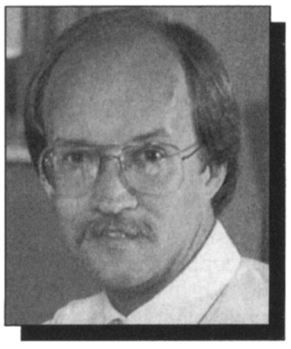
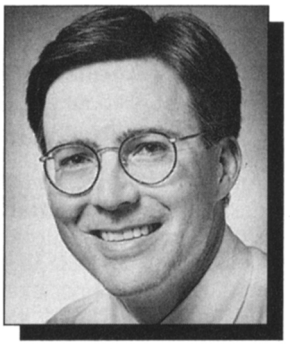
University Students Honor Professors with Excellence in Teaching Awards



Ron Gronsky



Tim Sands

Jim Evans

Beginning with the Spring semester of 1994, the University Chapter of the Materials Research Society (MRS) at the University of California—Berkeley has given an Exceptional Teaching Award every semester to the professor demonstrating excellent teaching skills in the classroom. The selection is determined by undergraduate and graduate students attending materials science classes, and the award serves as a means for students to voice their appreciation of outstanding professors. This feedback from students to faculty is often lacking. Although occasionally a professor may receive direct thanks from students for a well-taught course, more typically she or he will never hear such compliments. In fact, often the most verbose responses are constructive criticism which, while valuable, can be somewhat disheartening. We recall a professor from our undergraduate days who was distraught over the lack of positive comments on his teaching evaluation forms. While students admired this professor as an excellent teacher, who taught with seemingly limitless energy, enthusiasm, and patience, the message of their appreciation was lost. Now, with this award, this message is being made.

One difficulty in implementing the award was maintaining objectivity in the selection process. We wanted participation from all students attending materials science courses in order to form a broad compilation of individual opinions. By assuring the participation of each student in the selection process, we felt that this compilation would come close to objectivity.

Like many other universities, UC—Berkeley distributes a campus-wide evaluation form at the end of each semester which requests information regarding the quality of both the class and the professor. Because the completed forms are not generally available to the student body and because we had more specific questions in mind, a group of students in the MRS Chapter has designed and implemented a course evaluation questionnaire specifically for our department. With the individual permission of each professor, this form is distributed by representatives from the MRS Chapter at the same time the more general University evaluations are handed out.

The questionnaire asks students to rate their professors and the class (from 1 to 7) on six categories:

- Course Quality;
- Course Difficulty;
- Quality of Lectures;
- Text Quality;
- Problem Sets; and
- Exams.

In addition, plenty of room is supplied for specific comments in each category. After collecting the forms, a group of student volunteers (selected at the Chapter meetings ahead of time) compile the ratings, provide average ratings for each category, and carefully review the comments. In order to minimize the workload, enough volunteers are collected such that each student is responsible for only one class, with each class typically consisting of 30 to 40 students. The highest rated professor receives the Exceptional Teaching Award. This professor not only receives a certificate with much pomp and circumstance, but also has his or her name added to a plaque, prominently displayed in our department, which lists all previously bestowed professors.

The information is also used to compile a course evaluation guide. The statistics for each course in the department are listed in detail, along with a course description provided by the professor, and a summary of the students' comments from the evaluation forms. This guide is then printed using MRS Chapter funds and is distributed to the general student body to both augment and update information provided by the university course catalog.

The Exceptional Teaching Award seems to have made a positive impact on the professors and students. With it, professors receive feedback and students collectively voice their appreciation. Most importantly, the award reaffirms the priorities of students: *teach me*.

The response from the faculty has been uniformly positive. According to Ron Gronsky, the department chair, "All faculty are of course expected to excel in teaching (as well as research and service) in order to earn their promotions through the professional ranks, but the award highlights our *most* important job on the faculty." A recent recipient of the award, he said that the Exceptional Teaching Award is a thoughtful gesture by the students that returns a lot of goodwill to those faculty who value teaching. He received a surprising number of compliments from his fellow faculty members for receiving this award, which, he said, added even more to its value.

The first award recipient, Tim Sands, said that it is nice to be recognized for his efforts. He said that, over time, both the Guide and the Award should have a positive impact on the department.

Jim Evans, the most recent recipient (Fall 1995 semester) was pleased to receive the award, saying that the student chapter is doing an excellent job of promoting good teaching by making this award to the faculty.

Education Exchange highlights experiences of scientists and engineers with local schools (K–12), community programs, and university programs, along with helpful hints and resources. If you would like to share your own involvement in science education, contact *MRS Bulletin*, Materials Research Society, 9800 McKnight Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15237-6006; fax 412-367-4373; e-mail Bulletin@mrs.org.

Acknowledgment

A plethora of praise goes to the students running both the Exceptional Teaching Award and the Course Evaluation Guide: Elm Powers, Hilary Baumann, Joe Behnke, Marni Goldman, as well as many others. Without their hard world this award could not have happened.

SCOTT MCHUGO and CHRIS GILBERT

Scott McHugo *has recently received his PhD degree in materials science at the University of California—Berkeley for work on interactions of metallic impurities with structural defects in solar grade silicon.* ***Chris Gilbert*** *is completing his PhD studies in materials science at the University of California—Berkeley, researching mechanisms of fatigue and fracture in structural ceramics and their composites at room and elevated temperatures.*