

Exceptional Faculty



The 2016 Exceptional Faculty Award recipients are, *left to right*, Joseph Cavalli, Dr. Kathleen Chatfield, Heather McAfee, and Doug Mrazek.

During the 2016 Commencement ceremony, President Robert K. Knight announced the names of the recipients of the 2016 Clark College Exceptional Faculty Awards. The awards are presented annually to full-time and part-time faculty members. Nominations can be submitted by Clark College students, faculty, classified employees, administrators, alumni, Board members, and Foundation directors.

The awards are made possible through an endowed trust fund established by the Washington State Legislature and the Clark College Exceptional Faculty Endowment Fund, which was established in 1993. That fund provides recognition of exemplary work performance, positive impact on students, professional commitment, and other contributions to the college.

This year's Exceptional Faculty members are:

- Joseph Cavalli, instructor of history
- Dr. Kathleen Chatfield, instructor of business technology

- Heather McAfee, professor of geography
- Doug Mrazek, professor of French

Joe Cavalli, History

Joseph Cavalli has taught history at schools in Croatia, Italy, and Bahrain. He began teaching at Clark shortly after returning to the Pacific Northwest in 2006. For the past five years, he has also served as the director of Clark's award-winning Model United Nations program. He also teaches history through Clark College's non-credit Mature Learning program and at Mt. Hood Community College.

Cavalli says he sees history more as a context for understanding the world than as a rote memorization of names and dates. "It's not about me giving students information," he says. "What I want to impart is the love of learning and the need to be curious."

Students appreciate Cavalli's efforts to make history relevant to their current lives. "I had no interest in history whatsoever until I took his class," wrote one student. "After my first class with him, I was enthralled. Now, history is my favorite subject and my current major."

Dr. Kathleen Chatfield, Business Technology and Management

Over the course of her 21 years at Clark, Dr. Kathleen Chatfield has taught a variety of courses, including keyboarding, microcomputer applications, Microsoft Excel, e-commerce, and project management. In truth, however, her influence goes far beyond those subjects. In fact, she has been a part of every online class offered at Clark College through her work as the senior instructional designer for the college's eLearning Department, where she helps Clark faculty learn how to develop online classes.

"It is a daunting task to guide so many full-time and part-time instructors through all the different learning systems,

while also helping them to maintain their unique styles and philosophies of teaching,” wrote one nominator. “Yet Dr. Chatfield manages to accomplish this task.”

Dr. Chatfield continues to teach classes to students as well, saying that this experience helps her better understand the needs and challenges of faculty. This adds up to more than a full-time workload, but Dr. Chatfield says, “I’m doing what I love. I’ve never woken up in the morning and said, ‘Oh no, I have to go to work.’”

Heather McAfee, Geography

Heather McAfee first became interested in geography while working for the U.S. Department of Defense, doing cultural analysis of Iraq that included mapping the civilian population there. “I love geography because it is the most interdisciplinary subject you can study,” she says. “It touches everything, even health—we have medical geography. Recently in my classes, we’ve looked at and mapped the spread of the Zika virus.”

McAfee serves as chair of the Geography Department at Clark; she also serves on the college’s AA Transfer Committee, the Library of the Future Taskforce, and the Learning Communities Taskforce. Additionally, McAfee has worked to create connections between Clark and community organizations, including the Water Resources Education Center and the Vanport Mosaic.

“She made her classroom a comfortable area where every person’s opinion and outlook was highly valued,” wrote one student. “Her teachings went much deeper than the textbook material. She wanted us to dig deep and relate every lesson to our personal lives and experiences, and it taught all of us so much about the world around us.”

Doug Mrazek, French

When Doug Mrazek was job-hunting after receiving his master's degree in French from the University of Illinois in 1978, one of his professors told him that the Pacific Northwest was so beautiful that if he took a job there, "you'll never want to leave."

Those words turned out to be prophetic; Mrazek has devoted 38 years to teaching French at Clark. He has taught generations of Clark students how to conjugate *être*, led dozens of them on trips through France and Quebec, and helped the French Club put on countless events as its academic advisor.

