EXCELLENCE 2012

Distinguished Plymouth State University Faculty and Staff
Every calling is great when greatly pursued.

– Oliver Wendell Holmes
From the President

INTRODUCTION

Plymouth State University is an extraordinary regional comprehensive university, and the foundation of its excellence is wonderful people who are focused on helping students succeed. That means first-rate undergraduate and graduate teaching, informed by vibrant scholarship, creativity, and research, and involving genuine engagement with the community, region, and world. That means people who care about academic excellence and student achievement, about innovation, and about collaboration and partnership. That means people like those about whom you will read in Excellence.

The professionals highlighted here come from departments across the campus, and they have been honored by their colleagues with University awards this year. As you meet them and read their words, you will understand the commitment and joy they bring to PSU each day.

I would like to thank these award-winners for their dedication and their contributions and also welcome readers to a glimpse of the excellence that is Plymouth State University. 

Sara Jayne Steen
When Joyce Larson was young, she had dreams of being a doctor ... and an actress.

Those career goals may seem worlds apart, but for anyone who knows Larson, her childhood quandary makes perfect sense. Early on she showed an interest in and aptitude for science and math. Then in junior high school she was introduced to chorus and theatre and was instantly hooked. “I loved the feeling of being onstage, taking on an alternate persona, and of course, getting applause at the end,” she says. “It was something I had a lot of fun with.”

After college (where Larson combined her favorite subjects, chemistry and Asian studies, into a double major) she began her professional career in the labs of Merck, analyzing pharmaceuticals-in-development. “It was a lot of problem-solving using instrumentation and calculation, which is kind of my thing,” she smiles, “but I wasn’t sure working in a lab was something I wanted to do for the rest of my career.”

Larson did some soul-searching. “I thought about what I really believed in,” she says, “and it was education—specifically higher education, which allows people to grow intellectually and improve themselves and their lives.”

Inspired by this realization, Larson pursued work in college admissions, eventually accepting a position in Plymouth State’s Office of Admission in 2000. Since then, she has held various positions within PSU, including admissions representative, admissions information technologist, and registrar—each role offering her new challenges and opportunities to cultivate her interests in technology, research, and supporting students. In 2011, just after earning her MEd in Educational Leadership from PSU, Larson accepted a position in the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, where she currently serves as director. “I’ve always liked the technical reporting aspect of every job I’ve had at PSU,” she says, “and this was an opportunity to make it the focus of my work and use it to make a positive impact.”

Making a positive impact is something Larson does through her work as well as her service endeavors. She’s currently a member of the Fundraising and Benevolence Committee, which raises funds for student scholarships, and the Welfare Committee, which helps to represent the interests of professional staff in matters of policy that affect them. She also served two terms as speaker for the PAT Senate and recorder for the senate. “I’ve always been a get-involved kind of person,” she says of her campus activities. “I like working with people on issues and challenges, and interacting with colleagues I might not ordinarily encounter through my work.”

Fortunately for Larson, PSU allows her to indulge her passion for research and data, as well as music and theatre. For the past 12 summers, she’s been performing with the New Hampshire Music Festival choir. “It’s an incredible experience and a privilege to be part of it,” she says. And she puts her theatre background to good use regularly. “It gave me the confidence to lead meetings, make presentations, and interact with large groups of people,” says Larson, who is known on campus for her quick wit, self-deprecating humor, and cheerful disposition.

Larson’s career thus far just goes to show how right she was years ago: Higher education does indeed allow people to grow intellectually and improve themselves and their lives, whether they are students or among the many whose work supports students.
“I like working with people on issues and challenges, and interacting with colleagues I might not normally encounter through my work.”

— JOYCE LARSON
“I LIKE TO THINK OF THE PAST AS A series of futures.”

