UNLV Theatre Professor Wins Regents’ Creative Activity Award

UNLV theatre professor Glenn Casale recently won the 2009 Nevada System of Higher Education Regents’ Award for Creative Activity.

This award recognizes significant accomplishments that bring recognition, as well as national and international stature, to the Nevada System of Higher Education.

The honoree receives a $5,000 stipend and a medal.

Casale, who leads the department’s graduate-level directing program, joined UNLV in 2003. He has directed a variety of UNLV plays, as well as several major New York and Los Angeles productions. He directed the 1999 Tony Award-nominated and Emmy Award-winning Peter Pan, starring Cathy Rigby. He also recently directed a new production of Dragapella, which was nominated for Drama Desk and Lucille Lortel awards for best production.

For Reprise he has directed The Threepenny Opera, starring Patrick Cassidy and Theodore Bikel; Anything Goes, starring Rachel York and Brent Barrett; and Fiorella! with Tony Danza. His first L.A. production was Wrestlers with George Clooney and Mark Harmon.

Graduate-Level Programs Receive Nod from U.S. News and World Report

The quality of two graduate-level programs – one in educational psychology and the other in law – has been recognized by U.S. News and World Report.

For the second consecutive year, the educational psychology program at UNLV was named among the top 25 specialty programs in the nation, according to an annual survey by U.S. News & World Report. Out of 241 schools with doctoral degrees in education that responded to the magazine’s survey, UNLV’s program ranked 21st, tying with two other universities. Rankings are based on criteria such as research activity, doctoral students’ GRE scores, and faculty awards.

“The effectiveness of homework, how to teach climate change, and online test-taking versus traditional pencil and paper exams are just a few examples of research areas faculty and graduate students are investigating,” says Paul Jones, chair of the educational psychology department. “This ranking is an indication of our research mission and our commitment to produce highly qualified scholars and clinical practitioners locally and nationally.”

Educational psychology is a long-standing program at UNLV and offers master’s and doctoral degrees as well as a specialist degree in school psychology. Students are prepared for professional careers as university teachers, researchers, and mental health care providers in the school and community.

U.S. News & World Report also recognized the quality of the William S. Boyd School of Law at UNLV. The school moved up 13 spots to 75th – its highest rank ever. The move constitutes a 25-place improvement in the past two years for the law school, which was established just 11 years ago.

“The law school – with new, innovative programs and top faculty to lead them – is continuing the momentum that began with a solid foundation. The U.S. News rankings of law schools are but one indication of our continued success at building a world-class faculty and cutting-edge program of legal education,” says John V. White, dean of the law school. “The law school’s achievements in recent years are many, and, irrespective of recognition of outside rankings, we are proud of our work to provide students with an excellent legal education that emphasizes academic rigor, professionalism, skilled representation, and community service.”

The Boyd School of Law received special acknowledgement from U.S. News for several of its programs, including its Lawyering Process Program, which maintained its ranking as the third best program of its kind, and the Saltman Center for Conflict Resolution, which was ranked the nation’s ninth best dispute resolution program.
UNLV Study Addresses Physical Stability of Parkinson’s Disease Sufferers

A new study by UNLV researchers found that those living with Parkinson’s disease may improve their stability and reduce the likelihood of falling if they change the focus of their attention during movement.

The study, which appears in the February 2009 issue of the scholarly journal Physical Therapy, found that postural stability improved significantly among a sample group of patients with Parkinson’s disease when they adopted an external rather than internal focus of attention.

An estimated one million Americans suffer from Parkinson’s disease, and two thirds of them reported falling within the last year.

In the study, a research team led by UNLV kinesiology professor Gabriele Wulf tested three groups of older adults with Parkinson’s disease by asking them to balance on an unstable surface (an inflated rubber disk).

One group was instructed to look straight ahead and focus on reducing movement in their feet (representing an internal focus); a second group was asked to look straight head but to focus on the disk (representing an external focus). A control group was not given attentional focus instructions.

The external focus exercise resulted in significantly greater postural stability than both the internal and control conditions.

"For those with a history of falls, it’s much more effective to focus attention on the effects that their movements have on the environment rather than to focus on the internal movements themselves," Wulf says. "These findings have the potential to improve efforts of caregivers and clinicians providing rehabilitation guidance to Parkinson’s patients," she says. "They may also give the patients more control over their lives by providing them with a strategy to manage their posture and movement activities more safely and effectively."

In patients with Parkinson’s disease, degeneration occurs in the basal ganglia, the part of the brain that controls motor function and learning. Wulf and her team contend that instructions directing attention to the effect, or outcome, of the movement support a more automatic form of motor control, consistent with that seen from expert performers.