Small surprise, then, that Mrazek received more than 30 nominations for this award this year. "I'm in amazement," he says. "It's a tremendous sense of closure. After a career of 40 years, it's a nice way to move on."

Photo: Clark College/Jenny Shadley

The heroes' journeys



Clark College's 2014-2015 Exceptional Faculty Award recipients are, *clockwise from top left*, Steven Clark (biology), Alison Dolder (bakery), Michiyo Okuhara (Japanese), and Matthew Gallaher (English).

An interesting pattern emerged while interviewing the recipients of the 2014 -2015 Clark College Exceptional Faculty Awards: In each case, when the faculty member was asked how they came to teach at Clark, he or she would grin, look into the distance, and say something along the lines of, "Well, it's kind of a funny story..."

The details of each "funny story" varied: They meant to become zoologists, but wound up teaching baking. They meant to teach at a four-year university—or at a grade school—but wound up teaching at community college. They meant to teach English in Japan, but wound up teaching Japanese in the U.S. But no matter how each journey began, it arrived at the same place: Somehow, their passion drew them to Clark College, and once they were here, they'd found their home. All four of these

faculty members radiate a love of their subject matter and their work. Small wonder, then, that students responded by nominating them for this award, which was announced during the college's 2015 Commencement ceremony and officially presented during Opening Day activities on Sept. 14.

The Clark College Exceptional Faculty Awards are presented annually to full-time and part-time faculty members. This year the award recipients include two full-time tenured professors and two part-time adjunct instructors, whose detailed biographies can be accessed through the links below:

- Steven Clark: The naturalist
- Alison Dolder: The tough-but-caring technician
- Matthew Gallaher: The voice of encouragement
- Michiyo Okuhara: The cultural ambassador

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Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley

Exceptional Faculty Award

spotlight: The cultural ambassador



Professor Michiyo Okuhara helps members of the Japanese Club teach children in Clark's Child & Family Studies program about kimono in advance of the 2014 Sakura Festival.

Professor Michiyo Okuhara is well aware that students who enroll in her Japanese courses probably have a limited understanding of her home country's culture.

"They see it in pop culture—*anime*, *manga*, Hello Kitty—or sometimes traditional things like samurai," she says. "In class we don't focus on animation or comic books. We try to inspire them to learn the language, but also a more complete sense of Japanese culture."

Ironically, for someone who now teaches Japanese, Okuhara originally came to the United States to learn English. "I

studied English in Japan, but I wanted to use it and live it," she explains. She earned her master's degree at Portland State University, also getting a certificate to teach Japanese as a foreign language from that institution, and in 1999 began teaching at Clark.

"At the time, the program was very small," she remembers. "I had four classes a year, just Japanese 101 to 103."

Today, thanks largely to Okuhara's efforts, Clark offers two years of Japanese study. The college's Japanese Club, which Okuhara helped found, is a vibrant and visible presence on the main campus. Okuhara has



also been a key organizer of the college's annual Sakura Festival, and has helped incorporate children from the college's Child and Family Studies (CFS) program into the event—something she started after her own son, Anthony, graduated from the program's daycare. (Okuhara's daughter, Sakura, also has a Clark connection, having earned her associate here before transferring to Western Washington University.)

Okuhara, who received tenure in 2013, says she appreciates the partnerships she's been able to develop at Clark. "We have great colleagues, great collaboration," she says. "Like with CFS, and also International Programs are a great support for us. Or when we had a Japanese theater troupe visiting and needed a performance space; [drama professor] Gene Biby offered to let us use his stage. We're a small department, but with other people's help, we can do things we cannot do alone."

This year, Okuhara received 2014-2015 Exceptional Faculty Award. "This instructor goes above and beyond, helping students outside of class and outside of her office hours,"

wrote one student in her nomination. “She not only teaches the language, but she puts forth an extra energy to relate our lessons to Japanese culture. Her knowledge is not only shared to the class, but to the Clark community as well.”

