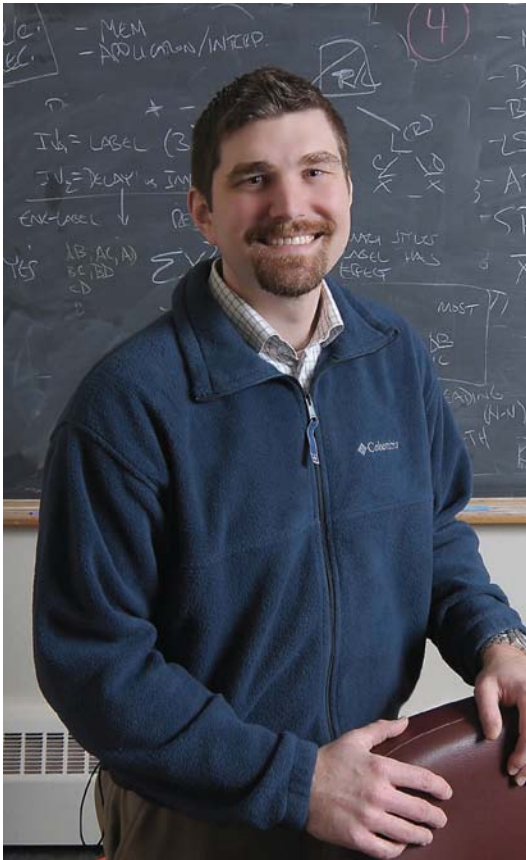


## ALWAYS UP FOR A CHALLENGE

Lucie Bryar '76\*  
(From: *Rivier Today*, Spring 2011)

Dr. Jerome L. Rekart inspires and guides the next generation of student researchers as he continues his own inquiries into human behavior and the workings of the human brain.

“One of my goals is to help and encourage experimental psychology students to publish their findings.” — Dr. Jerome Rekart, founder of the Cognition Laboratory



(PHOTO BY JODIE ANDRUSKEVICH)

Ask Associate Professor Dr. Jerome Rekart about the biggest challenge he faces as a professor and he doesn't hesitate to answer. "It's when I see a student with potential who turns in lackluster work," he says. "I think it's because I see a little bit of myself at that age."

Rekart joined the psychology department in 2006 and in 2009, became Rivier's first dual-appointment professor when he began teaching in the education department. In addition to teaching at all levels—from undergraduate to doctoral students—he oversees the College's Behavioral Science (Cognition) Laboratory, and mentors master's level experimental psychology students. But he admits the path that led him to pursue a master's degree and then a doctorate in brain, behavior and cognition, wasn't clear cut.

He started out as an undergraduate in biochemistry, because he was "good at it." His dream to become a physician was shattered, however, when he realized, "I didn't want to tell people bad news." That left him contemplating, at age 19, how to apply his love of science outside of medicine.

What happened next was one of those life-shaping experiences that was not apparent at the time. Rekart left college and tended bar before taking a job as a psychiatric technician at a crisis care unit in a hospital.

It was there, working with patients with severe mental illness, Rekart says, "I first became interested in psychology." He decided he wanted to explore the science behind why people behave the way they do.

That question and others motivated him to return to college and to earn advanced degrees in the field of biological psychology and to undertake the research that he continues today in the College's Cognition Lab, which he established shortly after coming to campus. He previously conducted research with lab animals and with post-mortem brain samples from Alzheimer's patients.

Many of his experiments with rats were designed to explore the role of the hippocampus and how brain cells respond to learning. In one instance, rats had to find their way to a platform through a water maze. Eventually, Rekart said, they “learned to follow signposts on the wall and those animals that succeeded exhibited robust growth of hippocampal neurons.”

In 2006, while working at the McGovern Institute for Brain Research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Rekart found himself at another professional crossroad. He was researching the molecular determinants of the growth of retinal cells during development and was to receive a post-doctoral fellowship grant from the National Eye Institute.

He turned down the grant, however, to accept a teaching position at Rivier. At that point, Rekart had already decided to move from animal research into human research. He also acknowledges that funding for basic research had dipped “frighteningly low” during the Bush administration and he had a young family to support. Most importantly, he came to Rivier because he had a strong desire to teach.

Five years later, he says without hesitation, “I love teaching.” On his roster are “required classes many students are reluctant to take,” including Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences for undergraduate psychology students and Fundamentals of Research for graduate education students. Among other classes, he also teaches Advanced Quantitative Analysis to doctoral education students. While undergraduate students may perceive him as “the expert,” the dynamic is entirely different with master’s and doctoral level students. “They bring career and life experiences to the classroom and feel comfortable contributing. It’s a neat dynamic.”

The biggest rewards come when he succeeds in reaching those students who lack confidence in their ability to understand the subject. He recalls one pre-school teacher who found Fundamentals of Research daunting at first. By the end of the semester, she was able to apply the concepts. “That’s rewarding,” says Rekart with a smile.

He also finds satisfaction teaching at a smaller college, where he gets to follow students’ progress throughout their academic careers. The experience is different from his own undergraduate days at Indiana University, where a student could get lost in large classes. At Rivier, students “know that I know who they are.”

Rekart notes that students are co-researchers with him in the Cognition Lab, where there is a strong focus on memory and emotion. They have explored the effects of disgust on false memories—a topic on which he and several former students have presented at international conferences. “One of my goals is to help and encourage experimental psychology students to publish their findings,” he says.

This semester, students will look at the role of shame in learning and at the effects of labeling on the learning experience.

He has a strong personal interest in pursuing research about the role of emotion in learning and integrating his finding into K-16 classroom settings.

“We know that a certain amount of stress is beneficial to learning,” he says. “I want to know how to use emotion to facilitate learning.”

Each year, when Rekart talks to AP psychology students at Nashua High North, he realizes the pressures high school teachers face. They have curriculum mandates, troubled students, and “bell going off constantly.” Against that backdrop, he wonders, from a researcher’s standpoint, how some teachers are able to engage their students in deep learning.

When he is not busy teaching, Rekart participates in or chairs a number of campus committees, including Rivier’s Institutional Review Board. The Board closely examines all proposed research projects to ensure its human subjects are protected from harm. He is also looking to bring faculty and

students together to discuss recent research findings through the nascent Education and Brain Journal Club.

The father of three young girls who is married to a clinical psychologist, Rekart admits he does not have much time for solo leisure pursuits these days, although “I really enjoy cooking and being outdoors.” One thing is clear, however. He will always find time to pursue through research his fascination with the working of the human brain. ■

## AT A GLANCE

### ACADEMIC BACKGROUND

- B.S. in Biochemistry, Indiana University
- M.Sc. in Biological Psychology, Northwestern University
- Ph.D. in Biological Psychology, Northwestern University

### RECENTLY CO-AUTHORED

An article in *Hippocampus*, pertaining to how overexpression of a brain growth protein provides insight into the circuitry of the brain.

### A FAVORITE WORK OF FICTION

*The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand

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\* **LUCIE BRYAR** earned a B.A. in English Communications from Rivier College in 1976. She has more than 20 years experience in news-writing, marketing, and public relations, including 14 years as a staff writer for Rivier College. In her current position as a writer for Southern New Hampshire Medical Center, Bryar produces the employee newsletter. She also writes for the hospital magazine, as well as contributes to the production of collateral marketing material.