Coming from a history professor, that statement makes a listener pause and think. Which is exactly what John Krueckeberg wants. “At any point in history, there was the potential for many different futures. Some happened, and some didn’t. Why?” Examining history from that perspective, he says, allows us to understand one fundamental—and exciting—premise: “History doesn’t just happen. People make history.”

As a teacher, Krueckeberg says, his primary goal is “to make all students historians.” Rather than simply memorize dates, students are encouraged to interpret a historical document and put it into context. “I try to get students to wear the shoes of the people we’re talking about.”

Krueckeberg describes history as an interdisciplinary field, which is fitting; he also serves as chair of PSU’s Interdisciplinary Studies Council, advising students who want to combine two or more different subjects into a program of study. He believes that interdisciplinary studies and history equip students to be better critical thinkers and better citizens—an important point for an individual who has a strong commitment to service.

“I’m committed to my communities,” he says. Krueckeberg serves on his church council and was a member of the Plymouth Planning Board for a decade. Beyond teaching, he works in many ways to help improve history education across the state and beyond: he has reviewed Teaching American History grants for the US Department of Education, consulted on New Hampshire social studies standards, and serves as the state coordinator for the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History’s History Teacher of the Year award.

One of Krueckeberg’s most ambitious projects has been working with PSU geography professor Patrick May to bring National History Day to New Hampshire. The state was one of only two in the nation that didn’t participate in the history education program for middle and high school students. The pair began working with schools across the state and launched the program in 2002; this year, they reached a milestone of having more than 1,000 students from every region of New Hampshire participate in NHD activities. PSU hosts the statewide competition each year, and winners go on to the national competition in Washington, DC.

“We decided it was something we really wanted to do, and it was important for the state,” he says. “The program is phenomenal for getting students to be historians.” Students must form a thesis, conduct research, interpret their findings, and defend their project to a panel of judges.

“It promotes higher-ordered thinking,” Krueckeberg says. In fact, a 2011 evaluation of National History Day found that students who participate outperform their non-NHD peers on standardized tests in reading, science, and math, as well as social studies. “I’m convinced that it’s because history is such an interdisciplinary field. We’re getting students to think critically. The program is doing important service for New Hampshire students, who will be better equipped graduates and more engaged citizens.”

It’s hard work to be involved in so many outreach efforts: “I feel like I have a very full life,” Krueckeberg says, “but I like to put my money where my mouth is. An important part of our existence as a university is serving our community. I really couldn’t have done what I do without the support of my colleagues. Ut prosim (That I may serve) is our motto, and I’m happy to be in a place that values service so highly.”
“... I’m happy to be in a place that values service so highly.”

— JOHN KRUECKEBERG
Kathleen Norris has lived in cities all over the world, taught Eskimo students in the Alaskan Bush, taught English as a second language in Japan, been a high school English teacher and administrator, and even earned certification in permaculture design. She also holds an MFA in creative writing and is a published poet and essayist. All of this, Norris contends, has contributed to the educator she is today. “I’ve had a wonderful set of life experiences that I’ve been able to draw from,” she says. “They all contribute to the whole.”

As a professor of educational leadership, Norris teaches graduate courses in research design, qualitative research, research methodology, program evaluation, and assessment—topics that can seem daunting to even the highest achieving students. “I appreciate being able to teach challenging courses and make the material accessible to my students,” she says.

Norris became interested in research and assessment as a high school teacher, when she often saw initiatives launched without the research to support them. “The initiatives had more to do with the superintendent’s last conference or the latest trend in education than what the students actually needed,” she recalls. So when she was given the opportunity to overhaul her school’s English curriculum, she says, “my inclination was to do a lot of research into what the students needed, to develop a curriculum with a highly integrated and challenging knowledge base.”

For her doctoral project, Norris—then a high school administrator as well as a teacher—evaluated the effectiveness of her school’s 9th grade transition program. The process yielded a revelation that altered the course of her career. “I discovered the field of program evaluation, which seemed to me to bring the best of applied research and evaluation methodology together,” she says.