Many of Okuhara’s former students return during Sakura to visit “Okuhara-sensei,” as they call her. Others write her from Japan to tell her about working there. Okuhara cherishes those stories, but feels that teaching world languages helps students even if they never leave their hometown.

“Not everyone gets to major in Japanese or work in Japan,” she says. “But part of what they learn is empathy for other cultures, and maybe patience with people from other countries who don’t speak English. I really enjoy seeing students learn. When they say Japanese is fun—that’s what I hope for.”

Learn about other recipients of the 2014-2015 Exceptional Faculty Awards.

Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley

Exceptional Faculty Award spotlight: The tough-but- caring technician



Bakery instructor Alison Dolder shows off some of her students' work.

Alison Dolder has got to have, hands-down, the best-smelling classroom at Clark College. The Bakery instructor and interim department head spends much of her time guiding students as they work in the program's lab, which is also a fully functional bakery. Racks of pie shells and biscuits stand by the doorway, and the air is thick with the aromas of butter and sugar. Students in chef's whites stand at tables, making croissants and baguettes to be sold in the college's retail bakery in Gaiser Hall.

"The training here is very different from some culinary schools," says Dolder. "Our students come in, and the very first day they're put in their station and they're forming, they're cutting—everything they'll be doing for the next two weeks till they switch stations. It's as close to a production bakery as we can get. When they get out and enter the job market, they don't require as much training [as other new

graduates] because they're used to the fast pace. They're ready to jump right in."

It's that combination of practicality and enthusiasm—combined with empathy and support—that prompted students to nominate Dolder for the 2014-2015 Exceptional Faculty Award. "I joined the baking program on a whim and it has come to be the greatest decision of my life," wrote one student in her nomination. "I feel like I can be not only the best baker or the best businesswoman around, but I can be the best of myself at all times, and for that I am grateful. Ms. Alison is so encouraging at times, she is tough at times, she is compassionate at times, and she can challenge you daily."



Dolder encourages her students to express their creativity, whether it's through experimenting with whole-wheat croissant dough or designing a steampunk-inspired layer cake.

Dolder came to baking almost by accident. She'd started college as a zoology major, but didn't enjoy the math and chemistry courses and decided to leave school to regroup. "My husband was going to school full-time and working full-time, and so just as something to do, I took a cake-decorating class," she says. "It turns out I was really good at it."

Dolder worked in bakeries and taught cake decoration for more than a decade before deciding to return to school to learn her craft in-depth. Ironically, what appealed to her most was the chemistry involved. "I love how you can take all these ingredients and turn them into something else, something delicious," she says.

Dolder graduated from Clark's bakery program in 2000 and quickly landed a job at the nationally known Pearl Bakery in Portland. But while she loved the work, she realized it wasn't compatible with having two young children. "I was really lucky to work with [former Pearl head baker and current Little T owner] Tim Healea, but it was 9 p.m. to 5 a.m.," she says. When a teaching position opened up at Clark, she decided to apply.

Dolder makes sure her students understand the realities of life as a professional baker. "I tell them, 'Don't believe everything you see on TV,'" she says. "You know, there's that illusion that 'I'm going to start baking cakes and get my own show and be famous.' Baking is hard work."

Dolder is happy to have returned to Clark to share her love and knowledge of baking with today's students. She's looking forward to doing so in the college's soon-to-be-remodeled Culinary Arts wing. "It's so exciting," she says. "I'm looking forward to introducing a new cohort model for our program in a shiny new facility." A shiny new facility that, in short order, will probably once again turn into the best-smelling classroom on campus.

Learn about other recipients of the 2014-2015 Exceptional Faculty Awards.

Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley

Exceptional Faculty Award spotlight: The voice of encouragement



English instructor Matthew Gallaher.

Matthew Gallaher's English Composition is winding down for the day. "If you have any last-minute questions, I'll stick around," the instructor tells his students, who are broken up

into groups to “workshop” their papers with their classmates.

