PROFESSORS EARN HIGH MARKS FOR DEVOTION TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

By MARK WILSON
Courier-Journal Staff Writer
dd-747700 at evansvillecourierpress.com

The University of Southern Indiana has come to pride itself on being a "teaching institution" focused on providing students the best classroom experiences and undergraduate education possible.

So when a student-faculty relations committee recommended creating awards to recognize excellence in teaching at the university, it made perfect sense, said David Bower, president of the USI Foundation and the school's director of development.

"It shows how valuable it is to have full professors in the classroom as opposed to student teachers," Bower said.

The foundation instituted the annual awards in fall 2006. Although the awards are given by the foundation, the winners are chosen by a committee from the Faculty Senate. The recipient of the new faculty award must have taught there six years or less. The winner receives a $1,000 cash stipend and a $1,000 professional development grant. The winner of the adjunct faculty award receives a $500 stipend and $500 grant.

The winners of the USI Foundation's Outstanding Teaching by New Faculty and Outstanding Teaching by Adjunct Faculty awards for 2007-08 are assistant professor of physics Shadow Robinson and adjunct history professor Christine Lovasz-Kaiser.

The two have more than their awards in common. Both started about the same time, teach classes at all levels and are passionate about what they teach, but both also have wide-ranging interests outside their chosen subjects.

Growing up in Pike County, Ky., Robinson loved to read, a habit encouraged by his parents who often took him to libraries. In his spare time he writes novels and poetry as well as academic papers. Communication is a skill he finds useful in all aspects of life, and he tries to stress that in his teaching.

"Having the right answer is useless if you can't convince people," he said.

As a child, when Robinson

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TEACHERS

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books, such as Stephen Hawking's "A Brief History of Time," he knew he had found his calling. He earned undergraduate degrees in math and physics from Eastern Kentucky University and a doctorate in theoretical nuclear physics from Rutgers University. He taught at Eastern Kentucky University and briefly at Lexington Community College before coming to USI in fall 2003.

"Physics really just means a whole explanation for the universe," he said.

Robinson is typically in the classroom or lab with students 10 to 18 hours a week working on that.

While he acknowledges that physics has practical applications for fields such as engineering, Robinson also stresses to help students understand that the pursuit of physics goes beyond everyday mechanics.

"There is so much more to it than just the equations," he said.

"There are things that are worth spending your life worrying about. I think it's a well-lived life that is spent trying to figure out the workings of the universe.

"It's been said that physics is the story of the universe, but that story is written in the language of mathematics," he said.

"It's still a problem. It's always going to be challenging. It's never going to be perfect, but it's OK to not be perfect at math. It's embarrassing to be uncertain, but it's OK to not be good at math.

"This is something that I think we're going to be a bigger and bigger part of what I do," he said.

In his own research, he keeps several high-powered computers running nearly 24 hours a day studying the properties of atomic nuclei. USI welcomes Robinson, as a teacher, is the intrinsic lack of emphasis on math in the American educational system.

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Passion FOR TEACHING

DENNY SIMMONS / Courier & Press

TOP: Christine Lovasz-Kaiser discusses "Beowulf" in her course on the history of England to 1600 at USI.

ABOVE: University of Southern Indiana physics professor Shadow Robinson uses anecdotes to teach the finer points of friction in his Wednesday morning class.