

2015-2016 OCUFA TEACHING AND ACADEMIC LIBRARIANSHIP AWARDS

CITATION FOR PROFESSOR DIANE HORTON



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“I can honestly say that Diane is the reason I am still studying Computer Science today.”

Those were the words that ended one student’s letter of support for Diane Horton, Associate Professor in the Department of Computer Science at the University of Toronto, to receive a 2016 OCUFA Teaching Award. That same student admitted that years ago, sitting in Diane’s introductory programming course, they never could have imagined where they’d end up today: pursuing a PhD in Computer Science at the University of California. The story was a testament to the life-changing power of dedicated and passionate teaching, and it certainly wasn’t the only one inside Diane’s nomination package.

Patient, encouraging, engaged, knowledgeable, considerate, supportive. These were the themes that tended to echo throughout the accolades of Diane’s teaching by students and peers, painting a vivid picture of a dedicated educator whose impact has been felt far beyond the classroom and long after the graduation ceremonies have finished.

A list of Diane’s teaching and service would be impressive enough, but a deeper investigation into her methods and guiding principles reveals just how transformative her pedagogical approach is not only to her students, but also to the instruction of computer science. The most important thing that can be said about Diane as a teacher can be found in her own words. “I believe our limited time in the classroom is precious,” she noted in her Statement of Teaching Philosophy, and it doesn’t take long to recognize this in every aspect of Diane’s professional and academic endeavours.



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Diane led the charge in overhauling the entire Computer Science curriculum. As colleague Paul Gries wrote, “this was a Herculean undertaking” that required a kind of patience and willingness to listen to others that seemed so unique to Diane. Thanks to her efforts, critical learning gaps in the curriculum were filled and Computer Science became a much more flexible, interdisciplinary and agile program that facilitated not only new ways of teaching and learning, but developed and offered joint programs never seen before, such as Bioinformatics and Computational Biology introduced in 2006.

If her dedication to excellent teaching at the macro-level displayed an enviable work ethic, then that same passion at the micro-level highlights her unbelievable creativity and empathy in the classroom. Ravin Balakrishnan, Chair of the Department of Computer Science, describes how Diane’s passion for teaching “the whole student” has led to the development of new co-curricular opportunities within the program and the implementation of innovative teaching techniques both inside and outside of the classroom. Diane championed an active learning approach within the program, in which students completed lecture preparation activities each week and received feedback in advance of class to ensure they arrived to lecture not as passive receptors of knowledge, but articulate and engaged learners with questions, thoughts, ideas and suggestions of their own. It is a student-centred approach to teaching and learning that is not only lacking in many programs similar to Computer Science, but in a large portion of academic programs. Diane’s dedication to forge a personal connection with her students radically rethinks the relationship between student and instructor and should be held up as a shining example of creative, empathic, involved and innovative teaching.

Whether it be making the understanding of binary code’s ones and zeroes an enjoyable classroom experience or fundamentally changing the very structure of what can be wrongly



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viewed as a rigid academic discipline, there is not a doubt in anyone's mind that Professor Diane Horton is truly deserving of an OCUFA Teaching Award.

In the opening of his nomination brief for Diane, Professor Balakrishnan admits that Diane's twenty-three years of outstanding undergraduate teaching initially started off as a temporary position, which only became permanent after Diane's outraged students wrote a letter to the Dean and Chair with 60 signatures demanding that she be given a more permanent position. After reviewing Diane's nomination package and reading the laurels of her students and peers, one is left with the feeling that they'd like to add their name to that letter too.