The Gitner Award
Assistant Professor Andrew West

The Gitner Award for Distinguished Teaching in the College of Arts & Sciences was endowed by CAS alumnus and Trustee Emeritus Gerald Gitner.

Astrophysicist Andrew West makes no secret of his passion and enthusiasm for teaching. How much he cares about his students and their learning is plain to hear in conversation and palpable in his classrooms. Students also pick up on the quality of thought and organization he puts into creating course syllabi, classroom dynamics, and high-impact learning techniques. The results are extraordinary, inspiring flights of hyperbole. One student describes the approaching end of a semester with Professor West as cause to “mourn”; a different student exclaims: “I want my kids to take this course in 25 years.”

The secrets of Professor West’s success are fully on display in AS 105, “Alien Worlds,” a course he developed to excite non-science majors about the exploration of planets within and outside our solar system. “Alien Worlds” has gone viral, growing from 40 students in Spring 2011 to over 200 by Fall 2012. Withal, Professor West continues to run his huge lectures as learning collaboratives where “everyone [is] actively involved.” He makes a point of knowing students’ names. That explains the time he took notice of an unfamiliar student who had dropped in for the sheer pleasure of learning. He makes speaking up comfortable, assigns “minute papers” as a forum for one-on-one questions, and uses Facebook to keep in touch with AS 105 alums. The emphasis he places on critical thinking and scientific advances has students convinced that they will retain what they’ve learned and apply it in later life. One IR major likes to tell how, in a chance encounter with students from MIT, he used Professor West’s teachings on wavelengths to set those techies straight about the difference between red shifts and blue shifts.

Consummate ability to inspire and empower also suffuses Professor West’s graduate teaching and his mentoring of high-achieving PhD candidates and undergraduate astronomy majors, including two recent winners of awards from the American Astronomical Society. He regularly welcomes high school students into his research group from the Upward Bound and RISE programs. Diversity efforts fill a whole section of his résumé. Whether as an active member of the National Society of Black Physicists, a GWISE advisor, a fixture at multicultural recruitment events, or the initiator of a research-oriented FY 101, he keeps an eye out at all times for ways to expand the involvement of women and minorities in his own and other STEM fields.

With his MOOC version of AS 105 set to go live, another general education blockbuster is in the works, the interdisciplinary Core Natural Science course he will co-pilot next spring on “Origins.” Recognizing an irrepressible and exemplary force for the good of teaching, CAS proudly calls on Andrew West by name to receive the 2014 Gitner Award.

May 14, 2014

Virginia Sapiro, Dean of Arts & Sciences
The Neu Family Award
Borden Parker Bowne Professor Charles Griswold

The Neu Family Award for Excellence in Teaching in the College of Arts & Sciences is the gift of Richard Neu (CLA ‘61) and his daughter Amy (CAS ‘96).

Charles Griswold’s acclaimed scholarship spans the whole history of western philosophy. For 23 years, Boston University students have had the great good fortune to be his fellow travellers on a journey that extends from Plato to Enlightenment thinkers Adam Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, beyond, to the contemporary interpersonal and political contexts of age-old questions about the nature, requirements, and meaning of forgiveness.

In whatever format he teaches, from introductory lectures to graduate seminars, Professor Griswold earns stellar, near-perfect or perfect 5.0 numerical ratings. Admiring colleagues and legions of student enthusiasts reach for the selfsame superlatives to describe the balance he strikes between divergent pedagogical tendencies. His classes are superbly organized and rigorously structured, but he encourages a free flow of discussion within them. He “leads the class like a big debate”; lectures feel like seminars, and seminars like conversations. His “incredibly enthusiastic,” “personable,” and “engaging” delivery makes it “easy to forget to take notes during lecture because you’re so caught up in what you’re learning.” Yet, in debate, he stays “neutral and unbiased.” For all his brilliance, students find him remarkably “non-condescending” and respectful of their ideas.

Professor Griswold is a demanding teacher, but also one who nurtures his students and “honestly” wants them to do well. He can be counted on to assign challenging material and, then, “methodically” and “clearly,” break it down in class. His ready wit leavens discussion when it gets “mind-altering and hard.” He typically requires frequent, short papers, making it essential to keep up and to tighten flabby prose. Whether it’s his kind helpfulness or his intellectually stimulating conversation that students most appreciate and can’t get enough of in class, they flock, warmly invited, to his office hours.

His special dedication and overtures to undergraduates stem from a deep conviction that philosophy is not an academic specialization, but a human possibility that should be encouraged and fostered in students from all disciplines. As one student convert explains, “He helped me overcome my ‘epistemological skepticism’ towards philosophy as a useful subject.” He hasn’t, however, relied solely on standard offerings to win the skeptics over to philosophical reflection. Instead, he has taken curricular initiatives, reaching out to SMG with a new course on “Wealth, Ethics, and Liberty,” and creating a course on the “Emotions” that attracts students majoring in psychology. His latest, a seminar wholly devoted to “Anger,” will enroll Kilachand students in their first semester. How better to embark on college than in the company of Charles Griswold, consensus “awesome professor” and winner of the Neu Family Award for Excellence in Teaching?

