

February 14, 2007

Dear Members of the Thorud Leadership Selection Committee,

We are writing to nominate Don Wulff, Director of the UW Center for Instructional Development and Research (CIDR), for the Thorud Leadership Award. Don has been a leading advocate for teaching and learning at UW for well over two decades, and has been a highly valued mentor to numerous faculty, staff, and students during that time.

With the increasing attention to student learning in recent years, it can be easy to forget the days when it was assumed that teaching excellence was simply a matter of knowing one's field – if you knew it, you could teach it, or so it was widely thought. Don's scholarly work has given him great insight into the complexity of teaching well, and his leadership and communication skills have made him highly effective at translating insights from his research into strategies that instructors can readily apply and adapt in their classes. UW faculty and students alike have benefited from Don's work to help faculty develop more innovative, effective, and efficient ways of engaging students in learning.

As part of his broader commitment to the quality of teaching and learning at UW, Don has paid particular attention to preparing graduate students for their roles as instructors. He has played a central role in placing TA preparation on agendas throughout UW, and he has contributed substantially to university-wide initiatives, departmental programs, and development of individual faculty members' practices related to mentoring their graduate students. It would be difficult to estimate the number of current and former graduate students, many of whom have since become faculty members, who have benefited directly or indirectly from Don's persistent efforts to promote and enhance TA preparation throughout the university. It would be truly impossible to estimate the number of undergraduates whose experiences at UW have been profoundly influenced by the fact that their TAs were better prepared to help them learn.

Diversity is a third area in which Don was leading long before many recognized its importance in teaching and learning. Don's leadership has included providing faculty and TAs with practical strategies for letting their students' voices be heard, honoring diverse backgrounds and experiences in their classes, and adapting their teaching in response to the realization that students are not all the same. Through his participation in numerous campus committees and planning groups, he regularly makes sure that diverse perspectives are represented in decision-making, initiatives, and events. Perhaps more than anything, his well-placed, respectful-yet-probing questions consistently ensure that others thoroughly consider the complexity of issues being discussed, and then strive to take meaningful actions that will have genuine impact.

We are nominating Don for this award, however, not just because of what he has accomplished, but because of how he has accomplished it. He greatly values the richness and breadth that are added by bringing multiple perspectives and areas of expertise to the table, and he actively seeks out partnerships that benefit everyone involved. Don's actions to include others both contribute to the task at hand and honor the experiences and commitments brought by others – colleagues, faculty, students, or staff – when we see how he learns from our input and incorporates it into his understanding.

In his work with our staff, Don consistently leads by example: He unfailingly models treating people with dignity and respect, even while he poses challenging questions that require us to think differently or communicate more carefully. He freely delegates responsibility to others, deliberately mentoring his staff to develop new areas of expertise; and as he gives us increased responsibility, he also goes out of his way to make sure we receive increased recognition for the work we are doing. At the same time, he will not ask others to do things he would not be willing to take time for himself – it is not unusual to find him helping clean up after a staff meeting, or taking time to circulate a card for a staff member who is celebrating an honor or suffering a loss. Through this careful mentoring and leadership of CIDR staff, he has greatly multiplied his expertise and the effects of his efforts, making it possible to assist faculty and TAs in over 100 UW departments, programs, schools, and colleges annually.

Most of all, we are nominating Don for this award because his leadership is the kind that is often easily overlooked: One of the things he does best is bring out the best in other people, and then make sure that others see it in them, too. In the years we have worked with him, he has shown little interest in drawing attention to himself, his accomplishments, or the national and international recognition he has received for his work. However, once you know the work he has done, it is not difficult to find traces of Don's leadership in the accomplishments of countless others in the UW community. Please feel free to contact any of us at CIDR if you require additional information in support of this nomination.