The professor we honor today told a student that “The only thing that we have to do is the thing that we feel most passionately about.” The only thing that this professor has to do is teach.

This faculty member possesses an extraordinary ability to motivate students to confront challenges. “I would not have written a thesis,” one student remarked, “had [this professor] not . . . answered with a resounding ‘YES!’ when I asked if . . . I was capable of writing [one].” Another student described the source of this professor’s inspirational teaching as “extraordinary intuition when it comes to determining how each individual student learns and what each student requires in order to grow as a scholar.”

The professor we honor inspires students in countless ways, but never by lowering standards. “She doesn’t accept mediocre,” one student observes. “[She] calls us out . . . [if we do] less than we can.” Another praises her as
“positive, but realistic. . . [and] honest with students about their strengths and shortcomings and what these will mean for their futures.” In the words of an admiring colleague, this professor “coaches, stirs, cajoles, and challenges; she slips criticism through the crack under the door, illuminating indirectly rather than blinding with bright light.”

Her inspiration extends well beyond the classroom. She has encouraged a generation of Davidson students to embrace passionate lives of leadership and service. “[Graduate school] taught me many useful skills,” one student remarked, “but my leadership skills came from Davidson, largely from [her] example.” Another alumnus adds, “I [have] worked for practically poverty-level wages for the past two years doing philanthropy. . . . I look around. . . and see a world consumed by greed. . . . I know it would be easier if I [were] part of that world, but the four years I spent with [this professor] have given me the
strength to do what I think is right. I thank her so much for that.”

Underlying all of this extraordinary teaching is this professor’s intense, boundless, and lifelong devotion to her students. “Despite the fact that I graduated from Davidson nearly two years ago,” one alumna writes, “[we] talk almost every week, and I know that I am not the only graduate doing this.” Another alumna testifies, “[in her concern about my professional and personal well-being, [she] possesses some of the best worst qualities of my own mother.” A third describes her as “one of the most positive and influential role [models] in my life, second only to my parents. Without her, I would not have the courage . . . or joyful faith to pursue my greatest ambitions.” A current student states that it took only “six weeks in her class to convince me that this petite powerhouse of a woman had changed me forever. . . She brings out the best in me.”
Even Davidsonians who never study with her perceive her influence. Her tireless work on the renovation of Cunningham concretely demonstrates her “relentless drive to have the very best for her students.” Her extraordinary teaching is visible to all who witness the often breathtaking performances of her student actors. As one nominator wrote, she “inspires those around her to work hard [and] do their best, and in the process they often discover [that] their best is better than they thought it could be. This is her gift. Perhaps most incredibly, [she] does this every day.”

Therefore, in the words of one student, “Because of her dedication to . . . teaching that stretches students in ways that surprise and inspire, her attention to students’ emotional well being, and her [unique ability to] . . . encourage students to disagree with fervor, justify with conviction, and laugh to see where it leads them,” we honor you, Professor Ann Marie Costa, with the 2009 Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching Award.