

Christine Malecki, Jon Miller named 2014 Presidential Engagement Professors

Teachers and administrators at K-12 schools across the northern Illinois region are singing the praises of this year's NIU Presidential Engagement Professors.

Psychology Professor Christine Malecki and Biology Professor Jon Miller both have long histories of involvement with external school partners: Malecki works with school psychologists on developing systems for assessment and intervention in students' academic, social, and emotional functioning, while Miller works with teachers to improve middle- and high-school students' performance in science and math.

Both are committed to NIU's definition of engagement as collaboration between the university and its larger communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.

Malecki and Miller will be honored at a ceremony on Thursday, April 24 at 3 p.m. in the Altgeld Auditorium. The Presidential Engagement Professorship award is accompanied by a \$5,000 stipend to support their engagement activities, renewable annually during each year of a four-year award period. PEP professors also receive a specially-minted medallion to be worn with their academic regalia.

Christine Malecki

Christine Malecki began her career as a school psychologist. After finishing her doctorate at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, Malecki came to NIU to teach future school psychologists and research effective methods of assessment and intervention. Over the course of fifteen years, Malecki and her colleague Michelle Demaray have garnered more than \$1.3 million in grants primarily focused on evaluating the effectiveness of after-school programs for at-risk children.

Along the way, Malecki's work brought her into contact with NIU's Center for P-20 Engagement. She enthusiastically joined in a number of Center initiatives, including the DeKalb High School Partnership, for which she helped support a new tutoring program involving NIU students. She also worked with DHS principals to develop a common syllabus format that is still in use at that school and has been integrated into Malecki's own classes at Northern. In addition, Malecki played a critical role in DeKalb's successful adoption of a new process called Response to Intervention, or RTI.

For more than a decade, Malecki has been supervising NIU students' externship experiences in area schools, helping aspiring school psychologists to hone their skills in behavior consultation, individual and group assessment and intervention, and systems change facilitation. Over the past five years, Malecki has recruited 32 school-funded, paid externships for NIU students, now co-supervised with a colleague. She points to this initiative as an example of the "mutual benefits" that come from engagement efforts.

"Supervising this practical work has continued to keep my own experiences and skills fresh, which in turn informs and improves my teaching and training of students," Malecki said. "I am a better teacher, trainer and researcher because of this work."

Based on the success of her work in DeKalb, Malecki was recruited to join in another partnership with the St. Charles school district.

“Dr. Malecki worked closely with us to create a system that changed from a deficit model to a model that was proactive in providing supports to student learning,” said Assistant Superintendent Becky McCabe. “This partnership was more than just collegial – it was visionary. She brought the dialogue, the insights, and the practical applications to deeper understanding and moving the organization to a new place that was better for students,” McCabe added.

Genuine concern for students – both her own at NIU and those K-12 students in districts where she consults – was a common theme in letters of support for Malecki’s PEP candidacy.

“Dr. Malecki is a selfless, devoted professional who genuinely cares for her students and the advancement of all children in education,” wrote Ross Bubolz, principal of St. Mary’s Catholic School in Sycamore.

“She has graciously and ambitiously assisted our school in achieving many of our goals. Her presence has allowed St. Mary’s to grow and advance as an example of what a true community and university partnership is capable of achieving. Many young lives will continue to be greatly impacted by her actions for generations to come.”

Jon Miller

Jon Miller has a long history of working with pre-service and in-service science teachers. Miller taught high school biology, human anatomy and physiology, and chemistry for nearly 25 years before coming to NIU. During his tenure as a high school science teacher, he mentored student teachers and participated in the development and implementation of workshops for teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels.

After completing a master’s degree in both education and science and a doctorate at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, he made a career transition by joining the faculty at NIU, serving as the Teacher Licensure Director for Biology.

Miller, who was recently named the interim director of NIU’s new Center for Secondary Science and Mathematics Education, is one of the driving forces behind a movement that keeps NIU among the top producers of new teachers in the math and science disciplines. Engagement has characterized Miller’s career for many years, as he works with colleagues, students, teachers and administrators to identify new ways to inspire excitement in the teaching and learning of science. In addition to teaching courses related to science teacher education, he works with school districts on curriculum reform and implementation of the Next Generation science standards and Common Core state standards.

Beginning in 2006, Miller reached out to school districts across the region to design a professional development program for science teachers. Armed with a \$1 million Illinois Math and Science Partnership grant, Miller and his colleagues created a program that gave 6th – 12th grade biology and natural science teachers the opportunity to improve their content knowledge and teaching skills while earning an advanced degree. Thirty-one teachers from 13 different school districts enrolled in the program, which featured late-afternoon, early evening and online classes, as well as summer sessions.

As the teachers became more confident about their grasp of scientific content and ability to convey concepts to their students, the children began to perform better on standardized tests. By the

second year of the program, 90 percent of the 7th and 8th-grade students whose teachers were in the program met or exceeded state standards in math and science.

“I felt that the program was making an immediate impact on how I was teaching,” said Deborah Perryman, a teacher at Elgin High School. “Dr. Miller helped me recognize that I had leadership potential in this field, and that perspective injected new energy into my teaching and my life.”

“Dr. Miller also works to improve the body of laboratory activities that are available to science teachers by writing and testing new experiments to demonstrate scientific principles,” wrote former student Jenna McAdoo. “Through engineering new ways to teach current material, he helps keep science exciting for students and teachers alike.”

Miller’s mantra – “You can’t teach what you don’t know” – drives him to continually improve professional development opportunities for K-12 teachers.

“Jon’s work involves a very deep level of engagement with communities, school districts, and teachers,” said NIU Biology Chair Barrie Bode. “Not only has NIU’s reputation been enhanced through his efforts, but the fruits of that labor are and will be students more fluent in science as they enter our classrooms in the future. In physiology, we call that a feed-forward cycle.”



Christine Malecki



Jon Miller