Gallaher sits down near one slump-shouldered student. “How are you doing?” he asks the student. “Do you have questions?”

“No,” sighs the student. “I just wish I had more time.”

“You *do* have time,” Gallaher responds with a smile. He points to the student’s paper. “This is only a first draft. You’re still going to do a second draft, and then revise it again before handing it in. Don’t give up on this!”

Imagine every possible permutation of the word “encourage,” and it shows up in students’ nominations of Gallaher for the 2014-2015 Exceptional Faculty Award, along with words like “fun,” “sincere,” and “enthusiasm.”



“The largest impact that Matthew has had on his students, and on me personally, is his ability to make students feel important, and that their individual success is valuable,” reads one. “He goes above and beyond to help others, and is encouraging

to his students to continue to develop and share their skills.”

Gallaher’s enthusiasm and support led him to be recruited as advisor for Alpha Sigma Phi, the Clark College chapter of the international honor society Phi Theta Kappa that blends academic achievement with public service. After two years in that position, Gallaher is stepping down to focus on teaching, but he says he enjoyed mentoring students as they developed new ways to help their community, including annual food drives and a campaign to reduce and reuse electronic waste.

“I was in Boy Scouts as a kid and an Eagle Scout, and it kind of reminded me of that,” says Gallaher, who earned Phi Theta

Kappa's Paragon Award for New Advisors in 2013.

Much of Gallaher's work at Clark contains echoes of his early years. "My whole family got their associate degrees," he says. "My parents both came from working class families and could never have afforded college without community college. I went to community college as a high school student, St. Petersburg College in South Florida."

Gallaher, who earned his bachelor's degree from University of South Florida and his master's in English from Portland State University, says he appreciates the diversity of students he encounters teaching at a community college. "You never know what kind of students you're going to have," he says. "There are vets from the last two conflicts, and there are students who have only been in this country a few months. There are older students and students who are still in high school. You get all these people together, and they don't agree almost ever, and it's kind of great to hear them get riled up as they hear opinions and viewpoints they've never been exposed to before."

Gallaher says he was honored to discover students had nominated him for the award, especially because he is an adjunct instructor, teaching part-time at Clark and part-time at Portland Community College. "It was surprising and humbling," he says. "Being an adjunct can be lonely. You don't quite feel part of the community. Phi Theta Kappa really helped me feel more a part of Clark. And now this is just another way of saying, 'Hey, you love Clark—and Clark loves you, too.' That feels good."

Learn about other recipients of the 2014-2015 Exceptional Faculty Awards.

Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley

Exceptional Faculty Award spotlight: The naturalist



Biology professor Steven Clark in his office.

Steven Clark's office is full of animals. There's the "Cats Against the Bomb" calendar; the poster of the grizzly bear; the woodblock print of a turtle; the vintage Audubon Society birdwatching chart; photos of bees, rodents, spiders, his dogs. The effect is something like walking into a natural history museum that's been shoved into a filing cabinet.

"This room is reflective of my interests," says Clark, glancing over at an illustration of wildflowers above his desk. And, indeed, a conversation with Clark is likely to take

you through the intricacies of parasitic wasps, the difficulties involved in attaching radio monitors to pond turtles, and a startlingly accurate imitation of a pika—a small, rabbit-like creature whose populations in the Columbia Gorge Clark has been helping to monitor for years.

It's hard not to look around this room and assume that Clark was destined to be a biology professor. But Clark, who received his Master of Special Education for the Hearing Impaired from Lewis & Clark College in 1986, began his career teaching almost everything *but* biology at the Washington School for the Deaf.

"I was attracted to the idea of teaching an underserved population," he says. Eventually, however, Clark found himself drawn to the sciences, and in 2000 he left the School for the Deaf to pursue a master's degree in Environmental Sciences and Resources at Portland State University. For four years, he worked as a field biologist for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife while also teaching mathematics and biology at Clark as an adjunct instructor.

