



## If you are in the education business, it really helps if you like students.

Every academic year is dotted with banquets of one sort or another, several featuring the bestowing of “outstanding alumni” awards by a particular college, followed by the honorees’ gracious responses thanking those who contributed to their success. Almost always, topping the appreciation list is that faculty member who made a difference—and just as often the most vivid memory of that professor occurred outside the classroom.

Such memories for many of my former journalism colleagues of the ’50s and ’60s attending the JayMac Banquet this fall involved Louise B. Moore, the adviser to *The Oklahoma Daily* who has been mentioned previously in this column. Besides taking us home and feeding us after we put the paper to bed, she constantly badgered us for the books we were currently reading, as if we had time to read for pure pleasure, and matched us opinion for opinion on everything from movies to politics.

Less personal, perhaps, was the stoic French professor of the same era who each semester invited his classes to his small home near the campus, where his wife served popcorn and ice water. We were not so critical of the quality of the refreshments as we were amazed that he actually had a home, much less a wife, and that he knew our names without a seating chart.

It is comforting to know that faculty taking a personal interest in their students did not end with burgeoning enrollments and higher admission standards. For a significant number of today’s professors, and for the institution itself, building relationships with undergraduates is still a high priority.

Several structured programs to foster faculty/student interaction have been extremely successful. The University built a spacious apartment at each of the hous-

ing centers, where a faculty family takes up residence, usually for three years, unencumbered by disciplinary responsibilities. There they serve, as *Sooner Magazine* noted in 1998, as “professional role models, academic advisers, personal counselors, faculty friends and friendly neighbors.”

Also housing-centered is the Adopt-a-Prof initiative, where approximately 70 faculty volunteers are assigned to one or more dormitory floors or one of the Greek houses. The profs act as informal mentors, participate in student-organized, get-acquainted events and in turn are given a small stipend to treat their groups to something like pizza or a cookout.

The Faculty Mentoring Program enlists from 18 to 24 faculty volunteers to shepherd a small group of freshmen through their first semester. Participation is voluntary for the students, too, who register during summer pre-enrollment; group assignment is random, although a few professors have particular areas of interest. Kelly Dampousse, for instance, has declared for out-of-staters, Texans, criminology and sociology majors, in that order. R.C. Davis-Undiano uses his heritage to mentor Latino students; Kelvin Droegemeier and Fred Carr have special insight to offer meteorology students. After an initial group meeting, the mentoring is freewheeling and individualized—monthly tea in the prof’s office, eating out or at home, hiking—even a scorpion hunt for those so inclined.

One department in particular seems to have made involvement with undergraduates an integral part of its daily operation. When Ryan Doezema became chair of the Department of Physics 15 years ago, he instituted afternoon tea, daily from 3:30-4 p.m., originally in the entrance hall of Nielsen Hall, but now in the spiffy new atrium in the renovated building’s new addition. Faculty, staff and students sign up at a small fee for

cookies and tea and informal conversation. On Thursdays the cookies get fancier at an after-gathering for the weekly colloquium in which undergraduates assemble with faculty, staff and graduate students to hear a member of the department discuss his or her research, followed by a lively Q&A.

Each fall the Doezemas invite the whole department—faculty, staff and students—to their home for a picnic, and in the spring the Society of Physics Students (SPS) reciprocates with a similar outing. Every Wednesday during the summer session, Professor Eric Abraham made use of the unoccupied area next to his home to stage Ultimate Frisbee competitions for undergraduates on campus to participate in a physics research program.

Abraham’s fellow faculty member, Lloyd Bumm, a collector of old 16 mm movies—the videotape of yesteryear—stages reel-to-reel showings of his favorites for SPS members in the Nielsen auditorium. He dubs the events Fortnightly Fizzix Flicks.

For decades, Stewart Ryan has entertained students as his alter ego, the mad-cap, lab-coated, fright-wigged Dr. Indestructo, in physics-is-fun performances that have made him a legend. In another expression of his concern for their welfare, he organized his colleagues to designate their contributions to the Campus Campaign for an undergraduate physics scholarship.

The operative word in all these faculty endeavors to bring undergraduates into the academic fold is “volunteer.” Students may be the business they are in, but working outside the job description is purely optional. So why do it? Movie man Bumm shrugs, a bit puzzled by the obvious: “It’s just fun.” It is also what creates the moments that will be recalled 20, 30, 40 years from now when alumni gather.

—CJB