

Russell Skowronek brings the excitement of discovery to students and community

Contact: [Gail Fagan, Public Affairs Representative](#) (956) 665 7995

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It was in his first stint as an educator teaching a class on human evolution, that Russell Skowronek, now professor of history and anthropology at The University of Texas-Pan American, set a goal to not be one of those professors who, for students, would be as interesting as "watching paint dry."

Recalling the advice of his mother, also an educator, who suggested teachers had to be a bit of a "ham" to interest their students, Skowronek brings his passion for research and lifelong discovery into the classroom to inspire students through engaged learning.

"If you bring that passion, the students will follow you," he says of the teacher-scholar model of education he advocates. "I learned that those who effectively used maps, slides, music and brought discussions to life with anecdotes and examples would enchant a classroom. In addition, I learned that education does not solely take place within a classroom. A great teacher understands that learning takes place in many arenas."

His expertise in teaching recently garnered Skowronek one of seven 2014 University of Texas System Regents' Outstanding Teaching Awards presented to UTPA faculty members. The recognition includes a monetary reward of \$25,000, which is among the largest incentives in the nation for exceptional faculty performance.

Bringing education to life through research

As a scholar of the Spanish colonial world, Skowronek's research has taken him from Madrid to Manila and from Labrador to Lima in the field, underwater and in archives and libraries. He has published 10 books and monographs and dozens of articles, book chapters and reports. He is a renowned expert on the archaeology of piracy, co-authoring or editing two books on his research in that field. As a research affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, Skowronek just completed a 15-year project, which included the engagement of undergraduate students, on Spanish colonial pottery that was published this year. His next book on piracy, "Pieces of Eight, More Archaeology of Piracy," will be published in Summer 2015.

Skowronek earned bachelor's degrees in anthropology and political science from the University of Illinois, master's degrees from Florida State University in anthropology and history/historical administration and another master's and a Ph.D. in anthropology from Michigan State University. Prior to his arrival at UTPA in 2009, he was a faculty member at Santa Clara University, where he received two of that university's coveted faculty recognitions - the Brutocao Award for Teaching Innovation and the Joseph Bayma S.J. Scholarship Award.

"I have embraced the local place-based STEAM field approach for my teaching and research. In an era when STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields grab the headlines ... STEAM (with the 'A' for arts and humanities) with its emphasis on place-based applications of the STEM fields provides historical and cultural context," he said. "My research bridges the spectrum from humanities to science and uses the skill sets of both to illuminate the human condition within the context of local conditions - both social and natural - through time."

Connecting communities to their history

At UT Pan American, this approach is evident in the Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools (CHAPS), a project that Skowronek initiated and now directs, that combines locally-focused research, community engagement and K-17 education. Through its class "Discovering the Rio Grande Valley" - the University's first interdisciplinary studies course - students work as teams to conduct field research in archaeology, biology, geology, history and oral history and critically evaluate their findings. So far, their research, guided by Skowronek and CHAPS multi-discipline faculty, has resulted in three books on the history of three Rio Grande Valley families and their land.

Skowronek's students have helped the National Park Service survey a Mexican War Battlefield, sifted through tons of dirt to assist the Edinburg police department in a crime scene investigation and talked to hundreds of school children about the history in their own backyard during HESTEC and the annual International Archaeology Fair.

"Identifying and providing and participating with students in a variety of discipline-related interactions builds relations which will last a lifetime," Skowronek said. "Energy spent on today's students can pay off when they become tomorrow's colleagues."

Engaging others in lifelong learning

For 2013 graduate Lupe A. Flores, who earned his bachelor's degree in anthropology, it was in the "Discovering the Rio Grande Valley" class that he said his growth as a professional and as an anthropology scholar reached a peak.

"Skowronek's never-ending motivation and guidance resulted in our group's first-ever published research manuscript. This, to me is what made all those long hours of studying, data collecting (interviews, transcriptions, archive visits, literature reviews) and writing worthwhile: the fact that he was able to open doors to an accomplishment rarely experienced by undergraduates (even graduates) while attaining their education," said Flores, who also wrote in his award recommendation letter about Skowronek's help during challenging times he

has as a student. "Skowronek never gave up on me: he recognized my potential even in dark times and helped me through every step of the way."

His student Jenarae Alaniz, a 2014 graduate in anthropology, called the nature of his classes unique and "taking each student on a wonderful journey through history."

"By simply reading the title of his class, such as "Pirates, Shipwrecks and the Sea" or "Chiefdoms and Conquistadors," one is intrigued to learn the topic that not many, if any other professor on campus can teach," she said. "Personally, he inspired me to learn about my own history and conduct my own research into my family tree. His classes are demanding but allow the student to look at the world differently."

Miguel Gutierrez Jr., a 2014 graduate in anthropology who is now pursuing a graduate degree in archaeology at a university in England, praised Skowronek's accessibility to and mentorship of students and claimed never experiencing one dull moment in any of the five classes he took from Skowronek. He recalled in his letter recommending Skowronek for the Regents' award that while students sifted in dirt for artifacts, Skowronek didn't sit back on the sidelines and just give instructions.

"He taught with his hands as well as with his mouth. Dr. Skowronek stressed that, in an archeological excavation, everybody involved was a student. He was just as likely to learn something new as anybody else," Gutierrez stated. "His benevolent help toward his students has helped them in ways that go beyond earning an "A" in class."

However, Skowronek's students go beyond those at UT Pan American. Through grants and foundation support, the rich but unexplored history and culture of the area has been brought to K-12 students also and their teachers in the form of workshops, classroom presentations in Valley schools and the development and distribution of children's activities books on local history. CHAPS' latest community-based effort is the development of a virtual Rio Grande Valley Civil War Trail consisting of a trail map, podcasts and a website that will be completed early next year.

"My idea about teaching is that I know that I am paid to teach college and graduate and undergraduate students, but if I think about what the mission of this University is and especially CHAPS, I am also helping to teach K through 12 and K through lifetime to the community," Skowronek said.

See [The University of Texas System's Regents' Outstanding Teaching Awards website](#) to view all 57 faculty members from the UT System's nine academic institutions selected to receive this year's award. Learn more about prior UTPA winners of the Regents' Outstanding Teaching Awards at the [Office of Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs website](#).