For Clark, teaching at a community college still fulfills that urge to help underserved populations. "There are great teachers at all colleges, I know that, but I think the mission of the community college—to teach the rank and file of our community—I like that," he says. "My mother never got to go to college. But I used to think that if my mom *had* gone to college, she would have gone to a community college."



Professor Clark at a STEM demonstration in 2015.

Clark, who received tenure in 2014, currently teaches the biology sequence for life sciences majors, a three-quarter series that has earned a reputation as a daunting academic challenge.

“It’s funny, because I think of myself as a warm person, but I know my class is often perceived as ... rigorous,” Clark says, smiling and pausing as he searches for the right word. “I think some students get nervous at first when I explain the work load. But the reason I talk about it from the very beginning is that I want them to understand what they’re getting into. I invite students from the past year to talk about what worked in getting them to be successful. I’ll tell students to show me their notes so I can see where they’re missing something. And you know, I think by the middle of winter quarter, their [study] habits have gotten better and they’re starting to have fun.”

Clark’s theory is backed up by the many students who nominated him for a 2014-2015 Exceptional Faculty Award. “Biology may very well be the study of life, but without an enthusiastic instructor it can seem completely lifeless,” reads one nomination. “Steven Clark has somehow managed to maintain a strict and efficient authority over his classroom, while also making it incredibly fun and intriguing. I can honestly say that I have never seen those two concepts, authority and fun, incorporated into a class so well together. ... He truly cares

for his students, that is abundantly apparent.”

For Clark, his classes’ rigor is one of the ways he shows that he cares. “I like my students to know that they did all their hard stuff at community college, where the focus is on teaching and the tuition is lower and there’s more room to recover from mistakes,” he says. “The best thing for me is when former students email me and say, ‘I’m at Washington State University right now, and me and the other Clark students are in the top tier.’”

Learn about other recipients of the 2014-2015 Exceptional Faculty Awards.

Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley

**Exceptional Faculty,
Exceptional Stories**



Clockwise from top left: Kelly Fielding, Chris Martins, Sarah Theberge, and Jim Wilkins-Luton.

A professor who never planned on going to college, A Web-savvy wiz who stays in touch with students on Twitter, an aspiring academic who turned his back on the ivory tower in favor of more hands-on teaching, and an experienced clinician who takes the mystery out of a much-misunderstood subject—these are the recipients of the 2013-2014 Clark College Exceptional Faculty Awards, which were announced during the college's 2014 Commencement ceremony and officially presented to their recipients during Opening Day activities on Sept. 10.

The Clark College Exceptional Faculty Awards are presented annually to full-time and part-time faculty members. This year the award recipients include two full-time tenured professors and two part-time adjunct instructors, whose detailed biographies can be accessed through the links below:

- Kelly Fielding: The voice of experience
- Chris Martin: The technophile with human feeling

- Sarah Theberge: The accidental professor
- Jim Wilkins-Luton: The book-lover gone digital

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Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley

Exceptional Faculty Award spotlight: The technophile with human feeling



Chris Martin has gathered the students from his Web Video Production class in the hallway outside their classroom to demonstrate how to set up an interview shot. One student—a burly guy with a baseball cap and gray beard—has affably agreed to stand in front of the camera as the “interviewee.”

“Now let’s think about camera height, because you can change things a lot depending on the angle you shoot your subject at,” Martin says, adjusting the camera’s tripod. “Do we want to set it lower and look up at him to give him that godlike angle? Because we all know Steve has a bit of a god complex—just kidding! Just kidding!”

The whole class, Steve included, cracks up, and then Martin continues, raising the tripod as he speaks. “You can do stuff like that,” he says. “You can look down on them, too. But typically, we want to meet the subject at their own level, to give them that human feeling.”



In many ways, that last line is an apt summation of Martin’s teaching philosophy—and the secret to his popularity with students, who nominated him in droves for Clark’s prestigious 2013-14 Exceptional Faculty Award.