After earning her doctorate in educational leadership, Norris began teaching research design courses at PSU. Now, as coordinator of the EdD program, Norris dedicates much of her time mentoring doctoral students as they conduct research. “Because of the interdisciplinary nature of our doctoral program,” Norris says, “candidates conduct research in a range of subject areas and work with institutions of higher education, international schools, human service agencies, and New Hampshire school environments.” Recently, she and some of her students completed a research project with a North Country non-profit agency. “Doing research to provide service creates opportunities for our students as well as our community. The service aspect of research is particularly energizing, and our students know they are making a contribution,” she says.

While Norris is grateful for all of her experiences in her life and career thus far, she feels particularly fortunate to be working with adult learners at this time in her life. “I have so much more patience and compassion, and more concern for the whole student, with each passing term,” she says. “I’ve really found my niche teaching graduate students. I’ve found my bliss.”
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— KATHLEEN NORRIS
If home is where the heart is, Ann Thurston has definitely found her home at Plymouth State University.

Thurston was raised in Vermont and New Hampshire, moving too frequently for her liking. Her dream was to find the right place for her to stay. For Thurston, that place is Plymouth State. When she arrived at the age of 17, “I didn’t understand the value of a degree,” Thurston recalls. But her mother, who had finished her own degree while raising three children, certainly did and brought Ann to visit Plymouth State. She’s been here ever since. And she’s learned the value of a degree, or in her case, three of them.

Thurston is humbled to receive the Patricia Storer PAT Award, named for a beloved Plymouth State employee whose career was similar to Thurston’s in many ways, and for whom Thurston had great respect. Like Pat Storer, Thurston had held many positions on campus. She started by working in Lamson Library, served as manager of campus services, and then as bursar. Today she is associate vice president for academic administration and finance. “I get to work with really fantastic people,” she says. “I have the opportunity to participate in the life of the University through supporting our students and faculty.”

Thurston’s work covers every facet of Plymouth State University, from working with department chairs, to the registrar’s office, to the Office of Sponsored Programs. “I don’t really know where any day will take me,” she says. She particularly enjoys faculty research presentations and the enthusiasm PSU faculty members show for their work. “I can’t take any credit for it,” she says with a laugh, “but I can share in it. We have some really great people.”

Travel plays an important role in Thurston’s life. Bringing together her Spanish major and history minor, Thurston recently completed El Camino del Santiago (the Way of Saint James), a walk across Europe to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, which has been made by pilgrims for over a thousand years. “We walked through small towns and villages in the Spanish countryside,” Thurston said in a presentation to the PSU community. “A woman called to us from a doorway to tell us we had wandered off the path. Another woman shouted from her balcony and gestured for us to turn around. People who live along the Way feel a responsibility to take care of pilgrims; to keep us on the Way. No one can walk the Way for you, but you do not walk alone.” She continues, “The Way is a metaphor for the journey of life, and it parallels our students’ journey at PSU. Here they are with their travelling companions at the start of their journey. No one can do their work for them, but they are not alone. We, all of us, are their guides; we support them on their journey. Each of us plays a different role and we all contribute, helping them to reach their final destination.”

As much as she loves to travel, Thurston loves to come home even more. “Living in a university town provides so many opportunities,” she says. “Music, theatre, the Medieval Forum, Sidore lectures—there’s always something happening, almost every night. I count my blessings every day. My glass is always half full.”
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— ANN THURSTON
“IF YOU HAVE GOOD PEOPLE SKILLS, you don’t have to be the most brilliant person in the room,” Mary Washburn says. Kindness, being polite, and helping people are the qualities Washburn, who retired in June, believes her position as administrative assistant in the psychology department was all about. As a mother of two, she instilled the same philosophy in her now-grown children: “I don’t care if you’re a straight-A student; I want you to be able to get along with people because that’s what’s going to take you the distance.”

