Departmental News

In early 2013, Dr. Don Schreiber resigned as Department Chair, and Dr. Paul Pancellia (Physics) took over as an interim appointee. Then in mid-August 2013, Dr. Gary Blackmer was appointed chair, and he has seen the Department through development of a beta-year academic program review (β-APRP) of our graduate and undergraduate programs. It has been more than six years since our previous program review, so the current β-APRP process was not trivial. Campus wide, the beta review involved nine departments, and this review will be followed by overall University reviews next year. Other personnel changes include the retirement of stockroom manager, Mr. Tom Norton. Tom had been instrumental in moving our lab and chemical inventories into the New Chemistry Building in 2006-7 and had over nineteen years of service. Ms. Brianna Hyder, who joined the department in 2011 as lab coordinator, became stockroom manager last summer. In the late Fall 2013, Mr. Peter Stuurwold became the lab supervisor. Peter received his M.S. in 2011 with Dr. John Miller working on algal biofuels. Dr. Miller presented “Algal biofuels; Energy, Environment and Economy on September 11, 2013 at the Michigan State University Bio economy Institute in Holland, MI. Notably, Bruce Carpenter, Finance Specialist, received a “Make a Difference Award” certificate and monetary award.

Ph.D. student, Kevin Douglass (Venter) won the best student presentation award for his seminar at the Anachem Symposium in Livonia, MI in 2013.

Rebecca Monterusso (B.S. 2013) was chosen as 2013 Presidential Scholar.

Ph.D. student David Sellers (Schoffers) was awarded a NSF Graduate Fellowship in 2013.

Drs. Sherine Obare and Yirong Mo were awarded College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Achievement Awards in 2012.

Dr. Obare has also recently been recognized as one of the top 25 women professor in the state by Online Schools of Michigan. Her group has published four papers in the last year.

Dr. George Cooper (1982) was named 2013 Alumni Scholar. Dr. Cooper conducts research on organic compounds in meteorites at the NASA Ames Laboratory.

Dr. Hashem Akhavan-Tafti (M.S. 1988) was named 2012 Alumni Scholar. Dr. Akhavan-Tafti is V.P of Research for Beckman-Coulters Immunoassay and Molecular Diagnostics business group. He established the Dr. Nagler Scholarship in 2012.

Dr. Aruna Weerashinghe (Ph.D. 2011, Sinn) having completed a postdoctoral stint at Duke University is now a lecturer at Appalachia State University.

Dr. Zhenhua Chen completed his MSF-funded postdoctoral research in Dr. Yirong Mo’s group and returned to Xiamen University (China). During his post-doc he published papers in two ACS journals (Journal of Chemical Theory and Computation, and Journal of Physical Chemistry A).

Dr. Eric Gato, (Means, 2007) is now an Assistant Professor of Biochemistry at Georgia Southern University.

Our student enrollments remain strong; we have nearly 150 undergraduate majors and 47 graduate students. In the past five years, we’ve averaged ~24 B.S. graduates, ~5 M.S. degrees conferred, and 5 Ph.D. graduates.
The Department continues its efforts to raise funds in support of our students and research. The Chemistry Elemental Fund Student Endowment supported by sales of elements on the tile mural Periodic Table of elements in the foyer of the New Chemistry building has generated more than $80,000. The Fund supports grants, scholarships and emergency assistance to our grad students. The faculty are developing a Periodic Table surrounded by ads and discount coupons for local businesses. These will be distributed to-2,000 students each year to generate funds for student scholarships.

Dr. Steve Bertman linked WMU to 12 other institutions in a $4.3M project to improve our understanding of aerosol production in forested locations in the Southern Aerosol Research and Characterization (SEARCH) Network. EPA, NSF, NOAA, Southern Company and the Electric Power Research Institute contributed more than $20 Million in total research funding announced in June 2013. Other Faculty here have traveled to Washington, D.C. to discuss NSF funding for a new NMR Spectrometer which would be used to replace (or supplement) our low-field instrument. This and other instruments are vital to the physical, analytical, organic, inorganic, and biochemical research efforts of students and faculty.

2013 was a year tinged by sadness due to the death of people with whom we shared life. Dr. James Howell, analytical chemistry, who joined the Department in 1964 and retired in 2001, passed away in November. Seven emeriti and at least four alumni joined many current faculty staff and family to celebrate his life. Jim not only conducted research and teaching at WMU. For many years he served as a technical advisor to the Detroit area USDA laboratory. Ms. Dannette Shaw, who worked in the Institute of Water Science analytical labs in McCracken from 1990 through 1994 passed away in December from complications of ALS. Dannette was an avid hiker and outdoors person in addition to being an accomplished chemist. For the last seven years she was a Forensic Scientist with the New Mexico-DPS Northern Forensic Laboratory.

The Department has a number of initiatives to pursue in 2014 and beyond. Top on the agenda, is to take decided action on the beta-year APRP review results in so far as possible. Also Dr. David Huffman has been working hard to assemble Federal and local funding necessary to fund a Center for Advance Medical Research which would unite University units as well as other local entities(hospitals, WMU medical School, etc.)

We welcome word from you, our alumni friends, so please don’t hesitate to contact us with news, suggestions, or insights that you may have on the Department’s mission, goals and future developments.

Please accept our best wishes for you and your family in coming years.

Sincerely,

Dr. Michael Barcelona
Past Chair, Department of Chemistry
Western Michigan University