It was an experimental school and we had a tremendous amount of freedom – and still do," Appleton said.

"In most universities, including OU, the rewards for faculty come from scholarship. But I feel a state university should exist to educate the students. I have done whatever I could to build that into our curriculum and recognize OU teachers who believe and practice that."

Appleton readily admits he is not a conventional teacher. Rather than lecture by rote to his students, Appleton breaks his classes up into small groups and uses teaching assistants to help ensure the students comprehend the class material.

"It's hard to engage students in class, particularly in a lecture hall environment. But I have them do a lot of cooperative learning by breaking into groups and completing assignments – usually summarizing a chapter and answering questions collectively," Appleton said. "If the students think they have something right, I'll purposely challenge their assumptions and try to shake them to see if they thoroughly understand the issue being discussed. People believe their assumptions and vote based on them. In some way, we need to try to address these problems."

Steinkraus enjoyed her experience in Appleton's "Introduction to American Politics" and "American People and Their Presidents" classes so much she jumped at the chance to become one of his teaching assistants when he offered it to her last fall.

"I wanted to do it because I wanted to work closely with Professor Appleton and see the academic angle from the teaching perspective," Steinkraus said. "Politics is something I'm excited about, and I wanted the students to be excited about it, too. I was responsible for three of the nine groups in the class. I spent time talking with them about the issues and encouraged them to ask questions about the chapters we read. I learned a lot more as a teaching assistant than I did as a student. It was an opportunity to challenge myself and be in a position where I had to have a better command of the material."

Appleton also has become a mentor and cherished friend to his colleagues, particularly to junior-level faculty members, said

Michelle Piskulich, associate professor of political science and department chair.

"Shelly takes teaching very seriously and believes in creating an enthusiasm for political science and for learning. He also feels strongly about recognizing full-time and part-time faculty for their dedication to teaching," Piskulich said. "He was a big help to me when I came in as a junior instructor. Most universities would push you into publishing, but with Shelly, it was always okay to be a teacher as well. What he does say is that teaching is important and should not be looked down upon. He has shown by his career that it is possible to publish and be outstanding in the classroom. He looks at teaching evaluations and talks to students and commends you on what you did as a teacher. He's nurturing and gives you a pat on the back when you need it."

Besides being recognized for his teaching excellence, Appleton also was instrumental in developing the current advising system for undergraduates at OU. He also served as associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences from 1979-87 and associate provost for undergraduate studies from 1987-93. His publications include two books and scores of articles in journals such as "The Public Perspective" and "Public Opinion Quarterly." His current research delves into public views of political assassinations.

But personal accolades aren't important to Appleton.

"There are three things I'm proud of: my wife, who's made some enormous contributions working with brain-damaged and emotionally impaired children; my two sons and two daughters, who have all chosen terrific spouses and are great human beings; and the students whose growth I saw and those who became polished alums, " Appleton said. "I'm pleased with the distinguished professor appointment, but I don't really need a title. I think a lot of my colleagues are really more worthy than I. But if it helps give more weight to the recommendations I write for students, whether it be for a scholarship or entry into graduate school, then that's great."

A complete story on Appleton will be published in an upcoming issue of **Oakland University Magazine**.

SUMMARY

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