Lest you think Washburn is anything less than brilliant, rest assured; in addition to her good people skills she is also one bright “old girl,” as she calls herself. In 1996, at age 51, she graduated from Smith College as an Ada Comstock (non-traditional) Scholar. And every fall since she was hired at Plymouth State 13 years ago, Washburn has audited a course, from history to anthropology, sociology to English, and most recently, criminal justice. She likes to quote actress Helen Hayes: “If you rest, you rust.”

As administrative assistant, Washburn played a role larger than her official job description. “I wanted to make everyone feel welcome and comfortable when they were in the office,” she says. Occasionally students came in angry or upset, even crying. “You need to know how to take them from that level down to a calmer one,” she says. As for the practical aspects of her position, Washburn believes the accuracy and organizational skills she honed in her earlier career as a legal secretary for the Boston US Attorney’s office have served her well. “You just have to know how to juggle and prioritize,” she says. “Keep everybody happy, keep the machines going, keep the budget.”

In addition to keeping the psychology department happy (she was famous for plying students and faculty with home-baked cookies), Washburn mentored young girls through Plymouth’s nonprofit Circle Program. She calls the relationships she formed with “her” girls over the years “a perfect fit.” They went to concerts at PSU and the local high school, made seasonal crafts, spent time outdoors, and baked. “I always made sure the girls had something to bring home to their families,” Washburn says. She encourages everyone to be a mentor: “One-on-one with a special little girl … It doesn’t get any better than that. It’s really magical.”

Mary Washburn’s own mother, whom she describes as a “grand Irish lady from Boston,” gave Washburn her greatest gift, a piece of advice: “No matter what, don’t give up, don’t give in. You have to keep going forward.” Washburn has always taken this advice to heart. When she wanted to further her education, she didn’t let her age or distance from her chosen college stop her. And when she met a fellow she liked three years ago, she didn’t wait around for him to ask her out. She took the initiative and asked him herself.

When asked why she decided to retire, Washburn says, “I always said I wanted to go out at the top of my game … it’s time to make room for a younger person. And I want to have fun.” For her, this includes kayaking, taking classes, spending time with family and friends (including her other half, George), and exploring new places. That’s Mary Washburn, always going forward.
“I wanted to make everyone feel welcome and comfortable when they were in the office.”

— MARY WASHBURN
“FOR MANY OF MY STUDENTS, MATH anxiety is a major impediment to their understanding,” Annie Hager says of the students in her Mathematics and the Humanities class. “But my students are good, even brilliant, at other things. I have seen them excel at athletics, or in music, or on the stage. They are young artists, or philosophers, or writers. They are unique individuals with a large capacity for knowledge, and over the course of a semester, we all end up learning from one another.”

Hager is fascinated by all the ways math is at work in the world—in art, music, nature, philosophy—and shares that fascination with her students. Lectures, animations, games, and group activities all provide different approaches to understanding, along with opportunity for practice and extra help. Hager says, “I emphasize on that very first stressful day of class that it is important to reach out to one another, to ask for help, and to give help to others.” Attendance in her classes is excellent, and she consistently hears her students say, “This is the first math class I’ve ever enjoyed coming to!”

A garden of tomatoes, cucumbers, parsley, and zinnias is growing in the large, sunny windows of her office in Hyde Hall—a perfect greenhouse. Hager shares the office with other adjunct instructors, who are amused by her little office garden. “They just laugh at me,” she says. “They’re very tolerant of me.” When the time comes to plant the seedlings outside, Hager’s garden will be another opportunity to apply mathematics to daily life. “How to lay out a garden, when to plant, when to harvest—it’s all very scientific and mathematical,” she says, “but it’s also very real.”

After graduating from St. Paul’s School in Concord, Hager earned her BS in biology from Stanford University, then came back east for an MS in forestry from the University of Maine at Orono. In Vermont, she discovered a love for teaching when Killington Mountain School needed a science teacher. Today, she and her husband, Stephen Murray, live in Plymouth with their son, Silas, and daughter, Sophie.

