

**2014 - 2015 OCUFA TEACHING AND  
ACADEMIC LIBRARIANSHIP AWARDS  
CITATION FOR PROFESSOR TIMOTHY O'CONNELL**

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## **CITATION FOR PROFESSOR TIMOTHY O'CONNELL**

**Prepared and read by Alastair Woods, CFS**

The OCUFA Teaching and Academic Librarianship Awards Committee is delighted to present a 2014-2015 Teaching Award to Professor Tim O'Connell, Professor at the Department of Recreational & Leisure Studies at Brock University.

The mark of an excellent teacher is not one who views their role as depositing information into empty vessels, but rather someone who sees students as vehicles in their own right, forever moving towards the acquisition of knowledge. In the latter viewpoint, a good teacher is one who offers gentle guidance with firm support, neither pushing students too hastily in the right direction nor pulling them back too harshly from the wrong one. So if this careful balance between mentorship and self-discovery is a benchmark for what creates a great educator, then it comes as no surprise that Professor O'Connell is being honoured as one.

Throughout his extensive academic career, Professor O'Connell has been admired by his colleagues and lauded by his students for his innovative approach to teaching and learning. Reading through his letters of support and nomination package, one is struck by the humility and sincerity Professor O'Connell exhibits as a teacher and researcher even as he receives accolades locally, nationally and internationally.

A theme that has defined Professor O'Connell's academic career is one of experiential learning and the pursuit of knowledge through doing just as much as thinking. While it is assumed that a program such as Outdoor Recreation would rely heavily on learning outside of the traditional classroom, Professor O'Connell has taken it to astounding new heights, with one colleague noting



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that Professor O'Connell was "literally and figuratively leading the way" in experiential learning long before it became common parlance in higher education.

Professor O'Connell describes his teaching philosophy with the phrase "see one, do one, teach one." This axiom is reflected in everything he does as a teacher and an academic, seeking to not only impart wisdom to his students, but also to inspire them to take up the pursuit of knowledge with as much passion and curiosity as himself and to foster the kind of experiences that produce strength of character and thoughtful leadership.

Professor O'Connell encourages students to forge new paths and arrive at their own conclusions. This teaching approach highlights a deep respect for students' capabilities and a strong belief that the badge of responsibility can motivate students to try, sometimes fail and try again. A perfect example of this approach can be found in his course Advanced Outdoor Leadership Theory and Practice, which takes students on a seven-day trip to learn the art of canoeing. After returning home, the students are asked to apply this new proficiency by designing and overseeing a one-day canoe trip with local high school students, demonstrating they not only accomplished the mastering of a technical skill, but are confident enough to transfer it to others.

This model of facilitating the transfer of knowledge from teacher to students to others is a common theme in Professor O'Connell's pedagogy, informing his Brock BaseCamp program and the Brock Outdoor Recreation and Environmental Action Living Learning Community initiative, both of which offer similar opportunities for students to impress upon others the theories, ideas and skills they originally received in Professor O'Connell's classroom.

This dedication to experiential education labels Professor O'Connell as a pioneer in the field, which is evident by the respect he commands on the subject both within his institution and far outside of it. His wealth of knowledge and years of involvement through academic journals, research and his own pedagogical practice have given him well-deserved recognition as one of the leading thinkers and practitioners of education that combines classroom theory with practical



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action – a model that today is seen as the next step in flexible, relevant and quality post-secondary learning.

For all his professional accomplishments as an educator, researcher and member of the Brock University community, the most influential – and arguably most moving – role he has played throughout his academic career has been that of a friend. His peers paint Professor O’Connell as an affable and thoughtful colleague, constantly seeking to support others in their own academic pursuits. Meanwhile, his students wax poetic about a man who not only instills in them a burning desire to learn, but who radiates warmth and compassion in academic and non-academic spaces.

Evidence of this abounds in Professor O’Connell’s numerous letters of support, but the most touching comments came from summer students at the Outdoor Education Program he helps facilitate in upstate New York. One student described him as “inviting and open” not only as a field guide in the Adirondacks, but even in times of personal struggle. Another remarked that Professor O’Connell is someone who they could talk to about anything.

Entering higher education is a transformative moment in one’s life, and at a time that can be turbulent and emotionally exhausting, the role of the teacher-as-friend is one that can usher students towards academic success, self-esteem and personal growth. Throughout his long and accomplished academic career, Professor O’Connell has taken up that role with grace and purpose, exhibiting the ways in which the great outdoors can become the great equalizer, where theory and practice overlap and crystalize to set the foundation for lifelong learning and self-discovery.

As a well-respected scholar, responsive educator, knowledgeable guide through the wilderness of academia and life, and deeply valued friend by students and faculty alike, it is an honour to present a 2014-2015 OCUFA Teaching Award to Professor Tim O’Connell.

Congratulations.