OU faculty and staff are the answer to a program chairperson’s prayer.

BY MARY LYLE WEEKS
PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

You can see and hear an expert on everything from “Gangs, Drugs and Violence” to a “Comparison of Oil Production Activities in Nigeria and in the State of Oklahoma.” You can explore topics as diverse as “Jackie Robinson and the Desegregation of Baseball” to “Dying from a Broken Heart: How Stress, Depression and Marital Conflict Kills.”

No, this is not material from a super-cable network or a high-powered satellite dish, interactive-television or the Internet. Here you can ask questions of these experts—face to face—and get answers without the expense of a monthly cable fee or an online subscription.

These experts are the faculty and staff members of the University of Oklahoma—and their services are free.

The University’s Speakers Service is not exactly a secret, considering how many requests are fulfilled in a year, but it could be utilized more fully by Oklahoma’s civic groups, clubs, high schools and libraries. It is composed of more than 80 faculty and staff authorities who share their expertise on a myriad of subjects including architecture, music, history, psychology, film, the Vietnam War, free speech, computer science—even the NCAA and its rule-breakers.

Administratively the 12-year-old Speakers Service is a Faculty Senate function; the senate’s staff coordinator, Sonya Fallgatter, is responsible for scheduling. She accomplishes this task with remarkable competence according to those who have used the service.

Jeff Gardner, former program chair and now president of the Del City Kiwanis Club, uses an Old West poker expression to praise her, describing Fallgatter as “the ace in the hole.”

“She is positively the best person,” Gardner says emphatically. “She got us set up with some really interesting programs from OU. Once, we had a speaker cancel on seven days notice, and she found us a great replacement. We really appreciated that. I would recommend the Speakers Service to any group; those that we heard were terrific.”

In 1984, the Speakers Service was begun through the efforts of the Faculty Senate and its chair, Tom Love (now George Lynn Cross Research Professor emeritus of aerospace and mechanical engineering and Halliburton Professor emeritus of engineering); the University of Oklahoma Foundation and its executive director, Ron D. Burton; and Alumni Affairs under the guidance of Paul Massad (now associate vice president for University Development and executive director of Alumni Affairs).

The only funding required—mileage expense—is provided by the Foundation, if the speaker requests reimbursement, which frequently does not happen. Speakers are not hand-picked by the Senate; they respond to a blanket letter sent to faculty at the beginning of each year. Among those involved is the current Faculty Senate
chair, Law Professor Rick Tepker.

"I do it because I’ve always enjoyed public speaking and talking about the law and public affairs," he explains. "For me, it’s enjoyable, and I suspect that’s true of all faculty members who participate."

Tepker sees the basic purpose of the Speakers Service as enhancing public awareness of the role of the faculty and the University in the state and improving public understanding of the University’s contribution to Oklahoma.

"It’s an effort to make sure that people understand the diversity of enterprises and missions that are going on at the University," he says, "and to get people to understand the worth of these activities and responsibilities. If the public—the citizens of Oklahoma—remain unaware of all that’s being done here for the public benefit, the public is the loser, and the University is the loser."

Alexander J. Kondonassis, David Ross Boyd Professor and Regents Professor of Economics, has been at OU since 1958 and is familiar to thousands of OU alumni. He has been involved in the Speakers Service since its beginning.

"The service gives the Oklahoma community at large an opportunity to discover the expertise that exists at OU in various areas," he says. "The audiences benefit by being updated and informed on a variety of current and ongoing issues. Faculty members benefit, as I have, from very positive experiences in speaking."

Kondonassis’ most recent talk was for the Norman Lions Club, where he discussed the global economy and the world’s increasing interdependence.

"I talked a bit about Japan, the European Union and the fact that the less developed countries now represent four-fifths of the world in terms of population. I believe if I were still there, I would still be answering the questions that were asked. It was a most rewarding experience."

In contrast to Kondonassis, Assistant Professor Mitchell McKinney of the Department of Communications is newly involved in the service, having completed only one full year at OU after finishing his Ph.D. at the University of Kansas.

"I like the idea of going out to share what we do here—that what I study and teach and research has appeal for the citizens of Oklahoma," he says. "It’s an educational experience for me to adapt what I do to a high school level to speak to the gifted and talented honor students at Blanchard High School about the presidential election campaign."

Since he had no idea where Blanchard was when he received the request, McKinney says, "This gives me a chance to see more of the state. In addition, I was impressed by the gifted and talented students. There’s a lot of good going on in the secondary education system in Oklahoma. At the college level, we tend to become detached from that because what we do is so different. So it was a positive experience in that way also."

Glen Castle, the Blanchard High School principal, has nothing but praise for the Speakers Service.

"When we get the brochure at the first of the fall semester, the students (gifted and talented from grades 7-12) choose whom they want to hear. They have always enjoyed—and learned from—the talks. I hope OU continues the service. We’ve never had a bad speaker. And Dr. McKinney, talking about the presidential election, discussed a truly current issue, really up-to-date, really important. This is excellent learning for our students."