At PSU, Hager also teaches Statistical Literacy and first year seminars on topics like “Is Popular Culture Making Us Smarter?” and “Are Cell Phones Destroying Civilized Society?” She’s also pursuing her CAGS in educational leadership. But her heart will always be with Mathematics and the Humanities, and the opportunity it brings to open students’ eyes to a subject many find intimidating. “It’s not just a bunch of equations,” Hager says. “It’s fun to show people that math has a very practical, rich side to it.”
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— ANNIE HAGER
Distinguished Teaching Award

Kathleen Arecchi
Professor of Music

Professor Kathleen Arecchi’s first experience with teaching came in 8th grade home economics, when a student from Germany arrived in class unable to speak or understand English. Arecchi was assigned to teach the student the English words associated with cooking. “I was left on my own to devise ways to do this,” she recalls. “I absolutely loved the creative aspect of this assignment, and to some degree it was prophetic.”

The teacher-by-proxy went on to study French, and then vocal performance, ultimately earning a Doctor of Musical Arts from the University of Maryland. “I hadn’t thought about an academic career; I wanted to perform,” she remembers. And that is what she did, initially. But she also remembers a nun in her Catholic school taking her aside during her sophomore year and telling her she hoped she’d earn a doctorate one day. “At a reunion many years later, I enjoyed telling her I was completing my doctorate,” Arecchi says.

After earning her doctorate, Arecchi was enjoying an active performance career and raising a young daughter when she saw an ad for an interim teaching position at Plymouth State. After securing the job, teaching four voice students one day a week the first year, and three days a week the following year, a full-time job offer followed, as did a move. Today, she is coordinator of the Voice Performance Studies program in the Department of Music, Theatre, and Dance.

Some of Arecchi’s students aspire to professional singing and acting careers, others hope to become studio teachers themselves, and many want to teach music in public or private schools.

“I am afforded a special opportunity to celebrate the uniqueness of every individual I teach, because mine is a one-on-one teaching environment,” Arecchi says. Each lesson or rehearsal provides opportunities for her to help her students understand the scope of their own vocal and musical potential, recognize the high level of personal effort that is required to develop their potential, and become fully confident in their abilities as singers and future teachers. “I love the challenges inherent in achieving these goals with each student,” she says. “The most rewarding moments for me as a teacher come when singers suddenly recognize dimensions to their talent they didn’t realize were there, or when after long weeks of work, they suddenly sing a difficult song or aria as if it was the easiest piece of music ever written, or when they exceed everyone’s expectations. I’ve been known to jump right out of my chair when that happens.”

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PLYMOUTH STATE EXCELLENCE 2012

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— KATHLEEN ARECCHI
in the lab or at the ocean, it’s all about collaboration for Chris Chabot. That interaction with other scientists and with students engaged in research at the undergraduate and graduate level is essential to the quality and scope of Chabot’s investigations into the biological rhythms of animals.

Chabot’s interest in science dates back to his youth. “I always liked to try to figure out what made things work,” he says. “I was encouraged by my parents and by my high school biology teacher—his enthusiasm inspired mine. A lot of us in this small high school in Cumberland, Maine, went on to biology careers. He instilled a sense of wonder and interest.”

He also discovered his enthusiasm for collaboration in school. “I had a buddy in high school and college who also loved biology,” he says. “We fed off each other’s interests. It’s the same today, collaborating with my students and other scientists.”

Growing up along the coast, he was familiar with horseshoe crabs, lobsters, and other marine life. They became his subjects as he developed his study of circadian rhythms in animals. “I was interested in the importance of time to organisms—an area that had long been overlooked. Physiology and behavior can be so different within a 24-hour period—it’s like two different animals: night and day.” He is particularly fascinated with how circadian timing interacts with tidal timing, and how these creatures survive and reproduce in the face of a changing environment.