“His patience and approach in bringing out the abilities in all his students, from the novice to the advanced, encourages respect for all,” wrote one nominator. “His emotional integrity allows him to act as a mentor and to also mirror the importance to students that he is also learning the ever-changing aspects of technology.”

“If you don’t care about who your students are or where they come from or what they actually know—and they know a lot—then you can’t help them,” says Martin, who teaches both Computer Technology and Computer Graphics Technology classes as an adjunct at Clark, as well as general business courses at Warner Pacific College. “What I like about teaching at Clark is you really get to know the students. When they go through hard times, you know about it.”

Martin also gets strong praise for his real-life experience as a web designer and videographer. He has spent more than eight years running his own multimedia studio, creating videos and web content for businesses, nonprofits, and artists. He also produces a regular online documentary video series called *Innovators of Vancouver* that showcases leaders in Southwest Washington.

Martin, who holds a bachelor's degree in Media Arts and Animation from the Art Institute of Portland and a master's degree in Management and Organizational Leadership from Warner Pacific, regularly shares stories from his professional career to illustrate class material. A self-described "big experimenter," he often tries out new tools and methods in his teaching—including Twitter, which Martin has used to create online discussions about class material among his students.

"It's just a way of being accessible," Martins says. "I think it helps students feel connected to me a little more."

Or, to put it another way: It's Martin's way of giving his students that "human feeling" in the digital age.

Learn more about the other 2013-14 Exceptional Faculty Award recipients.

Photos: Clark College/Jenny Shadley

Exceptional Faculty Award spotlight: The accidental professor



We've all heard the cliché that kids say the darndest things. But people rarely point out its corollary: So do adults. As an Early Childhood Education professor, Sarah Theberge says she is often just as surprised by what her students express in the classroom as she is by what children in the college's Child & Family Studies program say on the playground.

"I'm just surprised over and over again by how many things I hadn't thought of," Theberge says as she stands on that playground surrounded by running children. "The way that students approach the things we talk about reminds me that there's no one right answer to so much of what we're studying. I really do see us as 'co-learners' who are all learning together—and I'm learning right along with them. It's one of my favorite parts of teaching."

It's also one of the things students mentioned repeatedly in nominating Theberge for Clark College's prestigious Exceptional Faculty Award, which Theberge received for the

2013-14 year. The award was announced at Clark's 2014 Commencement ceremony and officially bestowed at the college's Opening Day festivities on September 10.

"She is honest, she is real, she is not only a teacher but an inspiration and a friend to all her students," wrote one nominator. "She brings passion to her work with children and with her students, and ignites the passion in all of us."

Students also mention Theberge's empathy and her strong commitment to serving as an academic advisor to students in the ECE program. When Theberge explains how she became a professor, it becomes clear why she is able to connect so strongly with her students and empathize with the challenges they face: After all, she faced them too.

Theberge never set out to become a professor. "It was the farthest thing from my mind," she says, laughing. Rather, her initial ambition was much more basic: She needed a job.

"I was a single parent without any college background or schooling, and a friend of mine had a childcare center," Theberge says. "I just thought it was a place where I could have my kids there and still work. But from the very first day, I fell in love with it."

A friend encouraged her to enroll in Clark's ECE program. "I said, 'Oh no. We don't do college in my family,'" Theberge recalls. "She literally took me by the hand and dragged me to Clark. And I've never left."

In 1992, Theberge graduated with honors from Clark with an Associate of Applied Science degree in ECE. She went on to complete both a bachelor's and master's program from Pacific Oaks College while working in Clark's CFS program, first as a program aide and then as an adjunct faculty member. Her roles and responsibilities continued to expand over the years, and in 2000 she was granted tenure at Clark. Throughout the years, she has continued to attend conferences and workshops to keep

up-to-date on current teaching practices in her field. She also presents her own research at conferences; currently she has been delving into the complex issues surrounding children's concepts of gender identity. Additionally, she serves on the board of directors for YWCA Clark County and has been instrumental in creating a library at CFS to help promote children's literacy.

