

2008 Board of Trustees' Award for Outstanding Teaching Recipient

Professor Peter Christopher

What is the defining characteristic of an outstanding teacher? Is it the ability to connect with students? Maybe it is the ability to invoke intellectual curiosity in students. How about the ability to make a lasting impression on students, inspiring them with dedication and enthusiasm that transcends the confines of a classroom for years into the future? Perhaps it is all of the above.

What are the odds that a college student takes the same course with the same professor in the same year of their college experience at the same school and even in the same building that her father did 34 years earlier? You're probably thinking: Slim to none. I stand before you today to attest that the chances are in fact slim, not none.

In 1973, my father was a freshman at WPI when he enrolled in a particular course with an exceptional professor that he remembered years after he sat for the final exam. Upon learning that his professor was still at WPI when I matriculated as a freshman last year, my father strongly encouraged me to enroll in his course even though I did not need it for my major. He wanted me to experience what he felt was the epitome of outstanding teaching at WPI. Taking his advice, I shuffled my schedule around to fit in the particular class with this mysterious professor. Needless to say, I was not disappointed.

This professor has a very special gift, characteristic of talented educators – the ability to connect with his students and to communicate challenging concepts in a way that everyone understands. Like all professors at WPI, he is exceptionally intelligent and is clearly an expert in his field, but his ability to take that next step and share his knowledge with students in not only a clear, but captivating way that holds the students' attention for the duration of the class period is truly remarkable. For that, his students are grateful. Sitting in his classroom, you can immediately recognize his sincere love for teaching and eagerness to help students learn. That is the mark of a great teacher.



But please don't take my word for it, or that of my father. The nominations we received from students on this professor's behalf were exceptionally strong. One student remarked "I have found him to be one of the best teachers I have had in my entire educational career." Another stated "He did an excellent job teaching the material, reviewing for tests, and getting students as a whole to understand the material well, as many of the professors at WPI do. The qualities that stand out are his ability to relate to students and appeal to them with a great sense of humor. While performance of a teacher can be based on how well students learn, and a class evaluated on how much material was taught, any student knows it's the way a teacher presents him/herself that makes the class worthwhile. The class was always at ease, and students felt free to try their hardest and maybe make mistakes. This is what I think makes him an outstanding teacher, bringing out the best in his students." One student had a one sentence nomination: "He loves what he is teaching." Those six simple words speak volumes for the type of educator he is, and is the reason why so many students complete his courses feeling lucky to have experienced such a rewarding class.

An outstanding professor has consistently demonstrated excellence in teaching for a considerable period of time. Today, we are thanking a particular professor for his 45 years of unparalleled service to this institution.

For all these reasons, on behalf of the committee, the Trustees, and the WPI community, I am truly honored to present the 2008 Trustees' Award for Outstanding Teaching to Professor Peter Christopher.