Chabot has gained a national reputation in the field of biological rhythms, publishing 20 articles based on his original research, co-editing a volume of Current Zoology, and serving on the editorial boards of two peer-reviewed journals and on multiple National Science Foundation review panels. The New Hampshire IDEA Network of Biomedical Excellence (INBRE), a National Institute of Health (NIH)-funded project, recognized his collaborative approach when they asked him to assume a leadership role working with 15 principal investigators throughout the state at eight different institutions.

Chabot’s dedication to collaboration is also evident in the classroom. “My goal is to get my students to tap into their sense of wonder and questioning,” Chabot says. “I try to help them develop their questions and then come up with ways to attempt to answer them.”

Over the years, Chabot has developed expertise in writing successful grant proposals to fund “original, novel, and impactful” biological research, including undergraduate research assistantships. It’s important to Chabot that his students have the opportunity to do actual research, not just read about the research of other scientists. “It gives our students a chance to do original research with a professor.” His students present and publish their findings to a degree that is rarely found at the undergraduate level.

While Chabot is honored to receive the Award for Distinguished Scholarship, he emphasizes that he is very much part of a team. “This has been such a collaborative experience,” he says. “I couldn’t have done any of it without my colleagues, my students, and my family. I have benefitted so much from all these people.”
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— CHRISTOPHER CHABOT
PLYMOUTH STATE EXCELLENCE 2012

SARA JAYNE STEEN OPERATING STAFF SERVICE AWARD

Angela Torsey
Program Support Assistant, Financial Aid

FOR MANY COLLEGE STUDENTS, approaching the financial aid office can seem confusing, even intimidating. Until they meet someone like Angela Torsey. With her caring demeanor and warm smile, Torsey, who grew up in nearby Wentworth, helps Plymouth State University students make their way through the labyrinth of funding their education.

As a mother of a middle schooler and a newborn, empathy and patience are two of Torsey’s watchwords, which is why she is well-known for her excellent customer service. “Good service is very important, because that’s what we’re all about,” she says. That means staying helpful and cheerful, as well as knowledgeable and professional, no matter how busy the Financial Aid Team is with budgets, FAFSA reports, and all the complexities that go along with understanding and meeting the intricate requirements of financial aid in a higher education environment. Even during the busiest time of the year, when incoming students are calling with questions and returning students are dropping by with more questions, she is always ready to put the students’ needs first.

Torsey points out that she often meets students and their families at a stressful time, especially since recent cuts to federal financial aid programs have changed some financial aid packages in unanticipated ways. “Families just want the best for their son or daughter, and to make it possible for them to go to Plymouth State,” she says. Torsey works with students and their parents to figure out their best financial aid options. She can often help them find creative solutions to meeting the cost of a university education, such as scholarship opportunities they might not have known existed.

Her work is not without its challenges, however. “Sometimes students have no idea why they’re at the financial aid window,” says Torsey. Their parents tell them to go to the financial aid office, and they do, but without really understanding what they are supposed to do when they get there. “You have to be a little bit of a detective,” as Torsey puts it, to find out what the students really need, then walk them through the process. “The most important thing to me is that they know they can come to us at any time.”

Torsey also serves students by holding SMART (Students’ Monetary Awareness and Responsibility Today) meetings with them. She meets with students one-to-one to create personalized recommendations for funding their education and keeping loan debt down as much as possible. Then she follows up with students over multiple sessions, keeping in touch and helping them navigate each stage of the financial aid process. While SMART meetings are open to students at any point in their university careers, Torsey says it’s the juniors and seniors who keep her busiest.

Torsey not only enjoys her work, but she also enjoys those she works with. Her colleagues on the Financial Aid Team are “a great group of individuals,” she says, calling them “entertaining, hardworking, and dedicated.” But most of all, she enjoys her interactions with the students. “I love to be able to help students reach their goal of going to school,” she says. “It’s the best.”
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