It's a long way from the young single mother who just wanted a job. "That's why I love advising," Theberge says. "I hear similar stories to mine from students—people looking for opportunity, looking for help in making their passion a reality. It's just so rewarding to sit with that and to walk alongside them on their journey."

Learn more about the other 2013-14 Exceptional Faculty Award recipients.

Photo: Clark College/Jenny Shadley

**Exceptional Faculty Award
spotlight: The book-lover
gone digital**



Exceptional Faculty Award recipient Jim Wilkins-Luton can tell you the exact moment when the course of his career changed. He was in his final year of graduate studies at Gonzaga University, listening to an English professor discuss Milton in pedantic detail.

At the time, Wilkins-Luton was well on his way to following that professor's path. He'd already been accepted to a Ph.D. program in English literature at Stony Brook University in New York, after which he would aim for a professorship at an elite university where he could happily discuss his own favorite authors in pedantic detail. "It was all lined up," Wilkins-Luton recalls. "I'd been accepted; I had my funding in place; I was going to focus on either medieval or Victorian literature. Everything was going according to plan."

But lately, Wilkins-Luton had begun having doubts about that plan. It started when he took on a part-time job teaching homeless youth to make some money during grad school. "I had

all these stereotypes about what these kids would be like,” he says. “I’m ashamed to admit it, but the night before I started the job I was worried they would give me head lice. And then that first day I went to work and came home just exhausted and devastated by these kids. And I started thinking, Maybe the world didn’t need another Shakespeare professor. Maybe the world needed people who were willing to teach—to teach the people no one wanted to teach.”

Which brings us back to that Milton seminar. Wilkins-Luton found himself staring at the lecturing professor. “I’m not even kidding: This guy actually had leather elbow patches on his tweed jacket, and he was expounding on some particular sentence Milton wrote,” he recalls. “And I remember thinking, ‘That’s my future. I don’t want any part of that. What I want to do is help.’”

As fate would have it, there was a poster advertising opportunities to teach English in Japan on the seminar room’s walls. Wilkins-Luton called his wife as soon as class let out, and soon after graduation, the two of them moved to Japan, where they spent the next seven years teaching English. Once the couple returned to the U.S. and settled in the Portland area, it was a natural progression for Wilkins-Luton to begin teaching at a private international school, and then English as a Second Language at Clark, and then pre-college and college-level English. He earned tenure in 2006.

Wilkins-Luton says he was surprised and honored to receive a 2013-14 Exceptional Faculty Award. The award was announced at Clark’s 2014 Commencement ceremony and officially bestowed at the college’s Opening Day festivities on September 10. Student nominators described a professor they called “funny” and “friendly,” who “makes all students completely comfortable in the classroom.”

“I love to teach,” says Wilkins-Luton. “I love the classroom. I love the engagement with students.” He is sitting in his

book-lined office at Clark, which amply proves that he hasn't entirely escaped the tropes of the English professor. ("I have a lot more books at home," he admits sheepishly, casting an eye at the seven shelves of volumes arranged in meticulous alphabetical order by author. "These are mostly the ones I don't want my kids reading.")

Yet despite his love of both printed books and face-to-face teaching, Wilkins-Luton recently moved to teaching entirely online. "I think you have to make transitions sometimes to stay sharp," he explains. "Also, I'd been reading some research discussing how the face-to-face classroom favors the extrovert—the person who's willing to raise their hand and speak up in class. In the online environment, the introvert and extrovert become equal. As someone with introvert tendencies of my own, I liked that idea."

Wilkins-Luton says that at first, he was concerned that the online classroom would stifle the sense of humor and personal engagement that he practices in face-to-face teaching. But in fact, he says, online teaching has allowed him to give even more personalized attention to individual students. "If they ask me a question, I send them back a two-paragraph answer," he says. "And yeah, it might have a joke in it. Because you know what? Students don't need gravitas; they need a reason to learn."

Learn more about the other 2013-14 Exceptional Faculty Award recipients.

Photo: Clark College/Jenny Shadley