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Julie S. Bettinger

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Spotlight on Faculty

Behind the L-shaped desk where oceanography professor Melvin E. Stern spends much of his time, hangs a bulletin board that easily could be home to a lot of technical papers.

Instead, the board is adorned with photographs-snapshots of former students for whom Stern served as major professor. The board has become something of a motivational device for FSU oceanography students: Devote enough time and attention to your studies, demonstrate an ability to put ideas together and arrive at credible theories, and your photo just might make it to the Stern bulletin board.

Studying under a man of Stern's academic stature is a coveted prize for serious students, and has been for many years wherever he's taught. Just this spring, Stern's own name was added to a worldwide bulletin board of sorts, a rare accolade that his friends and colleagues agree is richly deserved.

Stern was elected to the National Academy of Sciences, the academic equivalent of an athlete being voted to the Hall of Fame or winning the Masters, says Dr. Wilton "Tony" Sturges, an FSU oceanographer and Stern's colleague. For 1998, Stern is the only scientist in Florida to win Academy membership.

"If there's only one scientist in the entire state of Florida who got elected (this year), considering people at FSU, in Gainesville and at the University of Miami," Sturges says, "then Stern is at the top (of his field)."

Election to membership in the NAS is considered one of the highest honors that can be bestowed upon a U.S. scientist or engineer. With this award, Stern joins the ranks of only six other Florida State University researchers still serving on the faculty.

A native of New York City, Stern received his Masters degree in physics from the Illinois Institute of Technology and his doctorate in meteorology from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

He received high acclaim in 1995 when he became the first recipient of the Henry Stommel Medal from the American Meteorological Society, the highest honor the society bestows.

Since leaving the faculty of Rhode Island University to join Florida State University in 1987, Stern has been responsible for attracting nearly \$1.4 million in grant money to the department. Aside from his research at Florida State, another esteemed role Stern plays is director of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute summer program in Geophysical Fluid Dynamics at Cape Cod.

Stern is a theoretician in physical oceanography. He's credited with developing the first theories on how waters of different characteristics mix in the open ocean, such as how heavier, cold water on the ocean bottom mixes with lighter, warmer water above. Such work has profound implications not only for global climate but in meteorology and even industry as well.

A man of solitude, who often can be seen riding his bicycle on the St. Marks trail, or brushing up on Shakespeare, Stern is soft-spoken. Unassuming about his research, he talks of it as if it were a privilege. He downplays the recent recognition, saying, "the day-to-day work and trying to have an influence on the field-that's a greater ambition."

Of Stern's contributions to the department and the international study of oceanography, his colleagues say that through his office runs a steady stream of people from oceanography and other departments, who come just to talk or run ideas past him.

Often, people who make practical discoveries in their applied fields turn to Stern to work out the theory associated with them using fundamentals of physics. "Melvin helps us understand when it works and why it works and when it won't work," says Sturges.

Having a man of Stern's ability and bountiful knowledge is invaluable, he adds. "In our business, ideas are cheap-99 percent of them don't turn out to be worth much." He says Stern has personally saved him untold amounts of research time pursuing an idea that isn't worthy.

"We'll talk about my 'good' idea and he'll (shoot it down and) save me five years (of study) in 15 minutes."

Though he clearly respects his colleague's contributions, Sturges says what's equally important is that Stern is "a decent human being and a kind and generous spirit.

"Most of us just dearly love the guy."

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P.O. Box 13735 / Tallahassee, FL 32317 / 850.933.1304 / julie@juliebettinger.com

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