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UM-Western educator among the best

Rob Thomas named Outstanding Baccalaureate Colleges Professor of the Year

University of Montana Western environmental sciences Professor Rob Thomas has been named Outstanding Baccalaureate Colleges Professor of the Year by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education.

The two groups chose Thomas as the recipient of the prestigious award from a field of more than 300 professors from baccalaureate colleges and universities across the United States.

Judges selected national winners based on four criteria: impact on and involvement with undergraduate students; scholarly approach to teaching and learning; contributions to undergraduate education in the institution, community and profession; and support from colleagues and current and former undergraduate students.

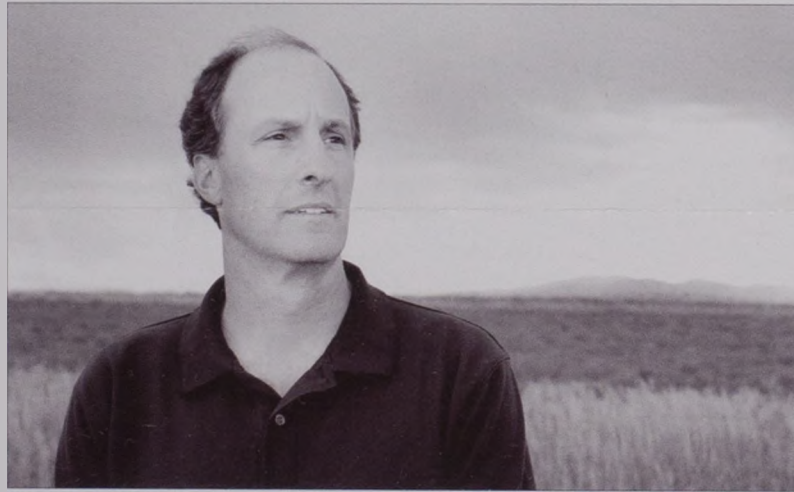
"I can think of only a select few faculty members I have known in my four decades in higher education on several campuses who have had the kind of impact Professor Rob Thomas has had on undergraduate teaching," said UM President George M. Dennison. "He has set the bar very high for his colleagues in the state and the nation. It bears noting that no other Montana faculty member has earned this award during its existence."

Thomas has been a faculty member at UM-Western for 16 years. In that time he helped transform the institution into the first and only public university in the United States to offer block scheduling. Under the scheduling system, students take one class at a time, three hours per day for 18 days, earning the same credits over a year as students do in traditional multiple-course scheduling models.

Experience One, or X1 as the scheduling program is known at UM-Western, is in its fifth full year at the Dillon campus.

For Thomas, the award is as much about the entire university's innovations as it is one professor's accomplishments.

"The facts are impressive," Thomas



Professor Rob Thomas teaches environmental sciences at The University of Montana-Western. (Photo by David Nolt)

said. "This university had two degrees and was dying. A small group of committed, visionary people turned this campus around. The award itself is recognition of what we have done to make this campus one of the most unique undergraduate experiences in the country. If this award is being given to me in any way, shape or form because of my role with X1, my role was one of many important roles to make this happen. This happened because of the courage of the faculty to change everything they know about how to teach undergraduate students."

Thomas said by replacing the "sage on the stage" education model, professors at UM-Western regularly are able to engage their students in the field and in real-world situations they will encounter as graduate students and professionals. Small class sizes also foster more intimate, mentorship-like relationships between professors and students. Thomas calls this "aboriginal learning," and it is at the core of his teaching.

Thomas takes full advantage of the large blocks of time he is able to spend with his students in the field. In November 2008, he and his environmental field studies students performed an unprecedented analysis of stream restoration on Montana's upper Big Hole

River. In 18 days (one block), the students conducted their analysis and drafted a 150-page assessment report on their collaborative effort with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and local ranchers to help preserve the endangered fluvial Arctic grayling fish.

Such work is all part of what Thomas calls "teaching the salient concepts of a particular discipline." He said the results are greater engagement in the classroom and better student retention both in knowledge and enrollment.

"There's no falling through the cracks here, and it's not coddling," Thomas said. "The block takes the highest level of commitment and passion and enthusiasm."

Thomas insists his award is a reflection of collective efforts taken by his fellow faculty at this small but innovative university in remote Montana.

