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UWF chemistry professor Dr. Karen Molek receives distinguished mentoring award

Pensacola, Fla. – July 6, 2016 – The American Chemical Society Scholars Program has selected University of West Florida Assistant Professor of Chemistry Dr. Karen Molek as the 2016 recipient of the Zaida C. Morales-Martinez Prize for Mentoring.

The ACS Scholars Program was established in 1994 to attract African-American, Hispanic and American Indian students, considered underrepresented in the chemical sciences, to pursue careers in the field. Molek helped establish and now directs the UWF Chemistry Scholars program to raise awareness of barriers faced by underrepresented students.

Since 2012, 12 UWF students have won more than \$75,000 in renewable scholarship funds from ACS Scholars as a result of successful mentoring by the chemistry department. In 2015, UWF tied with Stanford University for the second highest number of ACS Scholars in the nation.

“It’s common for me to have frank conversations with students about how they are being short-sighted by not pursuing an opportunity for which they would be a competitive applicant,” Molek said. “I’ve found that most of the time, it’s because they lack the confidence to think they can actually be competitive for these opportunities, so I work hard to help students overcome those confidence barriers, which sometimes means being very honest with them about their priorities.”

Molek said the most important thing she can offer students is her time – teaching skills in the lab and knowledge via lecture, getting to know them so she can give an honest assessment of their potential and providing advice about how to leverage that potential with their passions to have a fulfilling career and life.

“I spend a lot of time thinking about ways we as faculty can creatively engage students to help them succeed,” Molek said. “While I appreciate the honor, I more appreciate the lives my mentoring has touched and the successes students have and will continue to have in part through the intersection of my passion and their goals.”

Molek has found UWF to be beyond supportive of her endeavors. While she tries to align her goals with the University’s mission and vision, UWF has provided numerous resources to continue her efforts via

research, teaching and student engagement.

She said she would never have been capable of impacting so many students without the support of her colleagues and administration.

Dr. Alan Schrock, chemistry department chair, notes that Molek has received significant recognition from science education leaders around the country based on her focused mentoring efforts with UWF students through the highly regarded Chemistry Scholars program.

“Dr. Molek is viewed by our chemistry students as a go-to person for help, not just in chemistry problems, but also in life issues,” Schrock said. “Student reviews of her teaching are excellent, but our students recognize that she does so much more.”

Schrock said Molek brings a sincere belief that the UWF chemistry program and students are among the best in the country, adding that she is continuously searching for opportunities to help students meet their goals.

“She leads our efforts to provide the professional and life skills training for students outside the classroom that is necessary to be a successful professional scientist,” Schrock said. “Dr. Molek’s mentoring efforts and results are extraordinary, and the ACS committee is recognizing her results with this award.”

Molek will formally receive her award during the Fall 2016 ACS National Meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on Aug. 22, 2016.

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