

# James Cutsinger: Michael J. Mungo Distinguished Professor of the Year

By Mardi McCabe



**James Cutsinger** has received the Michael J. Mungo Undergraduate Teaching Award a number of times in his teaching career. But in 2011 he was named the Michael J. Mungo Distinguished Professor of the Year, USC's most prestigious award.

This award is given annually to an outstanding teacher for excellence in teaching in undergraduate courses. A selection committee composed of undergraduates and former winners of the award evaluates the nominations and determines the list of finalists. Members of the selection committee visit the finalists' classes, interview the finalists and the finalists' colleagues, and poll the students in the finalists' classes.

Dr. Cutsinger was joined by family, students, and colleagues to receive the award at the faculty awards ceremony, April 27, 2011 in the Program Room of the Hollings Library on the Columbia campus.

As the Michael J. Mungo Distinguished Professor of the Year, Dr. Cutsinger was invited to give the Convocation address to incoming students in August 2011. This spring the Center for Teaching Excellence asked him to be the speaker at a Power Lunch for teaching faculty, where he will lead an interactive lecture on "The Socratic Method and Critical Thinking."

## Excerpts From Talk at Award Ceremony

You have to admit: There's something a little ridiculous about getting an award just for enjoying yourself, but that's precisely the situation when someone loves his profession as much as I do. I'm sure the other honorees in the room understand what I'm saying. . . .

It's impossible for me to speak on an occasion like this without mentioning the greatest of my own undergraduate mentors, a classicist by the name of John M. Crossett. As many of my students know, whenever the subject of good teaching arises, I'm quick to pay homage to Crossett. . . .

I'm no Crossett, let alone a Socrates, but I do try to follow their examples by approaching my own classes Socratically. If any of you have ever tried your hand at this pedagogy, you know perfectly well that success, if and when it comes, is due just as much to the students as it is to the professor. Dialectic is an intellectual dance, after all, and it takes two—or I should say *at least* two—to tango. With that fact in mind, I'm obliged, and more than obliged I'm delighted, to be able to express my heartfelt thanks to the young people who have been showing up in my classes over the last three decades, several of whom are with us this afternoon. Thank you very much for your friendship and encouragement, but above all for your insights and your passion for truth.

## Excerpts From Talk at Convocation

*emollit mores nec sinit esse feros*

As you've no doubt guessed, these words are the University's motto, and they can be rendered into English in a variety of ways: "It refines the manners and corrects their harshness." "It improves our character and keeps us from cruelty." Or (my personal favorite): "It softens the heart and curbs the wild desires." I realize the motto on its own, at least in these translations, may not sound too inspiring. Someone has quipped that a lobotomy might also improve your character and keep you from cruelty! While it's difficult not to smile at such satire, the images on the seal are proof something rather different is at stake.

What we see are two human figures: Wisdom, represented by the goddess Minerva on the right, and Liberty, the figure on the left. And they're holding hands, indicating some sort of union between them. Meanwhile Liberty's other hand is raised toward the sky, and there's an eagle soaring overhead. Together these are indisputable clues that the liberating education here depicted is meant to lift us above, not lower us beneath, our previous capacities, assumptions, and expectations. In light of this symbolism, a less literal but more telling paraphrase of the motto might be: "It gives us the inward freedom and strength not to be distracted or discouraged by the inevitable struggles and challenges of life"; or perhaps: "It focuses our otherwise volatile and scattered thoughts, giving us wings to rise above ourselves, and helping us realize the full potential of the human mind and heart". This, in short, is the promise of a Carolina education. . . .

I realize we often talk about "receiving" an education, but that's actually a very misleading expression. On the contrary, a good education is something you must reach out and grasp, go out and confront, and seize for yourselves