Cal Poly Selects Three 2003-2004 Distinguished Teachers

SAN LUIS OBISPO -- Cal Poly has selected three professors – all from the College of Science and Mathematics and all San Luis Obispo residents – to receive the university’s highest teaching honor this year.

Named to receive a 2003-2004 Distinguished Teaching Award are Matthew J. Moelter, an associate professor of physics; Robert K. Smidt, professor of statistics; and Nanine A. Van Draanen, associate professor of chemistry. All three were credited with making complex subjects understandable and having a positive influence on their students.

Moelter joined the Cal Poly Physics Department faculty in 1998, after seven years’ teaching at the University of Puget Sound. He teaches introductory to advanced courses in physical science, general physics, physics on the computer, modern physics, thermal physics, quantum physics lab and solid state physics lab.

“Dr. Moelter is more concerned that his students understand the material than with knowing how to work out problems,” said one student nominator. “Both in and out of class, he will focus on explaining the material in every-day language and analogies to try to make us understand at a level at which we are comfortable.”

Additional remarks included:

• “Dr. Matt’ is by far the best teacher I have ever had. His enthusiasm and comedic character provide a conducive atmosphere to learning.”

• “His ability to explain the most complex forms of physics in the simplest manner is astonishing.”

• “He’s the only person who has made me think about becoming a teacher.”

Moelter has written several journal articles and was recently invited to speak to the American Council on Education conference on Fostering Innovation in Undergraduate Science, Technology, Engineering and
Mathematics for All Students, in Washington, D.C.

He earned a Bachelor of Science degree from UC Irvine in 1981, a master’s and doctorate from Brown University in 1983 and 1989, respectively.

Smidt has been teaching at Cal Poly since 1978. He has taught more than 20 different courses, including applied multivariate statistics, probability theory and mathematical statistics, experimental design, linear models, and statistical uses of the computer. He helped design and initiate Cal Poly’s statistical consulting service, open to all members of the campus community who need help in research design and data analysis.

He was recognized by one student for “truly providing examples that students can relate to as a method for demonstrating complicated concepts. He reduces the stress of deciphering the details with humor.” Additional comments included:

- “Whoever thought statistics could be a fun class? Dr. Smidt is a great teacher who has made such a dreaded class into the class that I can’t stand to miss.”

- “Dr. Smidt pushes his students to go just beyond their comfort level in class, pushing them to realize their full potential.”

- “He keeps the class moving at a pace that keeps everyone involved, using humor and real-world examples.”

Smidt has written numerous education-related texts, manuals and study guides, as well as journal articles, reports and technical documents. He earned a bachelor’s degree from Manhattan College in the Bronx, N.Y. in 1971, a master’s degree from Rutgers University in 1973, and a doctorate from the University of Wyoming in Laramie in 1976.

Van Draanen is a 1985 Cal Poly alumna. She came to Cal Poly in 1996, after serving several years as a scientist for Burroughs Wellcome Co. and Glaxo Wellcome Inc., where she earned a 1994 Excellence Award and a 1990 Special Performance Award.

She teaches a variety of freshman- through senior-level chemistry classes, including general chemistry, organic chemistry, biochemical pharmacology and drug development.

She was cited for being able to “bring a class together” and “caring about each student individually.” Others had this to say:

- “Dr. Van Draanen is an amazing teacher for a very difficult subject.”

- “She has greatly influenced me as a chemist. She has great passion for what she does, and anyone who has taken a class from her knows this.”

- “She is so clear and precise when presenting new information. She is
very approachable.”

Van Draanen has published several papers in peer-reviewed journals, holds one patent and has submitted four patent applications. She earned a doctorate from UC Berkeley in 1992.

The three recipients will be honored at Cal Poly’s June 12 Commencement ceremonies. Students and alumni of the university nominate the distinguished teachers. Cal Poly has named 126 distinguished professors since the awards program’s inception in 1964.

For more information on the awards and previous winners, go to the Cal Poly Academic Senate Distinguished Teaching Web page at http://www.calpoly.edu/~acadsen/dta.html.

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