

Professor Yusuf Mehta remembers 23 years at Rowan

Professor Yusuf Mehta was born and grew up in Mumbai, India. He came to the US when he was 21 years old. Yusuf's father was a businessman. His mother is a homemaker. His brother lives in the San Francisco Bay area.



Yusuf completed his Master's in Civil Engineering at the University of Oklahoma in 1994. Jess W. Everett was a professor there at the same time, but Yusuf did not take any of Jess' classes. Yusuf completed his PhD in Civil Engineering at Penn State University in 1999.

After a Post Doctoral stay at the University of Florida, Yusuf joined the Rowan Civil and Environmental Engineering (CEE) department in 2001 and is now a full Professor. He is the founder and director of the Center for Research and Education in Advanced Transportation Engineering Systems (CREATES), which finds innovative solutions to problems regarding pavement materials and transportation engineering. CREATES includes a fully instrumented accelerated pavement testing facility, a Heavy Vehicle Simulator (HVS) that allows for applying accelerated loading that simulates 20 years of traffic in as few as 3 to 6 months, and an American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials Materials Reference accredited laboratory. In November 2023, CREATES was awarded a \$30 million, five-year contract—with the first two years funded at \$11.5 million— from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Engineer Research and Development Center (ERDC), to expand Arctic region research.

Yusuf was instrumental in founding the Engineers Without Borders student chapter at Rowan in 2003. It was one of the earliest chapters in the US. Since then, the Rowan chapter has worked on projects in Thailand, El Salvador, The Gambia, The Dominican Republic, India, etc.

Yusuf loves endurance sports, such as running and swimming. He loves traveling, especially with family. They travel across the world and within the United States. Yusuf likes to hike during these trips. As his kids grow up, and become more independent, he hopes to get more into art.

I always wanted to design dams as a kid. The competition in India is very high regarding college entrance exams, look at my fortune, I was allocated to civil engineering!

It was a big change going from a megapolis like Mumbai to the small town of Norman, OK for graduate school. At that time (1993), the internet was not big and I was learning to adapt on a daily basis. The biggest thing was that it was hard to comprehend why it was hard to

understand me. I had to modulate my English and work on my intonation to be understood. Those were amazing formative years.

When I interviewed at Rowan, it was still a brand-new engineering college. I joined the faculty in 2001, a part of the group hired after the first student cohort graduated. Starting in a new and upcoming place was wonderful. Building new elective and graduate courses and charting the curriculum was very exciting. The collegiality was, and continues to be, excellent, and we were--and still are--vested in each other's success. It has been an amazing ride so far.

When I came to Rowan, I knew very little about New Jersey. I was impressed by the greenery in the area. Over time, the value of the location became very apparent. It was close to several metropolises, the shore, and the ethnic diversity was endearing. When kids went to school, I realized school districts in NJ are amazing, some of the best in the nation. A definite plus.

In that early period, we already felt very proud of our growing alumni, as Rowan Engineering continued to build its name. The Dean at that time provided the support to grow the research program one student and one equipment at a time. The class sizes were small, and students and faculty, were like family.

CREATES came about very organically, one sponsor, one relationship at a time. Growing this organization from the ground up has truly been a labor of love. CREATES came at a time when I was feeling that I was plateauing. It is priceless to keep me going here at Rowan University.

In my 23 years, Rowan engineering and Rowan University have grown considerably. The biggest thing is the cohort size. Going from 25 to 75 graduates each year over a relatively short period was a big change. The teaching pedagogy needed to change. Maintaining the same connection with students is challenging. The faculty size and the new building means it is getting harder to know everyone. It is the price of growth. We now offer more courses, projects, and resources to our students. More New Jersey students can stay in South Jersey for their Bachelor's, Master's and PhD degrees. And the reputation of Rowan and the engineering program continues to grow.

My favorite memory is seeing the students graduate, especially first-generation students. I also still love to teach. I enjoy all my classes: CE materials, Transportation, Pavement Design and Analysis.

[Editor's note: Dr. Mehta is the professor most frequently mentioned by the alumni I interviewed for the 25@100 project. CE materials is by far considered by these alumni to be the most challenging course. But they also appreciate how much they learned and remember the course and Professor Mehta very fondly.]

Written by Yusuf Mehta and edited by Jess W. Everett in February 2024