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Liberal Arts' Christa Slaton is the 2007 recipient of the Auburn University Award for Excellence in Faculty Outreach

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AUBURN -With an international reputation for promoting engaged citizenry and democratic systems, Christa Slaton embodies the concept of outreach scholarship. Slaton, professor of Political Science and associate dean in the College of Liberal Arts, is the recipient of the 2007 Auburn University Award for Excellence in Faculty Outreach.

In announcing the award, Assistant Vice President for University Outreach Royrickers Cook said, "Dr. Slaton's work is the epitome of what it is to be engaged in outreach as a faculty member. Her commitment to sharing her academic expertise to all residents of this state should serve as a model for all of us who work at this great land grant institution." The award recognizes Slaton's extensive record of outreach scholarship, in particular her ongoing work with the national Election Center training program, and her groundbreaking civic renewal work in Uniontown, Ala.



"My outreach work has focused throughout my career on creating partnerships among the university faculty and students, citizens, and government officials to strengthen democracy in the United States," says Slaton. "Whether it's developing deliberative public opinion polling, teaching conflict resolution skills, creating civic-minded community groups, or training election and voter registration officials, the common theme is sharing knowledge and skills that can create a more engaged citizenry who can act effectively in our representative democratic system."

Slaton's involvement in outreach began long before her arrival at Auburn. While at the University of Hawaii, Slaton co-designed a method of deliberative public opinion polling and helped establish the first neighborhood justice center in Hawaii. Slaton earned her Ph.D. in political science from the University of Hawaii in 1990 and taught at Georgia Southern before arriving at Auburn in 1993. Since then, she has moved upward in the academic ranks, earning the title of professor in 2001, and served in various administrative roles including director of the Master in Public Administration Program and director of the Elections Administration Program.

For Slaton, outreach goes hand-in-hand with her other scholarly interests. "It is difficult to separate my outreach from my teaching and my research; the three have always been intertwined," says Slaton. "For instance, the mediation course I teach to advanced undergraduates and graduate students was designed after I traveled across the United States with AU Alumni Professor Ted Becker researching mediation centers."

That experience also led Slaton to help establish the first university-based community mediation center in the country. Slaton and Becker joined international mediation organizations and were hired by governments in Alabama, Hawaii, and the Philippines to train community mediators. "Based on our research and experience we wrote a mediation manual and designed a wide variety of simulations that came directly from our field experience," said Slaton.

As her career at Auburn progressed, Slaton utilized her experience in polling and mediation to address community issues in impoverished rural Alabama. With funding from the Kettering Foundation, Slaton launched a five-year project in Uniontown, a west Alabama community noted for its racial tension,

distrust between citizens and government, unemployment, illiteracy, substance abuse, and broken families. Tackling these thorny issues through countless community dialogs and planning sessions, Slaton guided citizen leaders to establish a diverse civic organization, Uniontown Cares, as a vehicle to promote renewal in the town. "The ability to build consensus and facilitate positive change in a community divided by racial tension is extremely difficult, and it requires a person who really cares and possesses a special skill-set," said Cook. "Christa is to be applauded for her efforts in Uniontown." Slaton's efforts set the stage for many subsequent citizen-led projects such as town beautification initiatives, formation of support groups such as AA, and the opening of a new public library. The town now enjoys a civic Web site and community newsletter.

"It is immensely enriching to take the knowledge generated through academic research and see it applied effectively in communities," says Slaton, who has also encouraged Auburn graduate students to undertake their own outreach projects in the community.

"In my democratic leadership course in the Masters in Public Administration Program, students have frequently chosen outreach activities for class projects. They find working directly with citizens and assessing their successes and failures to be a valuable means to place theory into practice."

One of Slaton's most far reaching outreach initiatives is a national training and certification program for election and voter registration officials. Slaton collaborated with several AU political science professors to develop more than a dozen certification and re-certification courses for the program, a partnership between Auburn and the Election Center, a non-profit education organization based in Houston, Texas. She was also instrumental in developing the center's national code of ethics for election officials. Slaton has administered the program since 2003.

"Our goal is to help professionalize the field of elections and voter registration," says Slaton. "We provide the elections officials a way to understand, evaluate, and improve the administration of elections." The award-winning certificate program is the only national certification program in the country for election officials. Nearly 600 officials throughout the United States are graduates of the Election Center program, but the primary beneficiary is the public. "We gear all the workshops toward improving the administration of elections so that citizens are the primary recipients of more effective, knowledgeable, and efficient administrators," Slaton said.

Here again, Slaton has incorporated her outreach experiences into her academic activities at Auburn. She has been instrumental in the establishment of new undergraduate courses and a graduate concentration in election administration in the Masters of Public Administration program beginning this fall.

College of Liberal Arts Dean Anna Gramberg says she is lucky to have a leader as strong as Slaton as part of her administrative team. "I consider Professor Slaton the ideal colleague: she is always willing to assume leadership in fulfilling the mission of the university, is an excellent teacher, and a brilliant scholar." Gramberg recently appointed Slaton associate dean for Education Affairs and chair of the college's Civic Engagement Initiative Task Force. "The entire leadership of the CLA is looking forward to working with Christa on our college outreach mission," says Gramberg.

Slaton views outreach as a team effort that involves many faculty, staff, and students working together to fulfill the university's mission to extend knowledge beyond the classroom. "Faculty at Auburn University have an impressive commitment to outreach. In every college across the campus, there are faculty distinguishing themselves in designing better systems, processes, and means to improve the quality of life in Alabama and beyond."

And while Slaton's outreach work has had an immense impact at Auburn, in Alabama, nationally, and internationally, she keeps it all in the perspective of teamwork. "All of my outreach activities at Auburn have been collaborative and have allowed me to discover the immense talent and dedication to excellence on this campus," says Slaton. "For me, this award does not represent the accomplishments of a single individual, but the commitment of many individuals at Auburn who care about the greater public good."

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