UNLV Hosts National Clean Energy Summit

For a second year in a row, UNLV recently co-hosted the National Clean Energy Summit, at which government and industry leaders, scientists, policy experts, and citizens gathered to discuss renewable energy issues facing the U.S. and the world.

The day-long summit, which was co-sponsored by U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and the Center for American Progress Action Fund, included presentations by national leaders from a variety of sectors seeking to advance clean energy initiatives.

Speakers included former President Bill Clinton, former Vice President Al Gore, energy executive T. Boone Pickens, U.S. Secretary of Energy Steven Chu, and others.

Following this year’s summit, UNLV held its third annual Renewable Energy Symposium on campus as well. Presented by UNLV’s Harry Reid Center for Environmental Studies and the Division of Research and Graduate Studies, this symposium focused on renewable energy technologies deployable in Nevada, the Southwest, and across the nation.

Presenters discussed research related to sustainability and renewable energy; concentrated solar-thermal and solar photovoltaic designs; biofuels and bio-energy; fuel cell and hydrogen storage technologies; enhanced geothermal systems; new building technologies; and more.

Renewable energy is one of several sustainability-oriented areas of research expertise at UNLV.

“For example, beginning ice skaters focus all of their attention inward on their movements and adopt a stiff posture just to maintain balance," Wulf notes. "For experts, the act of skating comes naturally, and they’re able to focus attention on the environment around them. "Similarly in rehabilitation, we’ve found that directing attention externally..."
Earthquake Reactions

A 3-D Model Depicts Area's Earthquake Reactions

UNLV researchers have completed the most detailed three-dimensional model to date showing how shallow sediments of the Las Vegas valley will respond during an earthquake.

The model can be used to design safer buildings and highway bridges and is the latest step toward the team’s development of a comprehensive seismic hazard map for Las Vegas.

Nevada ranks third in the nation for risk of large-magnitude earthquakes. In Southern Nevada, active faults capable of producing an earthquake of magnitude 6.0 or greater have been identified.

Howard R. Hughes College of Engineering professor Barbara Luke and an interdisciplinary team of UNLV faculty and students performed site surveys throughout the Las Vegas valley over the last two years to measure profiles of shear-wave velocity.

Shear-wave velocity is a measure of the speed at which certain stresses move through the various sediments that make up the valley floor.

“ar the shear-wave velocity model is important because it will tell us how the different parts of the valley would react to an earthquake,” Luke says. “These measurements translate into guidance on structural design requirements in the community.”

By combining results of direct field testing with analysis of more than 160 seismic site classifications filed by others with local government agencies, the UNLV research team compiled a database of 230 shear-wave velocity measurements. Using the database and other sources of information, the team created the shear-wave velocity model for the valley to depths of hundreds of feet.

The final product for the research team, a seismic hazard map, will be used by local officials in disaster relief planning, land use planning, and assessment of existing infrastructure in the event of an earthquake.

Luke and colleagues Aly Said, also a UNLV engineering professor, and Wanda Taylor, interim dean of the College of Sciences and a geoscience professor, were awarded a multi-year grant from the U.S. Department of Energy in part to determine which areas of the basin would be most susceptible should a major earthquake occur.


First-Ever Study of Health Status of Nevada Kindergartners Completed

A team of UNLV researchers recently conducted a statewide study resulting in the first-ever comprehensive health status report on children entering kindergarten in Nevada.

The Nevada Kindergarten Health Survey was conducted by UNLV’s Nevada Institute for Children’s Research and Policy (NICRP) in partnership with the Southern Nevada Health District, the Nevada State Health Division, and the Clark County School District.

The survey was administered by 15 of the state’s 17 school districts in the fall of 2008. Its goal was to provide baseline data on the overall health status of children entering school.

“With this new information we can begin to identify health issues that may ultimately affect the well-being of children, in and out of school, and implement strategies to make improvements,” says Denise Tanata Ashby, executive director of the NICRP.

The 22-question survey gathered information on a variety of variables, including insurance status, access to health care, immunizations, weight, and health behavior.

The survey was distributed to parents of the estimated 30,744 entering kindergartners. More than 11,000 surveys were collected. Among the findings:

• 36 percent of kindergartners were either overweight or at-risk of being overweight.
• 18 percent had no health insurance coverage.
• 25 percent indicated using emergency rooms or urgent care facilities for non-life threatening illnesses in the past 12 months.

The researchers hope the study’s data will be used to identify and remediate health disparities and may ultimately lead to increased academic success among Nevada’s students.

“Studies have shown that there are definite links between the health status of a child and the child’s academic success,” Tanata Ashby says. “If we can track the trends that may be affecting the health status of children, we can target parent outreach and resources and ultimately increase both the well-being and academic success of children in our state.”

The full report is available online at http://nic.unlv.edu.