Virginia Sapiro, Dean of Arts & Sciences

May 14, 2014
The Frank and Lynne Wisneski Award
Associate Professor Brooke Blower

The Frank and Lynne Wisneski Award for Excellence in Teaching in the College of Arts & Sciences honors their daughter, Corey Wisneski, a 1999 graduate in Anthropology.

Brooke Blower teaches twentieth-century U.S. history, urban and transnational history, and historiography, by her own account, “in ways [she] would like to be taught.” The engaging, incisive intelligence and “unbelievable” generosity with which she puts that golden rule into practice have made her a magnet for students. Up and down the curriculum, she challenges, motivates, and helps students to historicize their view of the world and their place in it, to push beyond preconceived notions of the past, to elevate their analytical skills, and in all ways to grow as scholars and liberally educated people.

Professor Blower’s mid-level introductions to American cultural history and popular culture fill quickly with undergraduates from across the university, many of whom call her courses their “favorites.” She lectures with elegance and verve, building an original and powerful narrative over the whole semester. In keeping with her commitment to “modeling what a historian at work looks like,” she enlists a wide array of sources and uses the accessibility of her material to demonstrate the gains for understanding when familiar ideas and everyday objects are “made strange,” that is, re-examined in unsettling new perspectives and broader contexts. She has developed a knack for breaking up lectures with lively in-class discussions, often elicited by arresting visuals or audio clips that pull students deeper into the issue at hand and prepare them for assignments where they will themselves relate cultural artifacts to overarching course themes.

Professor Blower leaves a profound impression on the history majors and graduate students who line up to work with her in upper-level seminars and individually. One recent winner of the department’s senior research prize, for an honors project completed under her supervision, recalls always leaving her office “with my thoughts clearer and my stomach less knotted.” Others echo praise for her “uncanny ability” as an active listener “to help figure out” what they were trying to say. Commending the regular writing workshops she integrates into her seminars, one graduate student plans to “replicate her approach in every course I teach.” Graduates now in tenure-track positions credit her with having introduced them to “new types of documentary sources” and “a model” for entering the innovative stream of transnational scholarship. At the stage in her career when she might have stayed on the receiving end of career advice, she has instead “gone above and beyond” to counsel junior scholars on professional development strategies.

As Brooke Blower reminded the Class of 2013, history teaches us in part “to recognize the ways in which individuals continue to make a major impact.” This Wisneski Award celebrates her own excellence in teaching and its ever-widening circle of influence.

May 14, 2014

Virginia Sapiro, Dean of Arts & Sciences
College of Arts & Sciences Award
For Distinction in First Year Undergraduate Education

Dr. Kyna Hamill

This award recognizes a member of the CAS faculty for excellence in teaching, mentoring and/or other contributions to the undergraduate First Year Experience.

Kyna Hamill’s background in theater history and performance provides an apt metaphor for the range and impact of her engagement in the experience of first-year CAS students. She plays a whole repertoire of key roles: seminar leader and lecturer in Core Humanities, faculty advisor to pre-major students, and Core Student Life and Activities Coordinator. And, in each of those venues, her well-informed artistry and pedagogical inventiveness bring students and colleagues, sometimes literally, to their feet.

Dr. Hamill’s teaching comes highly recommended through the Orientation grapevine. She is known for creating a “great learning environment.” Passionate but cool, with a touch of whimsy, she poses pitch-perfect questions that generate interest, provoke strong and challenging discussion, connect Antiquity to the present day, and leave the “simplification you get in high school” behind. A colleague marvels at how she can win vocal cynics over to an appreciation of “great books.” To “stunning” effect, she has also refreshed the lecture format, coaching students to perform scenes from Euripides, which she wove into her finely crafted words from the podium on Greek tragedy. No wonder that scheduling conflicts with her sections have left would-be followers “devastated.”

Dr. Hamill enacts a breath-taking sense of dedication to extending first-year education beyond the classroom. She is an “always available” advisor who takes an active interest in helping her advisees find their way. For student groups, she sponsors learning through creating that includes the making of short films based on Core texts. Her Student Life Coordinator’s portfolio brims over with projects that bridge academic and residence life, bring current students together with alumni, involve juniors and seniors in first-year students’ transition to BU, and integrate peer mentors into the Core Natural Sciences teaching team. The long list of events and excursions she has organized reads like an insider’s guide to Boston-area arts and humanities institutions and, even more notably, illustrates her flair for introducing students to activities that give depth and immediacy to their studies. Rather than set novice museumgoers loose on the MFA or have them take the standard tour, she picks just the right artifacts of ancient material culture for them to look at, equips them with customized guides and podcasts, and gets them to talk and think about what they see in relation to the books they are reading in class.

