The Pacific Alumni Association has awarded three longtime Pacific professors with the 2009 Faculty Mentor Award, which recognizes the significant impact faculty members have on the lives of students and alumni. This year’s recipients are Caroline Cox, chair of the history department, Qingwen Dong, chair of the communication department, and the Conservatory’s Eric Hammer, professor of music education and director of bands. The association recognized the recipients for their efforts at an awards luncheon in August held in their honor. It is the second year the association has handed out the award.

A Person to Look Up To and Lean On

Known for her captivating lectures and for being a tireless supporter of students, Professor and Chair of History Caroline Cox has worked endlessly on students’ behalf during her 11 years at Pacific. She also serves as a guiding light for students long after they leave the classroom. She has written countless letters of recommendation, put former students in touch with alumni who have gone through the same graduate programs they are considering, and personally called professors at other universities where former students were applying for graduate school.

The core of her mentoring comes from the close-knit relationships she has with her students. And those relationships develop from the very beginning. Each semester on the first day of class, Cox memorizes her students’ names. She says it is important to her to recognize that the students sitting in her classroom are individuals with their own unique stories and not just bright young faces in a crowd. It is something she learned from her mentor, UC Berkeley history professor Robert Middlekauff.

“It’s very easy in this environment to see the crowd and not see the individual in the crowd,” Cox says. “And he always saw the individual.”

Just as Middlekauff had a profound effect on her life and career, so, too, has Cox impacted the lives and careers of many of her students. One of those students, Alexandra Wagner ’05, nominated her for the Faculty Mentor Award. Now a third-year doctoral student studying American History at Brandeis University, Wagner says Cox advised her during the application process and contacted history professors at Brandeis on her behalf.

It was her close-knit relationship with Cox that prompted Wagner to choose a small, private, research institution for graduate school. Wagner says she wanted that same experience she had at Pacific, an experience she treasures to this day.

“She’s just so approachable, so welcoming… I just never had any hesitation going to see her,” Wagner says of Cox. “I still consider her a person to look up to and lean on.”

A Role Model for Students and Faculty

Over the years, Professor and Chair of Communication Qingwen Dong has reached out to numerous students through research and teaching. Dong says he strives to create valuable learning experiences that students can take with them beyond graduation. To Dong, it is not enough to have students simply memorize ideas, concepts and theories from textbooks. It is essential that they apply those ideas to real-life scenarios.

Since arriving at Pacific in 1995, Dong has spent countless hours researching, writing and traveling the world to present his work. Throughout the years he has made it a point to involve students in his research to provide them with invaluable experiential learning opportunities. He also encourages students to conduct their own
research and helps them get internships and jobs. Once they leave campus, he continues to mentor them.

“Being part of the Pacific community means being part of a faculty that teaches toward a lifelong learning experience for our students,” Dong says. “In order for them to really have the Pacific experience… we have to reach beyond the campus.”

Communication Professor Carol Ann Hackley, a recipient of the 2008 Faculty Mentor Award, and Tim Howard ’90, ’05, nominated Dong for the award. Hackley says Dong has mentored both students and professors, encouraging them to collaborate with students when conducting research and presenting papers at academic conferences.

Dong mentored Howard, now an assistant professor of public relations at CSU Sacramento. Dong has included Howard as a co-author for research papers and presented with him at conferences in Florida and The Netherlands. Hackley says the experience will help bolster Howard’s research record and put him in a better position to receive tenure. It is just one of many examples of Dong working selflessly for his students, she says.

“He just has a wonderful and easy way of guiding them and helping launch their careers,” Hackley says. “He’s a role model not only for his students but for his peers.”

The Quintessential Mentor

Ever since Music Education Professor and Director of Bands Eric Hammer ’73 started teaching at Pacific in 1993, he has worked diligently at tapping into the potential of Conservatory students, while also connecting them with alumni. He often brings alumni back to campus to be guest conductors, to perform with the Symphonic Wind Ensemble, or to join him and current students at his house for small gatherings designed for networking.

In the classroom, Hammer says he challenges his students to utilize music as a means to continue growing and maturing, exploring the world, and deepening their relationships with their communities. He says he aims to create an environment where students feel comfortable enough to blossom and reach their full potential.

“We have a saying in music, ‘the notes are all in there, you just have to let them out,’” Hammer says. “That’s how I am with students. It’s all in there and I just try to get it out.”

Known for his “lifelong mentoring,” Hammer organizes alumni-student band concerts and conducts the annual Alumni Pep Band. He recently organized the Pacific Symphonic Band, made up of alumni and outstanding musicians who have some connection to Pacific. He also conducts clinics at schools where alumni teach, invites Conservatory graduates to Pacific’s outreach concerts and arranges opportunities for alumni and students to perform together.

“I know of no one more dedicated to this school, its students and its alumni than Eric Hammer,” says Conservatory Voice Professor Lynelle Wiens, who nominated Hammer. “He is the quintessential mentor.”