

## **Meet the Prof: Robert Stelzer**

**by Faculty Advocacy Committee - Thursday, October 01, 2009**

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/2232/meet-the-prof-robert-stelzer/>

*The following faculty Q&A was submitted by the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Faculty Advocacy Committee, a committee of the Faculty Senate. David Siemers, associate professor of political science, wrote the introduction.*

I am lucky to know many of our biologists and microbiologists. They are an accomplished group. A few years ago, they were recognized with the UW System Award for Excellence in Teaching, which is no mean feat. The award is a testament to their dedication to both teaching and research because they so frequently involve students in the latter activity.

One of the faculty most active in teaching students by engaging them in a research program is Bob Stelzer. I know Bob as a caring mentor to his students. I also know him as an avid fisherman. His passion for knowing more about biology is driven by his connection to the real world through fishing and other outdoor activities, and that's exactly the kind of biologist who can make a positive difference for our students and for Wisconsin.

### **How did you find your way to UW Oshkosh?**

I wanted a position where I could do a mix of research and teaching and interact with students. UW Oshkosh has been a very good fit for me in this way. Location was also important. We have always liked the upper Midwest and have made some great friends here. I think Oshkosh has a lot to offer, and I am very encouraged by the direction the city is headed.

### **Why did you choose to go into your field?**

As a kid I liked to play in streams and catch crayfish with my friends. When I found out I could get paid to work in streams, I was hooked. For a long time, I have had a strong curiosity about nature, and I like to quantify and analyze what is happening in it. I tend to be more interested in the big picture than in the fine details and was drawn to this aspect of ecology while in a senior seminar class in college. I had some great teachers in high school and college that got me excited about learning. One philosophy professor was particular influential, and in her class we talked a lot about what truth means and how to define it. I guess becoming a scientist has been my way to pursue truth.

### **What is your favorite thing about UW Oshkosh?**

Most students do not take their education for granted here. Many students pay their way through school while working one or more jobs. I really enjoy seeing students succeed, particularly those who make strong commitments towards learning inside and outside of the classroom. I also feel fortunate to be surrounded by many talented colleagues who are committed to teaching and the continuation of their own learning.

**What is the professional accomplishment of which you are most proud?**

I published a couple of papers from my Ph.D. dissertation that have been fairly well received by peers in the scientific community. There were times when graduate school seemed like a very long tunnel with an uncertain future. It has been rewarding to learn that hard work, with some good fortune thrown in, usually pays off.

**What leadership or service activities are you involved in?**

I serve on the Undergraduate Research Advisory Council at UW Oshkosh. It has been gratifying to improve research opportunities for students on campus through this committee's work. Additionally, all of my recent research projects have involved working with students. I was proud to have a former student, Damian Drover, win an award for the best research presentation by an undergraduate at a recent conference we went to. He is now in a master's program in biogeochemistry at the University of Georgia. I also serve my field by reviewing papers for scientific journals and proposals for funding agencies. This keeps me up to date on cutting edge research in my field.

**What is the most common misperception about what you do?**

Some people are surprised to learn being a professor is not a "9-to-5" job. Most of the faculty I know here are in the profession because they are curious about ideas and how things work and in sharing that curiosity with students. Because we do what we are passionate about, sometimes working long days doesn't exactly seem like work. It can be enjoyable to snowshoe to a stream and collect water samples on those frigid winter days in Wisconsin!

**What is the most exciting project you are working on right now?**

My research group is trying to understand what happens to nitrate, a naturally occurring form of nitrogen and a major component of fertilizer, in deep sediments of streams. It is important to determine how nitrate is processed in streams because streams and rivers send nitrate, and other nutrients not used by crops and other types of plants, to receiving ecosystems such as oceans. Excess nitrogen has been linked to pollution problems in oceans including "dead zones." Excess nitrate also can cause problems for humans when it reaches high concentrations in drinking water, a common occurrence in many areas of Wisconsin.

**How does what you research help you to be an effective teacher?**

To be an effective researcher, I have to continually think about gaps in knowledge about how ecosystems work and how I can design experiments to address these gaps. I need to keep up with the scientific literature in both cases. Discussing scientific papers and attending scientific conferences with students helps keep me current about progress in my field. These activities benefit my teaching by keeping me abreast of new knowledge and fresh perspectives on learning. For example, I've been reading papers on quality control procedures and have implemented some of their ideas in my field ecology lab course. Finally, doing research with students is a natural way to combine research and teaching.

**Describe some ways your department serves northeastern Wisconsin.**

One the most fundamental ways our department serves northeastern Wisconsin is to improve scientific literacy among citizens. There are many issues that the people of Northeastern Wisconsin are facing that require critical thinking skills and scientific knowledge, including choices about healthcare and nutrition, options for energy production and use, and ways to maintain healthy ecosystems. Courses and other opportunities for students in the Department of Biology and Microbiology help increase scientific literacy.

In addition, our department helps train professionals in biology and microbiology and in closely related fields such as healthcare, biotechnology and environmental science. Our graduates have been employed at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, at local hospitals, at county health departments and at private industries in northeastern Wisconsin. These students are poised to become leaders in these fields in northeastern Wisconsin.

### **Tell us about your family.**

I am married, and we have two children, who are 5 and 8. My wife, Wendy Stelzer, also works in the Biology and Microbiology Department. Our children attend Webster Stanley Elementary School and have been fortunate to be involved in many organizations in the community, including the Oshkosh Youth Soccer Club, Valley Academy for the Arts, the YMCA and Public Library.

### **What are your hobbies?**

I like a lot of outdoor activities, including cycling, canoeing, fishing and hiking. Oshkosh and northeastern Wisconsin offer a lot of these types of recreational opportunities, and I enjoy these with family and friends. I also like music and try to take advantage of the variety of musical performances and venues available in the community.

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