

UNM's Shepherd Named U.S. Professor of the Year

By Sari Krosinsky



[Ursula Shepherd](#) has a passion for helping students not only to succeed academically, but also to believe in themselves and seize opportunities they never thought they'd have. Because of that passion, Associate Professor Shepherd, University Honors Program, University of New Mexico, is one of only four U.S. Professors of the Year.

Sponsored by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the award is the only national program to recognize excellence in undergraduate teaching and mentoring.

Shepherd is the recipient of numerous awards, including the UNM Presidential Teaching Fellowship, the university's highest honor for teaching. Her students also attract many accolades, including Goldwater and National Science Foundation fellowships.

She wrote in a statement for the award that while challenges like low graduation rates and students' workloads outside school "can be frustrating, I teach here because here I can make a difference." Her students' successes keep her motivated.

"I believe every student who passes through my classroom has the ability to be outstanding. It's my job to help each of them find what they are passionate about and to show them that it is possible," she said.

As New Mexico's flagship university, UNM strives to stretch limited resources to provide an academic environment where research and education can thrive. "I am extremely lucky to be able to work in a situation that allows me to teach in small seminar settings and allows both me and my students to have all the advantages of this large research institution," Shepherd said.

UNM President David J. Schmidly wrote in his nomination letter, "Of particular note is Dr. Shepherd's enthusiasm to engage her students in research. She has scholarly publications in refereed journals, many of them co-authored with her undergraduate students. She has expectations of success for all her students and they rise to meet those expectations."

Shepherd uses highly interactive teaching methods, including guided discussion with full participation and frequent field research. She often teaches both lecture and lab to better integrate the two. She designs "each course in ways that make students responsible for the learning we are undertaking," she said.

"If students are to love what they are doing, they must have the space to ask the questions that excite them and to learn that the things they have read in their texts and been asked to memorize are hard won by real people, and sometimes may even be wrong."

Learning this way can foster a lifelong passion. "One student wanted to find

out what the bioluminescent animals were and whether they were signaling to each other or might be trying to avoid predators. After lots of thought, she came up with a novel approach using the light on her digital watch to 'talk to' animals she captured. She showed that they responded to these signals. She is now a behavioral ecologist," Shepherd said.

As well as teaching in the [University Honors Program](#), Shepherd has taught in the [Department of Biology](#) and was program coordinator and faculty mentor for NSF's Experiences for Undergraduates Program at [Sevilleta Long Term Ecological Research](#) station. Her service to the community includes mentoring faculty as well as students and teaching in a program designed to improve science instruction in middle and high schools. She received a doctorate and bachelor's degree in biology from UNM and master's and bachelor's degrees in social sciences from the University of the Pacific.

[The U.S. Professors of the Year](#) program salutes the most outstanding undergraduate faculty in the country, who excel in teaching and positively influence the lives and careers of students. The awards focus attention on models of excellence in undergraduate teaching.