Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching Award Citation: Brian Shaw

Students praise this professor’s constant engagement in teaching, noting how much time he spends inventing strategies to help them learn, long before striding into the classroom “genuinely excited and energetic” about the hour ahead. “I can’t say I’ve ever known anyone so consistently positive towards academic work,” wrote one student. His genuine concern, excellent sense of humor, and ability to relate to students creates an open, relaxed atmosphere that everyone values and from which everyone benefits.

This professor’s keen interest in students’ wellbeing coexists with powerful enthusiasm for topics they encounter together. One student asserts that this professor “engages the material with such passion that you walk out of the room inspired to learn more.” Another adds, “From class participation to paper assignments, this professor demands excellence, and his success in drawing out students’ best work originates in the respect and dedication he shows us.” An alumnus recalls, “He made me work harder than in any of my other classes, and I thoroughly loved every bit of it.”

So minutes of class fly by as the whole class gets involved and excited. Difficult theoretical material comes to life. Indeed, this professor does a fantastic job of becoming John Locke, Karl Marx, Immanuel Kant, or
John Rawls, exemplifying through his passion and his own annotated and underlined copies what rigorous engagement with texts means and why it matters.

Yet, he “avoids preaching the ‘great works.’” His energetic questions “involve each student in heated discussions of crucial and timeless questions.” Never settling for the easy but false either/or, this professor, “constantly plays the devil’s advocate, leading students to the most compelling strengths of each theory while poking holes in their arguments.”

One student wrote, “Always one step ahead, he pushes his students to think critically and offer support for our opinions and arguments.” Thus, he gives life and meaning to obscure Kantian or Rawlsian political philosophy. One student noted, “We can’t help but laugh and learn as our hypothetical selves steal property from one another, tyrannize societies, or barter goods.” His “brutally fair and open” tests, through his example, become “a labor of love.” One former student says, “He forced us to think - not what to think, but how to think.”

Our honoree also spends hours in conversation with students outside of class. They seek him out. “Whenever you go to his office, there is a student in there before you, and there is one waiting when you get out,”
writes one recommender. Discussing everything from challenging texts to family issues, he gives them time.

Lessons from this professor’s classes live on beyond Chambers. As one writer summarizes, “He has given me the necessary analytic and writing skills for the rest of my life,” while another notes with surprise: “I find myself drawing links from De Tocqueville to my premedical studies and from Kant to neuroscience. His class changed my life.”

For his unrelentingly “Infectious Perkiness,” his passion for teaching students how to think in and beyond the classroom, and his extraordinary ability to inspire students to reach their utmost potential, we award the 2012 Hunter-Hamilton Love of Teaching Award to Professor Brian Shaw.