Every academic year is dotted with banquets of one sort or another, several featuring the bestowing of “outstanding alumni” awards by a particular college, followed by the honorees’ gracious responses thanking those who contributed to their success. Almost always, topping the appreciation garnered us for the books outside the classroom.

Those who contributed to their success.

The Faculty Mentoring Program enlist from 18 to 24 faculty volunteers to shepherd a small group of freshmen through their first semester. Participation is voluntary for the students, too, who register during summer pre-enrollment; group assignment is random, although a few professors have particular areas of interest. Kelly Damphousse, for instance, has declared for out-of-staters, Texans, criminology and sociology majors, in that order. R.C. Davis-Undiano uses his heritage to mentor Latino students; Kelvin Droegemeier and Fred Carr have special insight to offer meteorology students. After an initial group meeting, the mentoring is freewheeling and individualized—monthly tea in the prof’s office, eating out or at home, hiking—even a scorpion hunt for those so inclined.

One department in particular seems to have made involvement with undergraduates an integral part of its daily operation. When Ryan Doezema became chair of the Department of Physics 15 years ago, he instituted afternoon tea, daily from 3:30-4 p.m., originally in the entrance hall of Nielsen Hall, but now in the spiffy new atrium in the renovated building’s new addition. Faculty, staff and students sign up at a small fee for cookies and tea and informal conversation. On Thursdays the cookies get fancier at an after-gathering for the weekly colloquium in which undergraduates assemble with faculty, staff and graduate students to hear a member of the department discuss his or her research, followed by a lively Q&A.

Each fall the Doezemas invite the whole department—faculty, staff and students—to their home for a picnic, and in the spring the Society of Physics Students (SPS) reciprocates with a similar outing. Every Wednesday during the summer session, Professor Eric Abraham made use of the unoccupied area next to his home to stage Ultimate Frisbee competitions for undergraduates on campus to participate in a physics research program.

Abraham’s fellow faculty member, Lloyd Bumm, a collector of old 16 mm movies—the videotape of yesteryear—stages reel-to-reel showings of his favorites for SPS members in the Nielsen auditorium. He dub the events Fortnightly Fizzix Flicks.

For decades, Stewart Ryan has entertained students as his alter ego, the madcap, lab-coated, fright-wigged Dr. Indestructo, in physics-is-fun performances that have made him a legend. In another expression of his concern for their welfare, he organized his colleagues to designate their contributions to the Campus Campaign for an undergraduate physics scholarship.

The operative word in all these faculty endeavors to bring undergraduates into the academic fold is “volunteer.” Students may be the business they are in, but working outside the job description is purely optional. So why do it? Movie man Bumm shrugs, a bit puzzled by the obvious: “It’s just fun.” It is also what creates the moments that will be recalled 20, 30, 40 years from now when alumni gather.

—CJB