

History edges JCOM for 2012 top teaching department award | Journalism

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Written by Allie Jeppson for *Hard News Cafe*.
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Every year, Utah State University seeks out its most accomplished departments to find just one to honor with the Departmental Teaching Excellence Award (DTEA). This year, the Department of History took the cake.

"We're flattered and pleased and not at all humble," History Department Head Norman Jones said. "It's a very competitive award and we were up against some really good competition. We didn't expect to get it but we're pleased."

The winning department receives both bragging rights and \$20,000, said DTEA Committee Chair Dave Wallace of the biology department. The history faculty will also be recognized during commencement ceremonies on Saturday.

With three finalist departments in the running—history, journalism and communication, and economics and finance—the choice was not an easy one, Wallace said.

"They're all winners," Wallace said. "Just to be a finalist, we consider you to be one of the top departments on campus."

However, to become even a finalist is not an easy feat.

"This is an extremely comprehensive and rigorous and thorough process," said Executive Senior Vice Provost Larry Smith.

In order to be a part of this process and considered for the award, each participating department must first submit a pre-proposal—a three-page summary that demonstrates a commitment to teaching and learning.

VIDEO: JCOM @ USU: Learning By Doing, by Emily Landeen

Finalists are then chosen by a diverse committee of faculty, students, USU trustees and administrators. From there, the selection process becomes even more rigorous.

"Once a department is selected as a finalist, they submit a much larger portfolio addressing various topics and issues about their teaching enterprise," Smith said.

Not only that, but committee members attend classes of each department to evaluate teaching excellence, and each finalist makes a 30-minute presentation to the committee.

While assessing classes and presentations, committee members are looking for five main attributes:

- commitment to sustained excellence in teaching and learning
- ongoing assessment and improvement of teaching and learning quality
- faculty development for teaching
- provision of resources for students, and
- linking discovery, creative activity and engagement with teaching and learning for the benefit of students.

One thing that put the history department above the rest was the way the program evaluates teaching outcomes through a process called "tuning," Wallace said.

"They had looked at how students that were graduating and going into the world, did," Wallace said, "and [whether] they learn and were able to do and prove ... the things that are expected of history graduates."

Through this process, the history department was able to show the results that students were seeing in the classroom, and used this information to tune the curriculum as one would an instrument, Wallace said.

"We're establishing outcomes for our degrees," said Jones, who has directed statewide efforts at identifying and achieving learning outcomes. "I suspect that's what made the impression on the committee."

Jones, who steps down as history department head this month after 18 years, moves into the provost's office to direct General Education innovations and to expand the kind of curriculum "tuning" efforts that he and the history department have undertaken.

Another thing that the committee specifically looks for is devotion to students, Smith said—something that all three finalist departments demonstrated very well.

The economy and finance department does this through several student involvement groups, one of which is the finance and economics club, said department head Tyler Bowles.

Through this club, students are able to meet professionals from businesses such as Goldman Sachs by taking sponsored trips to Washington, D.C., and New York City.

“We think we’re one of the finest teaching departments,” Bowles said. “Economy and finance could not be more relevant than they are today.”

The journalism and communication department felt equally confident about its efforts. One indicator was that six JCOM faculty and more than a dozen students participated in the final 30-minute presentation to the teaching excellence committee.

“The fact that we can go head to head with the history department and Econ, and come out well really speaks well of JCOM,” department head Ted Pease said. “Nobody beats our students for enthusiasm and passion.”

One JCOM’s measures of excellence, Pease said, is its learning-by-doing method of teaching.

“In class work, we get students started on their little tricycles, and then we push them down the hill, in real-world internships and other opportunities,” Pease said, pointing to the fact that JCOM students served more than 104 professional internships in 2011.

“We’re a professional program. Helping students get to work in their chosen careers and professions is perhaps the best way they can learn.”

Although only one department can be named the best teaching unit at USU, all three finalists were glad for the opportunity.

“Even if you don’t win there’s value in competing,” Bowles said. “It helps you see what you’re doing and it’s a good process. We’re glad the university has this competition. “

Pease agreed. “Perhaps the best part of this process was that it permitted both the faculty and the students to step back and look at what we do.

“Going through this process has been sort of a revelation, an epiphany—‘Hey! We’re kind of cool,’” Pease said.

“Fine, so history won the award this year. But we’ll be back.”

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