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Fast Five with the TFSC

A Newsletter for First Year Faculty at the University of Arkansas

MARCH 2023 THEME: ADVICE FROM THIS YEAR'S TEACHING AWARD WINNERS – CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS

This month we'll share information from professors who won major campus wide teaching awards at the University of Arkansas.

1. Dr. Susan Gauch, Professor, Computer Science and Computer Engineering, Charles and Nadine Baum Teaching Award



I believe that being a professor at a flagship state institution is one of the most challenging academic positions. We need to teach large undergraduate classes, small advanced classes, and work one-on-one with graduate students on cutting-edge research. It is a rare person indeed who excels at reaching a large class, inspiring a small group, and mentoring an individual. What they in common is the need for empathy and adaptation. You need empathy to understand the student's perspective so that you can adapt your course or your research based on their background, their concerns, and their goals. One technique I use is that I open up to them first. I use the few minutes before the class starts to chat about what I did on the weekend and ask what they've been up to. During lecture, I use personal anecdotes about where I was when I first learned a particular topic and, when I need sample data, make up humorous examples based on my own family members. That allows them open up to me about their own situation. For large classes, when they let me know that they are stressed about midterms, I adapt by polling to select the best day for our midterm based on their other commitments. In advanced classes, when I see that some (but not all) students are missing required background, I adapt by making certain lectures "attendance optional" to bring those with gaps up to speed with the rest of the class. When mentoring graduate students, I learn their goals and constraints and adapt their advising. Their research plans need to account for whether or not they are aiming for academia or industry, what time constraints a visa might impose, and the impact of family commitments on their studies. It is often easier to empathize with our best students because we can see ourselves in them. The key is to realize that very few will go on to grad school and become professors. Indeed, not all of them will stay in your major or even pass the current class. With empathy, you can make a connection, understand their perspective, and find the best path forward.

2. Dr. Hope Ballentine, Teaching Assistant Professor, Eleanor Mann School of Nursing. Arkansas Alumni Association Rising Professor Award



Over the years, I have found that most students really desire to connect with faculty in a meaningful way. Several strategies for engagement have helped to facilitate these connections. I make it a point to spend a few minutes introducing myself and talking about various passions and interests in order to give students several pathways for connecting. I write a “blurb” about myself in blackboard, but I also include a link to a video I made (and regularly update) about myself. I find that making it fun using programs where you can add music and pictures helps them to engage (I use Adobe Spark Video as it’s simple and free to use). I will play it in the first course meeting (its only 1-2 minutes) in face-to-face classes and ask students in online classes to view it and respond with an introduction video of their own.

Though not necessarily an obvious strategy for connecting with students, utilizing active learning techniques has made a real difference in my courses. Lecturing alone makes personal connections with students difficult. When they are participating in active learning such as working through a case study in small groups, I walk around, and they feel more comfortable asking me questions or clarifying something they did not fully understand. I am also able to engage them individually while I move around the room. For example, I’ll often notice a sticker on a student’s water bottle or computer and ask them about the travel destination it references or which professional sports team they are cheering for based on what I see. For online students, I find that video formats for discussion (I like Flipgrid) rather than traditional written discussion boards increases their connection with both myself and other students.

For me, the most meaningful way to connect with students is through mentoring. Through the years I have mentored many undergraduate honors students and several doctoral students. These are the relationships in which I know I’ve made the most measured impact. I really enjoy helping students develop their honors thesis or doctoral project, but more than this, I enjoy developing personal relationships and watching them transform into professionals. While this almost always happens with my “formal” mentees, I have developed similar relationships with study abroad students and other students with whom I share interests. In meeting with all of these students, we have conversations regarding graduate school or potential nursing positions they have been offered following graduation. I have been able to serve as a reference, source for interview practice, resume reviewer, and celebrator of accomplishments. It’s one of the most rewarding parts of my job to see students get the “internship of a lifetime” or admitted to the graduate school of their dreams after watching them work so hard to make it happen. I would strongly encourage all faculty to find students whom you can

mentor. By sharing enough of yourself so that they can find connection with you and being approachable while still remaining professional, the students will find you.

