

Departing with

flair

by Tom Nurre with Roy Ivey

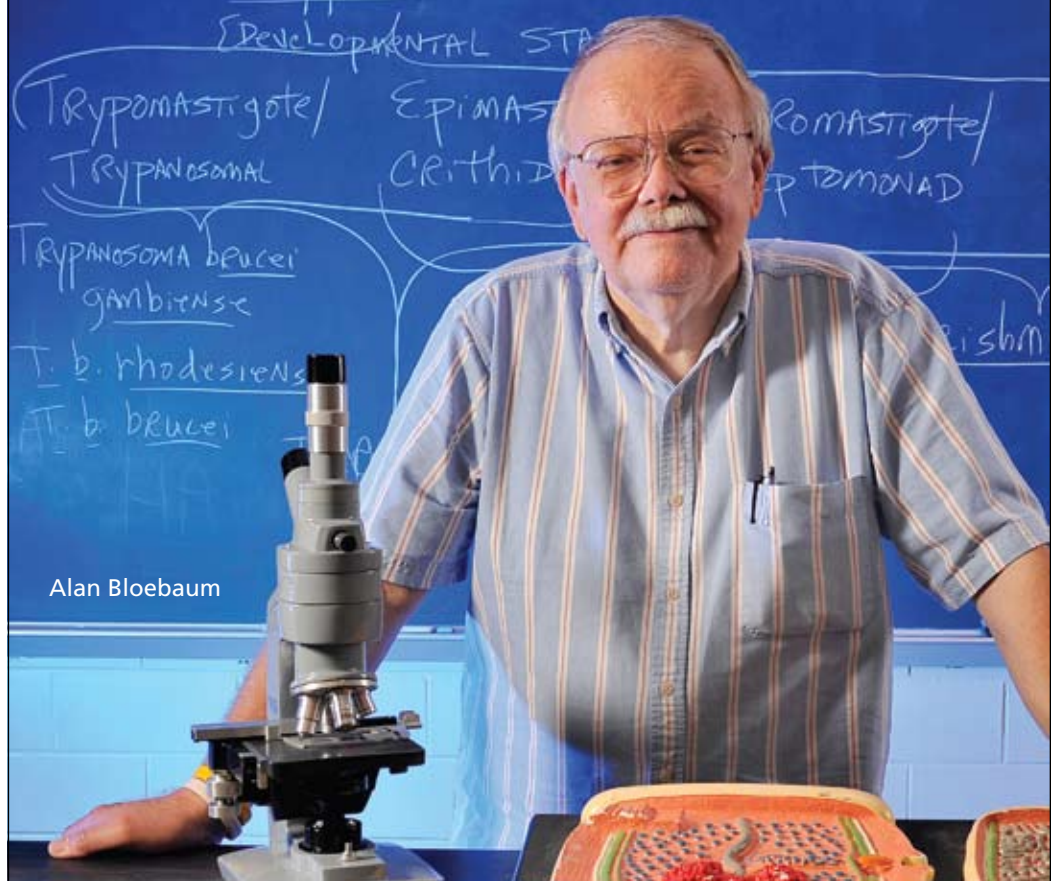


Photo by Danny Meyer

Though he rejected a medical career for himself, Dr. Alan Bloebaum shaped the health professions careers of hundreds of ASU students for almost four decades.

Originally from Austin, Bloebaum came to ASU in 1971 after getting his Ph.D. from New Mexico State University. Along the way, he was a pre-dental student at the University of Texas and even attended medical school for two years before finding his calling as a biology professor.

In 1972 he took over as chairman of the ASU Health Professions Advisory Committee (HPAC), a post he held until his retirement in 2007. Thus began his legacy of helping hundreds of students gain acceptance to professional schools in almost every component of medicine and health-related fields.

"It was something I had experience in that nobody else did," Bloebaum said. "Having recently been in medical school, I had a pretty good idea of what they were looking for and what kind of students they wanted. I was also good at writing, so writing health professions evaluations was something I liked doing."

It's a good thing he enjoyed it because he has written more than 570 evaluations, helping ASU consistently maintain one of

the state's highest acceptance rates to health professions schools during his tenure.

"Alan wrote the most thorough evaluations of students that medical schools would receive," said Dr. Ross Dawkins, ASU chemistry professor and fellow HPAC member. "He found it is best to describe students with their warts and all, not just as supermen. There have actually been students who transferred here from larger schools to take advantage of Alan's letters."

And, it is not just the folks at ASU that think highly of Bloebaum. When Harriet Lewis of the ASU physical therapy faculty goes on recruiting trips, she is constantly meeting other recruiters, counselors and health care professionals that compliment her colleague.

"Many times it was because of his relationship to the Joint Admissions Medical Program (JAMP) or other groups for allied health counselors," Lewis said. "They would all tell me about what a great guy he is, how much they enjoyed working with him and what a great job he has done bringing out the best in students. They are amazed at his ability to get ASU students accepted to professional, medical and other allied health programs all over the place."

But, it wasn't just about writing letters.

To the students in ASU's pre-health programs, Bloebaum was a teacher, mentor, adviser and friend, helping them through each phase of their undergraduate journeys and on to the next level.

Dr. Dale Brancel, a 1974 ASU graduate, is now a surgeon in Hurst. He actually met his wife in Bloebaum's advanced physiology class.

"I've had a lot of teachers all the way through high school, college, medical school and residency," Brancel said, "and I would have to say that Dr. Bloebaum is the best teacher I ever had, bar none."

"He was more of a friend and a confidant than just a teacher," said Gene Cobb, a 1975 ASU graduate and currently a macro-technologist in Big Spring. "He is definitely going to be missed. He is something else, definitely an icon."