"My role in this historic change is best left to others to determine," Thomas said. "However, I know that change of this magnitude requires shared vision, hard work by many people and the courage to take a risk and try something new. I thank my colleagues for caring enough about the students to take this bold step forward. They have made my working life so much more interesting and worthwhile." 🍷

Griz for Kids collects record amount of donations

The Montana Grizzlies football team paired up with Mountain FM in November to sponsor the fifth annual Griz for Kids Toy Drive. This year, co-chairs Marc Mariani and Levi Horn led the call for toy and cash donations, and Griz Nation answered by providing more than 3,000 toys and a record \$3,500 in cash donations.

The drive kicked off Nov. 12 at The Bookstore at UM with nearly 30 Griz players collecting toys and signing autographs for hundreds of fans. The drive continued when thousands of Griz faithful brought donations to the Nov. 14 game against Northern Colorado.

"The holiday season is a time for giving and generosity," senior wide receiver Mariani said. "There's no better way to give back to your community than to donate to the Griz for Kids Toy Drive, and Griz fans really stepped up this year."

Former Griz offensive lineman Chris Orwig started Griz for Kids in 2004 after

realizing the potential the 25,000 fans who pack Washington-Grizzly Stadium have to make a difference in the community. The drive, which is held annually in conjunction with Mountain FM's Mountain of Giving campaign, has grown every year since.

"The Griz asked the best fans in football to help support our community and help those in need this holiday season," said Horn, a senior offensive tackle for the Griz. "They delivered."

Mountain FM's Sheila Callahan, the main event coordinator, said the success of the drive depended on many people, including Beach Transportation, whose drivers started handing out fliers and encouraging riders to donate weeks before the drive. Many Beach Transportation drivers, staff, retired staff and families also helped sort through thousands of toys after the drive ended.

"The 'Beach Boys' have been helping us with the very labor-intensive toy sort since the very first year," Callahan said. "We

could not do it without them."

Several Missoula-area agencies benefitted from the drive, including Mountain Home Montana, Head Start, Early Head Start, the Missoula Indian Center, Youth Homes Inc., Watson Children's Shelter, Big Brothers Big Sisters, YMCA and WORD.

"The agencies were just amazed this year when they came to collect toys — it was the best selection we have ever had," Callahan said.

"This means the world to our kids," said Chris Carey of Youth Homes Inc. "It gives the most important gift we can provide these children — gifts of relationship and a sense of belonging."

All Missoula Federal Credit Union locations are still accepting cash donations for the Mountain of Giving campaign. People also can send donations to Mountain of Giving, c/o the Mountain Broadcasting Foundation, P.O. Box 309, Missoula, MT 59806. All donations are tax deductible. 🐻

Trust to Advance Value of Liberal Education

—UM President George M. Dennison has joined the new Presidents' Trust of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Dennison and a group of 81 other college and university leaders from around the country formed the trust to make the strongest case for liberal education and its value in today's world. The Presidents' Trust will function as a leadership group within the Association of American Colleges and Universities national initiative, which is titled Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP): Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College. The LEAP Presidents' Trust believes that a liberal education empowers individuals with core knowledge and transferable skills and prepares graduates both for socially valued work and for civic leadership within their society. Its members represent all sectors of higher education. More information is online at <http://www.aacu.org/leap>.

Journalism School Launches New Grad Program—The UM School of Journalism now is accepting applications from candidates interested in earning degrees from its new master's program in environmental science and natural resource journalism. The school will accept applications until Feb. 15, 2010. The new program will begin classes fall semester 2010. The school created the program to address the growing need for journalists who can better understand pressing science and natural resource issues, UM School of Journalism Dean Peggy



Kuhr said. Associate Professor Henriette Lowisch is the program director. Students will receive practical training in print, photo, broadcast and online media and take courses in the hard sciences, ethics and law, among others. Almost half of the course work for the two-year program will consist of classes outside of journalism, such as wildlife biology and forestry. For more information about the new master's program, visit <http://www.jour.umt.edu/degree-programs/majournalism>.

UM Students Attend Climate Conference—Three UM students were among the 10,000 or more people attending the United Nations Climate Change Conference Dec. 7-18 in Copenhagen, Denmark. The students from UM's Environmental Studies Program are Melissa Hayes, a law and graduate student from Girard, Ohio; Yaicha Bookhout, a senior from Shorewood, Minn.; and Zachary Brown, a freshman from Bozeman. Hayes and Bookhout were selected by the Environmental Studies Program to receive grants from the Wiancko Family Foundation that will fully fund their travel to Copenhagen. With the support of the program, Brown raised his own funds from UM's Office of the Provost and the Orfalea Foundation. The students will write about their experiences on blogs and Twitter, which can be accessed through the Environmental Studies Program Web site at <http://www.cas.umt.edu/evst>. They'll also communicate with classes via live video conferencing and presentations after they return. 🐻



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