

ENGAGED STUDENTS = EFFECTIVE LEARNING

Morningside College awarded the second annual **Sharon Walker Faculty Excellence Awards** to **Dr. Susan Burns**, assistant professor of psychology; **Dr. Stephen Coyne**, professor of English; and **Dr. Heather Reid**, associate professor of philosophy.

The 2004 recipients, selected from a field of nominees by a panel of outside evaluators, each received a substantial honorarium, as well as funds to use for professional development. The awards are funded by a \$500,000 gift from Morningside alumni Jim and Sharon



Dr. Stephen Coyne, professor of English, joined Morningside's faculty in 1988. His emphasis is in American

literature and creative writing. He serves as a faculty advisor to first-year students as well as to students majoring in English. For over 15 years, he has served as faculty advisor for *The Kiosk*, Morningside's literary magazine, which has been published at the college since 1938. Additionally, he served as the faculty coordinator for Morningside's new Passport and Composition and Communication courses.

CONTINUED on page 35



Dr. Heather Reid, associate professor of philosophy, began teaching at Morningside in 1996. In January,

she was a visiting scholar at the American Academy in Rome, Italy. She has been invited as a faculty member to the 13th International Postgraduate Seminar on Olympic Studies at the International Olympic Academy, to be held in Greece later this year.

She is currently writing a book about philosophy and athletics in the ancient world. She is the author of *The Philosophical Athlete*, published

CONTINUED on page 35



Dr. Susan Burns, assistant professor of psychology, began teaching at Morningside in the fall of 2002.

She specializes in developmental psychology.

She serves as a faculty advisor to first-year students as well as to those majoring in psychology. She has also served as faculty advisor to Student Government and works actively to encourage undergraduate research. She has been instrumental in establishing the Palmer Undergraduate Research Symposium.

She has co-authored articles

CONTINUED on page 35

EMPHASIZE INITIATIVE

By **Dr. Stephen Coyne**

Some years ago I was watching a local TV station cover graduation at Morningside. "How does it feel?" the reporter asked a young woman in cap and gown.

"You know," she said, "graduating feels great. I never have to study again."

I smiled at that student's naiveté. Here was a person who had gone through four years of college without ever understanding what it was she was doing.

Any sort of career she became involved in was going to require big doses of effective studying. Whether it was a product she needed to sell, a management problem she needed to solve, or a curriculum she needed to design, study would be the most

ASK THE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

By **Dr. Heather Reid**

Iwould call Socrates one of the greatest and wisest teachers of all time—and he would get angry with me for saying so. He would passionately disclaim ever teaching anyone. He asks questions, participates in conversations, offers up his views for discussion, challenges the opinions of others—but never does he transmit knowledge to his students. He can't teach, he would say, because he has no knowledge to offer.

I also shouldn't insult him by calling him wise, a *sophistes*. The only thing he knows for sure is that he doesn't know. He focuses on moral issues: how we should live, the nature of virtue, our relationship with the divine, the

COLLABORATE

By **Dr. Susan R. Burns**

When initially asked to write this piece, I allowed myself to drift back and reflect on the people and events, good and bad, that have given form and substance to my understanding of effective teaching. Filtering my experiences as an educator through the mesh of my developing teaching philosophy yields a brew of style and technique that I hope engages students in a meaningful way.

Throughout my academic career, I have had the privilege of learning from several outstanding teachers. In each of these educators, I saw characteristics that made me want to pursue a career in academia: an enthusiasm for the material they teach and a true interest

Walker, of Wayzata, Minn.

Criteria for selection included: teaching excellence, effective advising, scholarship, and service to Morningside College. The awards were based upon the accomplishments and activities of the nominees during the previous academic year.

The Office of Academic Affairs asked each recipient to write an essay on the topic, "Engaging Students to Produce Effective Learning." Each essay focuses on the relevance of the students' involvement in their own education.



important aspect of her preparation to do a good job.

Graduating from college, I caution my classes, does not mean that you are no longer students. Graduating means that you have less need of teachers. It means that you are prepared to educate yourself.

We all know of college graduates who do not seem to have gotten much out of their educations. They may be underemployed or even unemployed, or they may not be moving up in their organizations.

The unfortunate fact is that it is all too possible to do well in college without learning the skills needed for success in the workplace. Many students are too passive. They may be very good at perceiving what their teachers want. They listen in class, take good lecture notes, read well what they're told to read, recall information effectively for test purposes, and write papers which show that they can follow directions. But a student can be very good at all these activities and still not have the essential skills for success: *taking initiative, being creative, working flexibly, and cooperating with others.*

I try in my teaching to emphasize these qualities and give students practice using them.

Sometimes, I lecture in my classes, but frequently I break the class into small groups and pose questions. Groups must discover who among their members is prepared to contribute to answering the question. They must find ways to cooperate without quashing the energy produced by meaningful disagreement. They must sort effective answers from the less effective ones. Then they need to choose a method of

management of our communities. Answers to these questions are never final; they must be continually explored. The worst thing you can do is think you have the answers and therefore no need to examine further. Socrates can only be *philo-sophistes*, a lover and not a possessor of wisdom.

"But I agree with all that, Socrates," I might respond in my defense. "You taught me that wisdom means acknowledging ignorance and passionately seeking truth. I learned from you that a professor of ethics, religion, or politics cannot offer answers to her students; this would reduce philosophy to ideological indoctrination. The job of Socratic teachers is to make their students think—about themselves and about truths that must ultimately be explored and discovered independently."

