



# THOMAS MITZEL

NEW DEAN OF FACULTY COMES HOME TO TRINITY

BY RHEA HIRSHMAN

Trinity's new dean of faculty and vice president for academic affairs had not thought of himself as someone who would go into administration. An associate professor of chemistry at the College when he was tapped in 2008 for an administrative position, Thomas Mitzel loved teaching and doing research, working directly with students.

But the realization that he could have regular contact with many more students than just those in his classroom and lab, and significant influence on student well-being, helped convince him to accept the position of associate dean for academics. He served in that capacity from 2008-2011.

RICHARD BERGEN

Now, after a short stint away from Trinity, during which he was dean and professor of chemistry in the School of Natural Sciences and interim director of the Wild Basin Creative Research Center at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, Mitzel is being welcomed back to the campus where he began his academic career.

Mitzel did not enter college thinking he would focus on science. Taught to read by his older siblings, he started reading avidly when he was four years old, wrote short stories throughout high school, took honors classes in both English and the sciences, and entered Northern State University in his hometown of Aberdeen, South Dakota, as an English major. "Then I took an organic chemistry course in my sophomore year," he says, "and was hooked after my first experiment." He went on to earn a Ph.D. in physical organic chemistry from Boston College and, prior to his arrival at Trinity as an assistant professor in 1996, was a postdoctoral fellow at The Ohio State University.

### **Serendipity in the classroom**

An academic career was also not in Mitzel's original plans. "Actually," he says—in a comment that will resonate with the experience of many undergraduates—"I never thought about what I would do with my degree when I first went to college. There were no teachers in my family, my brother and I were the family's first college graduates, and most people

in South Dakota with science degrees go into industry."

The first time he thought about teaching as a possible career path was during his junior year, when one of his professors had to travel out of town and asked Mitzel to give the pre-lab lectures to an introductory organic chemistry class. Describing the experience of "seeing the lights go on" in students' faces, Mitzel discovered that he was good at teaching—and that he enjoyed it.

Encouraged by his adviser, Mitzel made plans to attend graduate school. There, he taught labs and study sessions to undergraduates and, once again, a professor asked him to cover classes. "I lectured to 150 students," he remembers, "and, by the end of the week, I was having the time of my life and getting great feedback. I thought, 'This could work!'"

It worked so well that Mitzel received Trinity's Arthur H. Hughes Award for Excellence in Teaching for New and Continuing Faculty in 2003.

Even with his new responsibilities, Mitzel will not be giving up the classroom. Although he won't be teaching chemistry, Mitzel is offering a first-year seminar titled "The Evolution of Science, the Science of Evolution." He explains that the class will begin by exploring how scientists go about setting up projects and trying to answer questions about the natural world; in the second half of the

course, that information will be used to examine the science of evolutionary theory. "We choose to be at Trinity College because we love working with students in academic discovery," Mitzel says, "and I want to be in the classroom while I am dean. I never want to lose that link with students."

### **Moving Trinity forward**

In discussing his approach to his administrative work, Mitzel says, "The question that always drives me is how we can best work together to support students." When he was associate dean, Mitzel's focus on envisioning the College as a whole community led to his helping the faculty through the Curriculum Committee to establish a "common hour," a time each Thursday when no formal courses or meetings are held, leaving all faculty, students, and staff free to attend scheduled campus events—many of which draw audiences of at least 100 people. He also helped lead the implementation of a successful assessment program to measure student learning, a program that received high praise from the foundation supporting the project.

During the economic downturn evident during the 2009-2010 academic year, Mitzel oversaw a subsequent budget trimming that, he notes, "required difficult discussions with all members of the community and a rethinking of every aspect of the College's educational mission." Still, he says, "We also worked hard to keep a

positive outlook," and important projects directly related to curriculum were facilitated, such as reconstruction of the neuroscience laboratory.

Returning to Trinity as the College's chief academic officer, Mitzel cites four elements that he will focus on as central to the College's mission: an outstanding and diverse faculty; a rigorous curriculum; a talented, motivated, and diverse body of students; and an attractive, secure, and supportive campus. He plans to continue his practice of "knocking on doors, just to see how people are doing."

Additionally, he has already discussed with the faculty and the President's Office his desire to have the College prepare a long-range (10-year) academic strategic plan, something that has never been done in the past. "Many reports have been written," he says, "but we have never done a long-range plan around which everyone has come together."

While the shape of that plan is yet to be determined, Mitzel is confident in the Trinity community. "We are like a big family, and there are bound to be disagreements," he says. "But I also know that we are all deeply committed to our responsibilities as educators. We bring in the brightest students; our work—and our focus—is to train them to think critically and to send them out in the world as engaged members of the global community."