Another high school official who is sold on the Speakers Service is Assistant Principal Bryan Staples at Northeast High School in Oklahoma City.

"We use the OU Speakers Service for our honors biomedical students. It’s part of our lectureship series. The OU people do a quality job, a super job. It is a real asset to the learning experience that we can provide."

The Faculty Senate offices are located on the second floor of the new Visitor Center, which is housed in a less-than-new building, Jacobson Hall on Parrington Oval. The new director of the Visitor Center is Leslie Baumert, an OU staff member for 20 years, 15 of which she spent in high school and college recruitment. Baumert’s involvement with the Speakers Service is to promote public awareness and opportunities for both the speakers and the groups that request them.

"There is a great demand for luncheon or dinner speakers," Baumert says, "and the variety of subjects of
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"...favored by our faculty is a veritable cornucopia. I hope that through continuing outreach efforts more groups are made aware and take advantage of this special service. The University of Oklahoma is a pacesetter on many fronts, and the Speakers Service is one vehicle for sharing this excellence."

Baumert views the service as one way the University can give back to Oklahoma communities that have supported the institution throughout its history.

"President Boren emphasizes a commitment to public service for faculty, staff and students," she says. "The Speakers Service is an outstanding public service effort that allows OU to share some of our most distinguished faculty and staff with the citizens of Oklahoma."

Over the past year, the most popular topics for groups requesting the service have been capital punishment, why good people make bad decisions, how to improve your memory, coping with change and slowing the aging process. Diversity is a key for the Speakers Service, Samuel Osisanya, assistant professor of petroleum and geological engineering, explains.

"This is my fifth year at OU," he says, "and I have been involved with the Speakers Service for several years. I have spoken at Mid-Del High School and Northeast High School. I never had a bad experience—it was always very fruitful.

"The most interesting talk was at Elk City in—I think—1993. No one told me that a member of the OU Board of Regents was in the audience. I stood up there and poured out my heart, and when I learned he was there, I had anxiety. But he came up after the speech and congratulated me. That meant a lot to me.

"I represented diversity then, because I spoke as a foreigner in America. But now—" Satisfaction can be heard in Osisanya's voice. "—now I am a citizen."

One of the staff members who participates in the program is Karen Holp, general manager of OU's public radio station, KGOU. Holp came from New Mexico in July 1988 to direct the activities of KGOU. She participates in the program because she is "a missionary for public radio."

"I welcome the opportunity to explain how public radio differs from commercial radio," she says, "I explain how we can be of service to these..."
groups. And I particularly target non-profit groups to tell them how we, as a non-traditional media outlet, can be of service in terms of their public service announcements. It's been a positive experience for me and, I hope, for those who have listened to me.”

A former OU student who returned as a faculty member is another involved in the program. Alberto Mata earned both his bachelor’s and master’s of art at OU and left the campus in 1972. After earning his Ph.D. at Notre Dame, he returned to OU in 1991 and is now an associate professor of human relations. He has been involved with the Speakers Service since 1992.

Among Mata’s topics are “Gangs, Drugs and Violence,” “Latinos in the United States” and “Community Health Interventions.”

“I have had nothing but receptive audiences,” he says. “Even in small towns, they express the same concerns that I hear in urban areas about drugs and violence—which illustrates that we have a societal problem, not a big-city problem. Some of my most interesting discussions have been with retired citizens. I find them concerned about not only the issues that affect them directly, but also the issues involved with enhancing and improving their community.”

Mata believes the Speakers Service is more than merely making a speech before a club.

“We are here to serve the state,” he says. “We take OU to them—to the citizens of Oklahoma. We are part of something very important—we are part of their OU experience.”

In these days when the small- and medium-sized towns are concerned about the influx of the mega-retailers, it is understandable that one of the most popular Speakers Service topics would be “Is there life after Wal-Mart/Home Depot/Toys ‘R Us?: A Guide to Retail Survival in the 1990s.” And it is understandable that the speaker who addresses this topic is one of OU’s most popular professors, James Kenderdine, associate professor of marketing and director of the Distribution Research Program.

Kenderdine has been at OU for 27 years and involved with the Speakers Service for more than five years. “I was the typical absent-minded professor,” he says with a laugh. “I got the letter one year—thought, ‘that’s a really good idea,’ then got around to being involved a year later.”

Kenderdine believes that the Speakers Service serves the people of the state by making OU concrete.

“Most people have never seen an OU professor. The connection of many people to OU is only through athletics—football or basketball or whatever. This program serves the people of Oklahoma by giving them examples of what else happens here. They are amazed at the expertise. And we give back something useful to the state, something that serves the people of the state.”

Kenderdine once had an interesting experience when he spoke in a western Oklahoma town. “The group was a collection of women working in banking. And they truly had never met an OU professor. They asked me if I had a passport or visa from OSU to be there. But before the evening was over, OU was no longer an abstract to them. OU had become a real institution of higher learning.”

The experts are available to share their knowledge, only a request away.

Editor’s Note: Groups can receive a Speakers Service brochure or schedule a speaker by telephoning Sonya Fallgatter in the Faculty Senate Office at (405) 325-6789.