

# Spotlight

academic awards triannual

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## Breaking down walls: from Eastern Europe to Edmonton

University of Alberta professor, David Marples teaches an area of study that is filled with the stuff of thriller movies and spy novels—former spies poisoned with plutonium, Russian tanks rolling into Ossetia, the Velvet and Orange revolutions, the government-sponsored murders of thousands of peasants in the 1930s, the world on the brink of nuclear war.



Still, not all students come to Marples' classes filled with curiosity and the desire to learn. Go figure. In fact, many are not majoring in history and are simply fulfilling an arts requirement.

Indeed, that is one of the reasons that Marples was chosen as the newest recipient of the University Cup, the highest honor the U of A bestows on a member of its academic staff. The award celebrates outstanding distinction in scholarly research, teaching and service to the University and community at large. In addition to Marples' numerous publications and accomplishments, including the Killam Annual Professorship and the J Gordin Kaplan Award for Excellence in Research, Marples is an outstanding teacher. This year he was the recipient of the Faculty of Arts Undergraduate Teaching Award and in 2007, the Phillip Lawson Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Marples has the ability to enthuse and excite students about Eastern European history when they might rather be studying nanoparticles or logorhythms. He has even seen uninterested students switch to history honors and continue to the graduate level. Marples makes sense out of Eastern Europe and all its chaos, intrigue and world-altering events for his students, as well as the academic world and the general public through his media interviews, articles and publications.

In fact, Marples' first PhD student showed little interest as an undergraduate and was asked to leave the university. Marples met with him when he was allowed to return conditionally. He perceived real talent, especially in the student's writing and communication skills. "I was never more proud than when he got a tenure-track position at a Canadian university; and when

he was listed in *Maclean's* magazine as one of the top ten teachers in Canada," says Marples.

When Marples enters a class he assesses it. Who is paying attention? What sort of diversions are students bringing into the class such as iPods, Blackberries or the worst, laptops? So, he uses innovative and creative ways to engage students.

"The class has to be interactive and I always make direct contact during the class with anyone who does not seem to be focusing on the lecture." He infuses his lectures with photographs from his travels, YouTube clips, short documentary films and jokes. "The Russians and Ukrainians have thousands of them," he says of the latter.

Marples also teaches history not from the point of view of dates and facts, but on new analyses, ideas and themes. "No part of a class should be ritualistic learning," says Marples. "I tell students never to take anything at face value, but always to read and read, and then to question."

Marples also engages his students by making the classroom inclusive. He will break large classes down into small units of four to five students, often combining the more vocal students with those who are shy or unresponsive. He will give them a topic to discuss and let them debate. "People develop and respond in different ways and as a teacher I do not focus specifically on the ostensibly brighter students in a class," says Marples.

"I think students operate at very different levels but they are all ultimately reachable in some way. They need encouragement to participate in class."

Marples believes strongly in accessibility—that instructors should always be available for students. "That for me means not only in class or office hours, but by e-mail at any time. Although some of my classes are quite large, I make every effort to know all my students and encourage them to stop by and discuss their progress... I want them to know they are the most important part of academic life for a professor." ■

# Upcoming Deadlines for Academic Awards

## McCalla Professorship

McCalla Professors are those who value excellence in teaching, acknowledge the importance of students, conduct themselves in an ethical manner, are collaborative, open to change, take pride in history and traditions and are committed to integrating their research and teaching.

Large Faculties determine individual submission deadlines; therefore, please check Faculty websites for more information. Submissions from small Faculties (i.e., Augustana, Extension, Graduate Studies and Research, Law, Native Studies, Nursing, Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Physical Education and Recreation, Rehabilitation Medicine, Campus Saint-Jean, and School of Public Health) should be sent each year to the Office of the Provost and Vice-President (Academic) on the first working day of December (i.e., **December 1, 2008**).

## Alan Blizzard Award

The Alan Blizzard Award was developed by the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) to encourage, identify, and publicly recognize collaboration in university teaching which makes a demonstrated difference in student learning.

The Alan Blizzard award is given to collaborative projects that increase the effectiveness of student learning. The first award was given in 2000; teams from the University of Alberta received the award in 2000 and 2003. The deadline to submit applications to STLHE for the Alan Blizzard Award is **January 16, 2009**.

The application form is available at [www.mcmaster.ca/stlhe/awards/alan.blizzard.award.html](http://www.mcmaster.ca/stlhe/awards/alan.blizzard.award.html).

## Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF)

The Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF) has been created to improve teaching and learning effectiveness.

Applications are invited from all University of Alberta instructors who seek innovative ways of integrating teaching and research. It is anticipated that this fund will support a diverse range of initiatives specifically focused on creating exceptional and life changing university experiences for students.

There are two levels of funding for the TLEF: professional development in the area of teaching and learning and projects or research. Applications for funding for professional development are accepted on a continual basis. The deadline for funding for projects or research is **February 1, 2009**.

## Rutherford Award

The Rutherford Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching is designed to recognize teaching excellence by full-time continuing academic staff at the University of Alberta.

Any individual who has completed a minimum of five years of teaching at the University of Alberta as a full-time continuing member of the academic teaching staff is eligible to be nominated for the Rutherford Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. The deadline to submit nominations is the last Friday of February (i.e., **February 27, 2009**).

## Provost's Award for Early Achievement

The Provost's Award for Early Achievement of Excellence in undergraduate Teaching is designed to recognize teaching excellence by full-time continuing academic staff within five years of their first university appointment.

Any individual who has completed no more than five years of University teaching as a full-time continuing member of the academic teaching staff is eligible to be nominated for the Provost's Award for Early Achievement of Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. The deadline to submit nominations is the last Friday of February (i.e., **February 27, 2009**).

## Teaching Unit Award

Excellence in teaching and learning may occur at the group or individual level. The intent of the Teaching Unit Award is to celebrate excellence in teaching when a group of individuals consistently work together to promote outstanding teaching and learning.

The teaching unit may work at the graduate or undergraduate level and may include some or all members of a faculty, school, department or division, or it may be an interdisciplinary team. The deadline to submit nominations is the last Friday of February (i.e., **February 27, 2009**).

## William Hardy Alexander Award

William Hardy Alexander Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching was created to recognize teaching excellence by academic staff.

Temporary academic as well as continuing academic staff (Administrative Professional Officers, Faculty Service Officers, Librarians, part-time continuing academic staff and Trust staff) with at least three years teaching experience (and who have taught at least 18 credits) at the University of Alberta are eligible to be nominated for the William Hardy Alexander Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. The deadline to submit nominations is the last Friday of February (i.e., **February 27, 2009**).

## For more information...

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For discipline specific awards, please visit our website, select the appropriate field of study and determine which award(s) are applicable to you.



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