I can only hope that Socrates might be satisfied with my response and with my approach to teaching. I know that the dialogue would go on indefinitely—just like my struggle to be a good Socratic teacher. The goal is relatively simple—inspire your students to think and learn—but the process is an ongoing and unpredictable challenge. One must profess one's ignorance, help students to see theirs, and then ask them to take responsibility for learning. In today's academic service-economy, it can make a professor seem like some kind of fraud. Predictably, students are surprised and often frustrated by a professor who serves up questions rather than answers. The response "I don't really know; what do you think?" makes them wonder what they are paying for. Eventually, most students

and investment in their students. Early in my graduate career I was given full responsibility for teaching undergraduate classes in psychology, and, although this challenge at first frightened me, quickly I found that the classroom was where I wanted to be. It is incredibly rewarding to see students making connections with the material they are learning and developing a sense of ownership of their education, which also is my goal for their intellectual development both in and outside the classroom.

There are essentially two basic assumptions that underlie my teaching philosophy: 1) *the importance of sharing knowledge and experiences* and 2) *taking a student-centered or mentoring approach to both teaching and learning.* The first assumption, sharing of knowledge and experiences, stems from my dislike of the rigid approach to lecturing and teaching. From a traditional standpoint, it is assumed that the educational process of sharing information is primarily the instructor's responsibility. I do not completely disagree with this stance, but I feel that the progression of learning is more effective if students are allowed to share *their* wisdom. That is, I see my students as bringing unique knowledge and experiences with them into the classroom. Learning can, in many instances, best be accomplished through a collaborative process, and, by incorporating student examples into classroom discussions, many connections take place that might not have happened without their additional input. Because I predominantly teach in a very experience-oriented domain, i.e., child/human development,

presenting the group's results to the class. Initiative, creativity, flexibility, and cooperation are all called for if the group is to work successfully.

Another way of helping students practice the skills needed for success is requiring them to conduct independent research. I almost never assign specific topics for the papers that students are required to write in my classes. Deciding what to write about and what slant to take are, in many ways, the most important parts of the writing process.

Students must develop active curiosities about subjects and must not rest until those curiosities are satisfied. They must sift reliable information from the unreliable, the relevant from the irrelevant, the useful from the useless. They then must wrestle their unshaped ideas and information into orderly discussions which present the results of their self-education.

As a teacher of writing and literature, I am keenly interested in the difficult and complex relationship between writers and readers. Writers require readers and readers require writers, and yet the relationship is often dysfunctional. Writers presumably know what they mean when they write something, but readers often interpret the writer's language in ways the writer never intended or even imagined.

Only when writers and readers come into dialogue with each other do these disconnections become apparent. Papers for my classes are not communications between the teacher and the student only. Rather, papers are read and commented on by many students. It takes years of writing for an audience as well as listening to what that audience says about what they have read for writers to develop a reliable ability to make complex information clear to others. Those years of practice should begin in school, not in the workplace.

If any of my students are interviewed about how it feels to graduate, I hope they will say something like this: "You know, it feels great. I get to study what I want to study, now. And I'm looking forward to using my abilities to make some lucky organization better."

overcome this frustration. One said that, for the first week of my class, her notebook was blank because I only asked questions. Then, she said, she started writing down the questions and thinking about them on her own—and that was when she really started learning.

"Learning what?" one might ask. Once students realize that questions of morality can't be answered by a formula, they sometimes conclude that it's just a matter of opinion. Since opinions on moral issues are something they already have, there's really nothing to "get" from the class. But moral opinions, like consumer opinions, derive their value from the understanding that informs them. Two students may believe that they should buy a particular car, but the student who bases that belief on an understanding of his financial situation and driving habits as well as objective research into the reliability and consumer-satisfaction ratings of the car is more likely to be making the right choice.

Likewise good moral choices must be made in an atmosphere of understanding—and gaining that understanding requires hard work: good old-fashioned study and discussion. It's not enough to say "I believe X." You need to be able to explain your reasons for believing it, support those reasons with evidence, and account for competing views. In this sense, ethics is a lot like science. A thorough grasp of the issues and the panorama of opinions surrounding them is what earns students the privilege of criticizing others' views and of better shaping their own.

A Socratic professor does not possess and cannot offer her students knowledge; rather, my gift is the *love* of wisdom. I try to create processes and situations through which students develop the motivation and skills to improve their understanding independently. There's no set way to do this. Teaching is like a dance in which I simultaneously lead and respond to the students. Unlike Socrates, I am proud to be called a teacher. Because of Socrates, I think I have a deeper understanding of just what that means.

students have many valuable personal examples that they can use to better understand the material. Often it is through the sharing of these experiences that their peers also begin to better understand the topic at hand.

The second assumption of my philosophy, the concept of taking a student-centered or mentoring approach to teaching, centers on my belief that it is important to recognize the needs and perspectives of our students. This approach can be as simple as having an open-door policy or as complex as focusing efforts to mentor students to become professionals. It is an instructor's responsibility to assist in students' learning, and by taking a student-centered approach, the learning process extends far beyond the classroom and has a greater impact on both the student and the instructor. This student-centered approach is what inspires me to involve students in research and is why I thoroughly enjoy advising students in their professional development. In my opinion, one of the many reasons students choose to attend Morningside College is because of the possibility of getting to know faculty and to feel like more than "just a number." I hope that with my advising/mentoring style, both academic and professional, students recognize that I am truly interested in their educational, personal, and professional goals, which extends learning far beyond the classroom and promotes the "life-long learning" that is a part of the Morningside College mission.

Read Dr. Burn's paper "Inviting Students to Become Research Collaborators" online at www.morningside.edu; go to "Alumni and Friends" and look for the link to The Morningsider.