Top honors: 2004-05 Meritorious Teaching, Advising recipients: Daniels' motivation: students' best interests

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Bressler's classroom skills drive students to excel

Innovative. Committed. Demanding. Fair. These are but a few of the adjectives used by students and colleagues to describe the classroom talents of Michael Bressler, associate professor of political science.

Take innovation. Bressler frequently asks students to engage in classroom simulations, in which they portray representatives of different countries or governmental regimes. One of his favorite simulations: a model United Nations. Last year, the “delegates” examined the topic of nuclear nonproliferation.

“It’s neat to see how students relate to another country,” he says. “They confront each other and stage debates from their individual country’s point of view. It really helps drive different points home.”

Last year, Bressler brought in a ringer of sorts for this activity. He asked a student who had been a summer intern at the United Nations to be the chief United States delegate during the simulation.

“Because of his background, he knew how to approach things, and he was very forthright and aggressive,” says Bressler. “As a result, his classmates experienced what it’s like to be on the receiving end of American power and how that can impact a country’s politics.”

Bressler’s passion for his subject, his willingness to “mix things up,” and his eagerness to engage students both in and outside the classroom were among the reasons he was recognized at the spring Commencement with the 2004-05 Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching.

Students seem to embrace the challenges of a Bressler class. As one recent graduate wrote in nominating Bressler for the award, “There is only one reason why many people feel that his class is difficult: because he demands more from his students. He drove us to excel, and thus inspired us to learn.”

Lindsay Woolf ’06 offers confirmation. Woolf initially intended to audit Bressler’s international relations class last spring but soon realized that “just auditing wasn’t going to cut it.”

“It became my favorite class,” she says. “I felt as if each day I exited the room with more IQ points than I had entered.”

A native of Ohio and graduate of Ohio State, Bressler went on to earn his graduate degrees from, if you can believe it, the University of Michigan — although he convincingly declares his undying allegiance to the Buckeyes. He came to Furman in 1993.

Bressler is currently editing a book on Russia as part of the “Understanding the Contemporary World” series by Lynne Rienner Publishers. Furman students have assisted with the book, which includes the work of 10 authors plus three chapters written by Bressler himself.

He says, “I’m enjoying the challenge of taking the good work of my colleagues and putting it in a form to which undergraduates will respond positively.”

— Jim Stewart

Daniels’ motivation: students’ best interests

As the first non-faculty member to receive the Aleseter G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Advising since its advent in 1994, Carol Daniels of the student services staff jokes that she no longer has much room for improvement.

“I can only go down from here,” she says with a laugh.

More seriously, Daniels says she is “tremendously humbled” — and fully aware that she’s a trailblazer of sorts.

“There are so many faculty and staff who are deserving of this award,” she says. “I’m just pleased that my selection opened the doors for staff members to be considered. And to share the stage at Commencement with Hazel Harris, who is a legend at Furman — it’s such an honor.” (Harris, co-winner of the 2004-05 award, retired over the summer as associate dean for summer sessions and director of graduate studies.)

Daniels, coordinator of student services and a past winner of the Chiles-Harrill Award for devotion to students, arrived on campus in the early 1970s. She started as a secretary in the chemistry department, then moved across campus in 1974 to work for O. Suthern Sims, vice president for student affairs.

There, from her office niche on the first floor of the administration building, she discovered she had a “natural affinity” for students. And she took to heart something Marguerite Chiles, Sims’ successor, once told her: “There is no piece of paper on my desk more important than the student in my office.”

Daniels, who took courses part time until she earned a bachelor’s degree from Furman in 1983, has through the years assumed an assortment of departmental duties. Today they include advising a host of student groups, from sororities and fraternities to student publications and the freshman Orientation staff. In her University Center office students find the encouragement and help they need — and even, on occasion, the tough love.

The same skills apply when she’s wearing her academic advisor’s hat. She says, “Advising is all about presenting options. You form a partnership, establish clear and defined goals, and help them determine how to get where they need to go. You listen closely, hold them accountable and help them work through the necessary steps to realize what the best result is for everyone.”

In nominating Daniels for the award, a colleague wrote, “There are numerous students who would not be alumni without her advising experience and assistance. She has a very warm and inviting presence that makes even the most troubled student feel comfortable with her.”

 Says Daniels, “It’s those students who for whatever reason — personal, academic, poor decision-making — are not performing as well as they can that I seem most drawn to. It’s wonderful to see them make progress and become more confident.

“And it’s such a pleasure,” she adds, “to have a job in which I can devote my time to students’ interests.”

— Jim Stewart