Apparently, Bloebaum achieved that status in spite of his unique wardrobe.

"Alan dresses like a bum, almost," Dawkins said. "I think the most he dresses up is to put on his best pair of suspenders. But, he is obviously an incredibly bright and dedicated guy."

Responded Bloebaum, "I would also put pins on my suspenders and the students called it 'flair.' I didn't know it, but I guess

I had a lot of flair. But, that was just in the winter. In the summer my teaching attire was shorts and flip-flops.”

Also adding to his students’ wonderment was his habit of driving beat-up used cars that rarely cost more than \$300.

“I saw Dr. Bloebaum’s car and I said ‘that looks like it has leprosy,’” said Pamela Darby, a former student and current ASU nursing instructor. “It was horrible. So, toward the end of school I was taking up a collection because I thought even if I got just \$300, I was going to go buy him a used car and it would have looked better than the one he had.”

“I don’t know what model it was, but it was something from the ‘70s,” said Dr. Travis Sincclair, now a radiologist at Temple’s Scott and White Hospital. “It was about 30 feet long, this big old vehicle, and he never threw away his parking stickers, so he had about 40 of those on it. You always knew if he was in his office because you would see his car there with all the stickers on it.”

However, when it came time to get serious about school, his students knew that Bloebaum could always be counted on to give them his best, even if it was to send them in a different direction than they originally planned. Such was the case for 1991 graduate Derek Smith, a chemistry professor at Howard Payne who actually changed his ASU major from pre-med based on Bloebaum’s counsel.

“I changed over to chemistry and found a real passion for chemistry and experimentation,” Smith said. “Because of his advice, I didn’t spin my wheels in a program that would not have been very valuable to me. It is advice that I have carried with me for the last 19 years and have even shared it with students who wanted to go through a pre-med program.”

In fact, Bloebaum was so dedicated to his students that he sometimes even dreamed about them.

“He said he had been dreaming about me for three nights,” said Johnny Matthews, a San Angelo optometrist who graduated in 1974. “He said ‘I know you have been looking to do something for your career, you have good math skills and you like biology, and I think you should go into optometry.’ I told him about a booklet I had sent off for about health careers and that one I had selected was optometry. He said ‘Good, maybe if you do this I can get some sleep.’”

Another example of Bloebaum’s influence was how involved he became in students’ lives outside the classroom. When local nurse Debbie Eubanks contracted a rare disease while at ASU and was taken to a distant critical care unit, she looked to Bloebaum for much-needed advice and comfort.

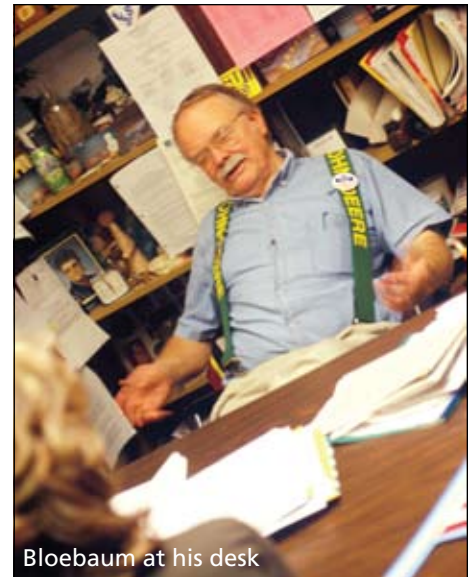
“I called Dr. Bloebaum several times and told him ‘now they are saying this and I don’t know what it means,’” Eubanks said. “He would explain it to me and he was very patient. I just felt that I could rely on him, trust him and he would tell me exactly what was going on.”

Being a full-time professor, adviser, counselor and friend takes a great deal of time and energy and a major commitment to organization and time management. But many of Bloebaum’s students never saw that side of his job.

“He loved to tell jokes,” said Dr. Joel Dunnington, an associate professor of radiology at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. “He had a file cabinet full of jokes on three-by-five cards, all of them labeled to specific topics for different courses. I think we should have a couple of them bronzed and hang them up someplace.”

“I remember going into his office,” said Dr. Kelly Wilson, in obstetrics/gynecology at Shannon Medical Center, “and it was like you were in a 1940’s book store run by somebody a little obsessive-compulsive. There were books piled to the ceiling and stuff stuck all over the walls. I remember him sitting in that chair with all that mess around him, but he was organized at the same time. He knew where everything was, though it didn’t seem possible that anybody would be able to.”

With those and his many other memories in tow, Bloebaum now heads into retirement with one very definite plan for the future.



Bloebaum at his desk

“Long term, I’m not going to make any big decisions,” he said. “Short term, my stock answer is ‘I’m just not going to go to work.’ I’ve had a lot of friends that bought new houses, moved off or worked at something like a greeter at Wal-Mart. There is nothing wrong with that, but if I wanted to keep working I would have stayed at ASU.”

Bloebaum calls himself and his wife, Laura, “big collectors and pack rats,” so you may run into them at a garage or junk sale or driving around in his Kia that is “a little newer.” Their plans also include travel, possibly accompanied by one or both of their daughters, Gretchen and Heidi. They will also continue to attend every Rams home football game, continuing a streak that once reached 35 years straight without missing one.

Fittingly, Bloebaum was the first-ever recipient of the ASU Alumni Association’s Distinguished Faculty Achievement Award and in 1998 was named an Outstanding Centennial Alumnus by New Mexico State,

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Wonderful Careers

In addition to Dr. Alan Bloebaum, several other long-time professors have called it a career.

For a glimpse at three of them – **George Shankle** of chemistry and biochemistry, **Paul F. Love** of sociology and **Sandra S. Love** of psychology – visit the “Bonus Features” on the *ASU Magazine* Web site at

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