



DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARDS

Stephen L. Mayo '83



To Stephen L. Mayo for his scientific breakthroughs and entrepreneurial spirit.

It's impossible to pigeonhole Stephen Mayo, Bren Professor of Biology and Chemistry and chair of the Division of Biology and Biological Engineering at California Institute of Technology (Caltech), where he has been on faculty since 1992. The multi-talented visionary has co-founded three biotechnology companies and is also an academic leader, educator, researcher, and pioneer in the field of protein design.

Mayo is grounded in chemistry, his field of study during his undergraduate years at Penn State. He said he'll go out of his way to tell people this, jokingly referring to himself as a "card-carrying chemist."

"Even though I'm now chair of a biology-centric division at Caltech, I always tell people I'm a chemist," Mayo said. "That really comes from my experience at Penn State."

During his time at University Park, Mayo was in the Penn State University Scholars

Program—forerunner to the Schreyer Honors College. He worked with (now emeritus) Professor of Chemistry Roy Olofson for three years. It was a life-changing experience for Mayo, who also worked alongside graduate and postdoc students and had access to state-of-the-art research equipment in a first-rate facility.

"That really defined my career trajectory going forward, and based on that experience, I dedicated my graduate work to chemistry," Mayo said. "Even today, the work that I do, in terms of my research, really is still connected to what I learned while working in Roy's lab all those years ago. It's had a huge impact."

Before Penn State, Mayo moved around a bit, as his father was in the military. At one point, he attended four different schools in one year, and the family eventually settled in Chambersburg, Pa.

Growing up, Mayo was initially interested in science and engineering, attributing this, in part, to his father's natural curiosity regarding how things were built and put together. But then, just like at Penn State, Mayo came across an educational role

model that shaped his perspective—his high school advanced placement chemistry teacher.

"It all came together for me as a central science," Mayo said. "You can rely on quantitative things from math and physics, but you can also explore the idea that some types of chemistry are really about building things, about understanding things at a molecular level."

Mayo was aware of Penn State growing up, especially since there was a campus near Chambersburg. So Penn State naturally entered the discussion when Mayo began looking at where he'd continue his education. "It became clear that Penn State was going to offer just a great opportunity, both economically and also in terms of the scale and scope of what was available there," he said.

After earning his undergraduate degree at Penn State, Mayo earned his Ph.D. at Caltech and completed his postdoc work at the University of California, Berkeley, and Stanford University School of Medicine. In 2004, he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences. He also was appointed by President Obama to the

National Science Board, an oversight board that has responsibility for the National Science Foundation.

Additionally, he's been honored with numerous awards, most recently with the inaugural William K. Bowes Jr. Leadership Chair from the San Francisco-based Bowes Foundation, which will fund education and research projects in the Division of Biology and Biological Engineering.

Mayo last visited University Park nearly a decade ago, and he said he's hoping to become involved in the Millennium Scholars Program. Additionally, he wants to strengthen his connection to Penn State, especially now that one of his former students from Caltech is on the research staff in the College of Science.

Mayo is a life member of the Penn State Alumni Association. He and his wife, Julie, who received her Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, have two sons, Derek and Jason. They live in Pasadena, Calif.