

18 April 2023

Dear UNI Faculty Senate members,

I am most pleased to support for Dr. Steve L. O’Kane, Jr’s., application for Faculty Emeritus status. Dr. O’Kane earned a PhD in Evolutionary and Population Biology from Washington State University at St. Louis in 1993. He held a postdoctoral position with the Missouri Botanical Garden, and was an instructor at Washington University at St. Louis prior to his appointment at UNI in 1996. At UNI, he achieved the rank of Professor in 2007. When Dr. O’Kane retires from UNI this summer, he will have served the Department of Biology for 27 wonderful years.

Over the course of Dr. O’Kane’s career at UNI, he has been a devoted educator, showing exceptional passion about his teaching and great care and concern for his students. His early adoption of discussion-based teaching led to a transformation in curriculum of the Department of Biology. To quote his department head, Barbara Hetrick, in her 2007 letter in support of Dr. O’Kane’s promotion, “Had Dr. O’Kane not tested this format [discussion] across a wide range of classes, we would not have had the confidence as a department to move to requiring a class of this type for every student in our majors. This is a bold move for our department, but one we see as vital to developing the critical thinking and communication skills, as well as the scientific literacy, of our majors. This literally would not have happened without Dr. O’Kane’s ground -breaking efforts.” Dr. O’Kane taught the inaugural class of Evolution, Ecology, and the Nature of Science, a class he taught regularly until his retirement. He also taught Plant Systematics, Evolutionary Biology, Bioscientific Terminology, Ecology, Life: The Natural World, and Biogeography & the Origins of Diversity. Students resoundingly praised his teaching in all arenas.

Dr. O’Kane has had a distinguished career as a plant systematist, publishing over 60 peer-reviewed scientific works. His 2013 book, “Flora of the Four Corners Region: Vascular Plants of the San Juan River Drainage: Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah” is described as a “massive contribution to floristic knowledge of wester North America” describing 2,303 species. His culminating work, scheduled to be published in 2023, is entitled “Vascular Flora of New Mexico”. This book promises to be an exceptional contribution to the field.

Dr. O’Kane has served the scientific community and all levels of the University. He has been the curator of the Grant Herbarium at UNI, and he has been a regular member of departmental and college committees. He also has a long history of service on the University Faculty Senate.

Dr. O’Kane is a well-rounded academic, dedicated to teaching well, a true scholar, and freely serving the university and scientific community. For his strong performance in all areas of faculty life, he was awarded the Regents Award for Faculty Excellence in 2015. In light of Dr. O’Kane’s laudable accomplishments in teaching, scholarship, and service to others, I wholeheartedly recommend that he be awarded emeritus status.

Sincerely,



Theresa A. Spradling  
Professor of Biology and Department Head