

American Philological Association Recognizes Casey for 'Excellence'

For the second time in as many years, Eric Casey, associate professor of classics at Sweet Briar College, has been recognized for "Excellence in Teaching."

The first time, the honor was bestowed by Sweet Briar's Class at 2006. Voted on by the student body, the "Excellence in Teaching" and "Excellence in Service" awards are presented each spring at Commencement.



Dr. Eric Casey

The most recent distinction was made this month by the American Philological Association. On Jan. 5, the APA presented Casey with its "Excellence in Teaching" award at its annual convention in Chicago.

The award is presented each year to one to three U.S. and/or Canadian college teachers. Winners receive a cash prize, an invitation to the group's annual meeting and a plaque, appropriately inscribed in Latin.

According to its Web site, the APA, "founded in 1869 by 'professors, friends, and patrons of linguistic science,' is now the principal learned society in North America for the study of ancient Greek and Roman languages, literatures, and civilizations."

Casey, who has taught at Sweet Briar for more than eight years, was nominated by Jonathan Green, dean of the College. In his letter of recommendation, Green wrote in part, "Eric has revitalized Classics at the College. Enrollments in all of the department's classes have steadily grown since he arrived on campus, especially his classes."

Green also commended Casey for his "remarkable zeal for teaching Greek and Latin," adding that Casey has worked tirelessly, sponsoring students in the Summer Honors Research Program and meeting regularly with a number of student groups and individuals.

"One such group a few years ago was a lone alumna, who had graduated prior to Eric's arrival on campus, preparing for her comprehensive exams in graduate school," Green wrote. "They 'met' weekly for over a year by telephone.

"This is what makes Eric such a great teacher; any student, even those who are not technically his, who betrays an interest in a specific subject inspires him. Their curiosity serves as a catalyst for his excitement to teach."

Although Green wrote the initial letter to the APA, Mindy Wolfrom, a 2005 Sweet Briar graduate and former student of Casey's, started the ball rolling. Last spring, Wolfrom, now a graduate student in Greek and Latin at Boston College, contacted Sweet Briar's dean's office, suggesting Casey be nominated for the award.

“To me, it seemed pretty obvious that Eric would stand a really good chance of winning the award,” she said. “He’s such a well-known presence on campus and has really revived enthusiasm among students for classical studies.”

On a personal note, Wolfrom said Casey was influential in her decision to study classics at the graduate level. “I think I started asking him about grad school my second year [of] taking ancient Greek with him,” she said. “He’s spent countless hours offering advice about grad school and helping me with Greek grammar.”

Wolfrom said the “Greek hotline” – Casey’s home phone number – still comes in handy. “I’m just happy he got the recognition he deserves,” she said. “I’ve been at Boston College now almost three years, and I haven’t met another Eric Casey yet!”

Sweet Briar sophomore Courtney Cunningham, who describes Casey as her “favorite professor, hands down,” was one of several current or former students who wrote letters of recommendation to the APA.

She has taken several of Casey’s classes, including Greek, and says he has a way of making “an insanely complex language ... fun and manageable”

“His enthusiasm for the ‘charming’ – his favorite word – language is really contagious,” she said, adding that Casey’s “many quirks” make him popular with students.

Among these eccentricities, Cunningham cited Casey’s “bottomless book bag,” a “mind-boggling number of books from his own personal collection” that he sometimes brings to class; a propensity for making puns, and countless stories about his “infamous dachshunds,” Julia and Linus.

“His classes are always both enlightening and a lot of fun,” she said. “He keeps the discussion going and everyone interested in the subject matter.”

Like Wolfrom, Cunningham also has benefited from Casey’s personal attention. Under his guidance last summer, Cunningham learned a year of Latin in just two months so she would be eligible for Latin 201 in the fall.

“It was a fantastic experience and it was quite successful,” she said. “He’s obviously very dedicated to helping his students.”

If you ask Casey, the feeling of gratitude is mutual. “Given that this is a teaching award, I feel especially grateful to my students at Sweet Briar as any success in the classroom is always a collaborative effort,” he said.

“I feel very honored to have received this award and I know it would never have happened without the wonderful students at Sweet Briar, both those who specifically wrote recommendations for me and all the students over the years who have contributed to making all our classes here a success.”

– *By Suzanne Ramsey, SBC staff writer*