3. **Dr. Heather Walker, Teaching Assistant Professor, Chemical Engineering - Dr. John and Mrs. Lois Imhoff Award for Outstanding Teaching and Student Mentorship.**



It has been shown that students are motivated to perform better in class when they feel a connection to their teacher. So how do we foster those connections? I do this in a variety of ways in the classroom. First, I talk about the things I like with my students. It could be the movie I saw over the weekend, or my favorite fandoms, or what I fixed for dinner last night. You never know what is going to make a connection with a student. Also, ask about their activities and express enthusiasm. It's interesting to find out that a student is on the mock trial team, writes graphic novels, or has a love for parakeets. I've learned about some really cool hobbies this way, and they appreciate someone caring enough about them to ask. Finally, it's important to have fun occasionally in class. Recently, when we pivoted to remote for the snow days, I shared my favorite recipe for snow ice cream. Some of the students made it with their roommates. They sent me pictures that I shared with the class. It was fun, but it also leads to greater learning. The students want to come to class because they enjoy it. In these post-COVID days, there needs to be a "value add" for coming to class. If students can watch the class video in their pajamas in half the time, then how can you get them to come? You can get them to come to class by making it interesting, letting them know you care about them and having some fun. It's important to build connections with our students, and you'll probably enjoy it more too!

4. **Dr. Alex Nunn, Assistant Professor, School of Law – Top 3 Finalist for the Dr. John and Mrs. Lois Imhoff Award for Outstanding Teaching and Student Mentorship.**



A few years back, I took a moment to reflect on my time as a student. It was easy enough to quickly identify my favorite undergraduate and law school courses, which included a diverse array of classes ranging from evidence law to macroeconomics to securities regulation. An eclectic bunch, to be sure, at least from a substantive standpoint. Yet, to me, the connection between each of these courses was obvious—each was taught by a professor who evinced a genuine passion for their teaching. Their enthusiasm was contagious, so much so that I still remember small substantive details from their classes years later.

Now, as a professor myself, I've tried to emulate the approach of my favorite professors, continually challenging myself to create a classroom that offers an equally engaging, inclusive, and enthusiastic environment. Of course, achieving that goal is not always easy; it requires a deliberate effort. On a granular level, for instance, I've come to appreciate the relational aspect of teaching—the importance of creating an authentic classroom space that gives students room to “be themselves.” On a more technical front, I have also sought to present material in new and dynamic ways, balancing textbook problems with examples that draw material from popular movies, shows, or podcast clips.

Most importantly, though, I always try to bring energy to my lectures—the same energy that I saw in my favorite professors. And I've found that that energy often sets the tone for a class. On days when I'm perhaps a tad bit too lethargic, a class can seem to drag on with minimal student engagement. Yet on days when I bring my full complement of energy to my lecture, the class often feels vibrant, with earnest students mirroring my zeal.

Ultimately, then, I've found that students invest most deeply with the material when they feel comfortable and engaged in the classroom. Enthusiasm is, indeed, contagious.

5. Dr. Jared Phillips, Teaching Assistant Professor, International and Global Studies - Top 3 Finalist for the Dr. John and Mrs. Lois Imhoff Award for Outstanding Teaching and Student Mentorship.



So my approach to working with students is pretty simple: I don't take school and its formalities all that seriously. My students learn about me—what's happening in my family, on my farm, in my writing and research. This is partly just who I am—I'm generally pretty open about my life—but I'm also trying to cultivate an environment where students understand my concerns aren't really about grades and lectures, but about the process of being a better human. I'm clear when topics we cover are pure intellectual discussion (and therefore interesting and often useless) and I pull examples of how I failed as community development person to separate the useless from the useful. I also work to understand when to let things slide; part of it is knowing when to ask them to do better because the work demands it. I think, and have always thought, that students should be able to understand that we academics don't need to take ourselves as seriously as we so often do, so that when we need to be serious about something students are ready to hear us, whatever the topic is. Really, at the end of the day, I ask myself what I need to do to build trust with my students, and I generally do that. It hasn't steered me wrong yet.