In all these ways, with substance, style, and stamina, Kyna Hamill brings the liberal arts to life and, as a result, affects students in deep and truly life-altering ways. Bravissima!

May 14, 2014

Virginia Sapiro, Dean of Arts & Sciences
College of Arts & Sciences Award
For Distinction in First Year Undergraduate Education
Maria Gapotchenko and David Shawn

This award recognizes a member of the CAS faculty for excellence in teaching, mentoring and/or other contributions to the undergraduate First Year Experience.

Writing Program Senior Lecturers Maria Gapotchenko and David Shawn make a terrific tandem. For eight years, they have co-coordinated the CAS Writing Center. A major resource for first-year students, the Center offers more than 4,000 individual tutorials in writing every year. Simply managing an operation of this size and complexity, with its reliance on graduate and undergraduate student tutors, would be a tour de force. In fact, Maria and David have led the Center forward intellectually, while remaining fully responsive to their fellow instructors and engaged in their own classroom teaching.

They are both outstanding teachers individually. Maria, a poet and translator, communicates a passion for language that is matched only by the intensity of her devotion to students. She backs up high expectations with her own formidable work ethic, meeting multiple times with each of her students and inspiring essays that garner a disproportionate share of program-wide prizes. David’s all-round pedagogical excellence is flavored by a serious intellectual interest in oratory. He often has his students memorize and recite excerpts from Shakespeare, Martin Luther King, and Sojourner Truth, noting that the experience helps develop students’ confidence and a feel for the rhythms of language that ultimately manifests itself in their writing.

Together, Maria and David have built up the Writing Center as a true teaching culture. Under their leadership, the Center has evolved from a supplementary resource to a core component of the Writing Program. One of their initiatives was to locate tutors at Mugar Library. This way, first-year students learning how to integrate research and writing can work closely with both reference librarians and Writing Center tutors. A second initiative, responsive to rising numbers of international students, led to the development of a new course that introduces student tutors to principles of second language acquisition and to the theory and practice of working with ESL students in a tutorial setting. And a third initiative has replaced ineffective group tutorials with a successful new model: Students identified by their Writing Program instructors as likely to benefit from intensive tutoring now voluntarily commit to a series of six weekly meetings with the same tutor.

Add to those milestone accomplishments the co-coordinators’ unstinting and meticulous attention to keeping the Center staffed, tutors supported, and quality high. The College of Arts & Sciences gratefully salutes Maria Gapotchenko and David Shawn for laying essential foundations of undergraduate education with great energy and distinction.

May 14, 2014

Virginia Sapiro, Dean of Arts & Sciences
Arts & Sciences
Dean’s Award for Excellence in Graduate Education
Professor Michael Lyons

This award recognizes a member of the CAS faculty whose commitment to excellence in graduate teaching, mentoring, and/or program development has contributed significantly to the quality of education in the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences.

Michael Lyons’ indelible contributions to graduate education in clinical psychology run the gamut from program building, to superb classroom teaching, to finest quality mentoring of several generations of master’s and doctoral students.

Under Professor Lyons’ leadership, the clinical program’s long-held dream of having its own clinic was realized through the establishment of the Psychological Services Center, where all of the program’s graduate students complete their first practicum. He also actively promoted the scientist-practitioner model of graduate education by creating opportunities for clinical researchers and postdoctoral fellows at CARD to teach and mentor graduate students.

His own signature course in Advanced Psychopathology attracts students from all areas of psychology. In the classroom, he radiates wisdom and integrity, generates confidence, poses stimulating and important questions, listens respectfully, and calls forth excellence. His “dry sense of humor” cuts to the heart of problems and helps introduce perspectives that challenge the status quo and might otherwise be hard to hear. As one student writes, “I will seriously miss this man’s personality.”

Professor Lyons has served on 100 dissertation committees, 27 as first reader. With continuous NIH funding since 1982, he provides rigorous research training in behavioral genetics; 82 of his journal articles and 10 book chapters have been co-authored with current or former BU students, many of whom go on to distinguished academic careers. Those facts only begin to suggest the exemplary scope and qualities of his mentoring. Successful graduates cite an “ideal dynamic” where his honest assessments are subtended by belief in students’ potential and where, far from being apprenticed as “mini-mes,” they were encouraged to develop their own passions into bold and original research agendas. He also showed them the way to lifelong pursuit of professional growth and work/life balance. One mentee, now a clinical manager, concludes: “I would be hard-pressed to think of a single week where I am not practicing a skill that I have honed with Dr. Lyons’ guidance, whether it involves diagnosing symptoms, running stats, performing neuropsychological assessments, or mentoring students and staff of my own.”

In Michael Lyons, this Dean’s Award thus recognizes a shining role model of comprehensive graduate education and an especially inspirational mentor of mentors.

May 14, 2014

Virginia Sapiro, Dean of Arts & Sciences