

The mind's eye

John Sparrow has two great passions: teaching psychology and college hockey. "When I began undergraduate school [at SUNY Oswego], I had no idea of what I'd be 'when I grew up,'"

Sparrow reminisces, "and then I took an introductory psychology course, and I was hooked."

His interest in experimental psychology led him to graduate study in the psychology program at UNH, which has been nationally recognized for its college teaching program. "What I really appreciated about UNH was that the program focused on the teaching of psychology and on research, instead of having a clinical perspective," explains Sparrow. "In this program, you really learn how to be an effective teacher."

At UNH, Sparrow also learned what it meant to be a true college hockey fanatic, "I played hockey as a kid and grew up watching the NHL, but college hockey is different—exciting, fast, and clean," he enthuses. "Plus, UNH has a first-rate team that's really terrific to watch."

During his years as a graduate student, Sparrow began his research in visual perception and "psychophysics," the quantitative relationships between physical stimuli and the observer's experience.

"We can talk about the physical aspects of vision," Sparrow explains, "what the lens and rods and cones are doing in the eye, but that can only tell us about the biology and physiology of vision. It doesn't explain how the brain perceives what we see—color or motion—for example. The answers to questions about perception represent the *psychology* of vision."

After earning his doctorate, Sparrow taught at SUNY Geneseo. But his connection to UNH and southern New Hampshire remained a powerful one, and five years later he accepted a position at UNH Manchester.

For 13 years, Sparrow, an associate professor, has honed his teaching approach at the urban Manchester campus, where he credits his students for being especially "focused and engaged." "UNH Manchester has students of all ages and backgrounds who make up a very nontraditional group of undergraduates. They feel free to question and challenge the information presented, so classes become dialogues rather than lectures," he says, "This level of interaction makes the classroom experience very exciting for me, and I am able to raise the bar for the students I teach."

With teaching evaluations that are nearly a perfect five (as well as a previous Teaching Excellence Award in 1996), Sparrow's students clearly return his compliment. They recognize his teaching abilities, including "his gift for making complex topics understandable" and the way in which he challenges his students to "push beyond where [they thought they] could go."

Sparrow's students, many of whom have interests in clinical and counseling psychology, often gain an important new perspective of the field from his classes. "One of my missions is to remind students that the roots of our discipline are in experimental psychology," Sparrow says. "Psychology didn't begin with questions about schizophrenia or the theories of Freud; it actually grew from the work of philosophers and the need for empirical, scientific research on the nature of the mind, perception and sensory processing, cognition, and learning and behavior."

This is where Sparrow's work meets his passion for college hockey. In presentations about his research on motion and depth perception, he has been known to incorporate Hockey East video clips. "Think about the nature of motion perception in hockey; players and the puck are moving virtually all the time. Imagine what the goalie has to do in terms of depth perception, perceived motion, and visual cues," Sparrow says. "In hockey, as in any sport, athletic ability is clearly required, but there is also a whole lot of psychology as well."

—Donna Eason

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JOHN E. SPARROW



John Sparrow at the Whittemore Center, home of the UNH Wildcats.

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