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Tidwell to Lead EIU Journalism Department Through "Transition" Period

Jan-27-2005

Professor James Tidwell views his role as acting chairman of the journalism department as an extension of his service to Eastern Illinois University and his profession.

The journalism department is in a particularly critical stage, as it is making its six-year accreditation bid, implementing new curriculum and preparing to lose some retiring faculty members, making continuity in its leadership particularly important, Tidwell said.

"I've had other chances to go into administration before, but I hadn't been inclined to do that," Tidwell said. "We are sort of in a transition with the department. I thought that it probably was time for me to step up to the plate."

Tidwell, who has been at EIU since 1987, is to serve as acting chair of the department through the end of June, when a permanent replacement will be named. He took his post on Jan. 3, replacing Les Hyder, who will remain on faculty.

As part of its reaccreditation effort, the department must complete a self-study by Sept. 1. A team from the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications is to visit campus in October.

"That's probably one of the main reasons I said I'd take the job, because we needed some continuity," Tidwell said.

For the past five years, he has served as chairman of the department's curriculum committee, and he has spent the last two years heading up the assessment committee, which works to be sure all journalism graduates measure up to standards set by the accrediting agency.

"This fall, we'll be among the first institutions in the country to follow new standards," which include assessment, Tidwell said.

Two years ago, the journalism department implemented new curriculum, so at this point, some students are under the old curriculum plan and some are under the new, making this a "transition period for us in curricular issues," Tidwell said.

Tidwell's influence has also reached beyond higher education. For the past 15 years, he has been in charge of the department's outreach to high schools, including directing summer workshops for high school journalism students and teachers. He also heads up the Eastern Illinois High School Press Association and serves as executive secretary of the Illinois Journalism Education Association, a statewide high-school advisory group.

Through the IJEA, Tidwell is working with an Illinois High School Association planning committee to implement a statewide journalism competition. The IHSA board has tentatively approved the program, which would have its culminating event at EIU in April 2006.

Although the competition would benefit EIU and the journalism department by introducing the campus to more high school students, that is not the only goal, Tidwell said.

"In some ways, a lot of things we do are just a service to the discipline," Tidwell said. "Part of our job as a unit within an institution of higher learning is to promote journalism."

Before embarking on a career in newspapers that led him to teach, Tidwell received his bachelor's degree in journalism and government from Oklahoma Baptist University, his master's degree in journalism from the University of Oklahoma, and his juris doctorate from the Brandeis School of Law at the University of Louisville.

His law background has been put to use in the classroom, with the communication law course being a mainstay in his schedule.

"I'll probably always teach communication law," Tidwell said. "I would feel lost if I didn't do that."

He has also used his legal knowledge as an author of journal articles and a book. The second edition of Tidwell's "Media Law in Illinois: A Reporter's Handbook" (Stipes Publishing) was released earlier this month, updating the 1992 version of the publication.

In another outreach, Tidwell has worked with fellow EIU journalism professor Brian Poulter to create the acclaimed "News Scene" and "News Sim" educational news-writing software. The publishing company, Wadsworth, has requested that they create two additional interactive writing exercises for the news-simulation programs.

On campus, Tidwell has served in a variety of capacities through the years, including the Faculty Senate, with two terms as chairman and two terms as vice chairman; Council on Academic Affairs, with one term as chairman and one term as vice chairman; Academic Technology Advisory Committee; Committee for the Assessment of Student Learning; Radio-Television Board; Pre-Law Minor Advisory Committee; and search committees, including serving as chairman, for various faculty and staff members.

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As the journalism department prepares for a couple of upcoming faculty retirements of its own, this is an optimum time to reassess the department's goals, Tidwell said.

"We have a chance to hire faculty whose skills and experience fit what we want," Tidwell said. "We have a chance to go in a new direction if we want to."