

The Role of Faculty in Student Character Development

By Kelly Nolin, Ph.D.

While it is impossible to agree on one definition of “character,” many universities have addressed its various traits through their mission statements and curricula. This appears to be the case at American University. In the Statement of Common Purpose, President Benjamin Ladner emphasizes that “the central commitment of American University is to the development of thoughtful, responsible human beings in the context of a challenging yet supportive academic community.” Indeed, the eleventh point of the Fifteen Point Plan is to “enhance our profile as a values-based institution.” A university’s faculty is perhaps the biggest and best resource it has to operationalize these types of commitments. Because of this, exploring what professors think about this objective becomes important.

As part of my doctoral dissertation, I conducted a study to investigate the role humanities professors believe they can, should, and do play in the character development of undergraduate students. This qualitative study consisted of interviews and classroom observations. These were conducted with professors from Colorado State University, Regis University, and the U.S. Air Force Academy, because they were all named to the Templeton Foundation’s Honor Roll for Character-Building Colleges (1999). This study concluded that: professors feel a responsibility to help their students with character issues, there are a variety of strategies to use in this endeavor, and anecdotal evidence is how most professors assess success.

Although this research lacks direct generalizeability because of its limited size and scope, it is still possible to make recommendations, which AU faculty members may find useful. The following are suggestions for professors interested in more effectively influencing student character development:

- Participate in activities with your students outside of class.
- Consciously decide to influence character but use indirect teaching methods.
- Use teaching strategies that require active student participation.
- Raise questions of character that flow naturally from the subject material.
- Put classroom lessons into a real-world context.
- Encourage students to develop their own values and beliefs.

By putting these suggestions into action, professors might be better equipped to achieve the goals of the university. For further discussion of this study, please see the paper “Student Character Development: What Role Can, Should, and Do Faculty Members Play?” which was handed out during a poster session presented at the Association for the Study of Higher Education 2003 Annual Conference (available online) at: <http://www.admin2.american.edu/~nolin/paper1.htm>.



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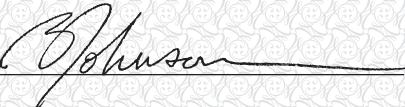
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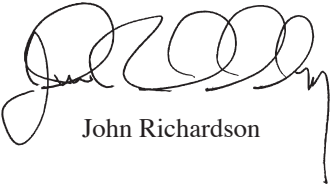
COPING WITH ADVERSITY

Not long ago, a faculty member’s email described CTE as ‘the closest thing we have to an ombudsman at American University.’ Such compliments reinforce our commitments to meeting faculty pedagogy/technology needs and ensuring that those needs are strongly represented.

Meeting our commitments in Fall Semester 2003 posed daunting challenges. A Tsunami of messages awaited me when I returned from an overseas trip in mid-October. You are well aware of the problems they described. My message volume was but a small fraction of that received by Help Desk and other e-operations staff members. Problem-solving was complicated by AU’s complex configuration of diverse, interlinked information technology systems and by an administrative structure that shares responsibility for that configuration between three Vice Presidential Divisions.

I will not sugar-coat our present circumstances. Forestalling future problems and improving system performance will be an ongoing process. But members of AU’s information technology community deserve high marks for effective coping strategies, this fall. As problems mounted, Provost Kerwin and Vice President Don Myers gave IT crisis management top priority. Collegial problem solving paid little heed to administrative formalities. With input from many sources, e-operations produced an elegant status reporting system in record time.

Faculty members played two absolutely critical roles. First, you continued to provide timely, detailed information about problems you were experiencing to information technology staff members, to Carl Whitman and to me. Second, your strong, uncompromising demands, in the face of adversity, affirmed American University’s commitment to excellence in information technology support services for faculty, students and administrators at the cutting edge. CTE is proud to be in the vanguard of that commitment by responding to faculty concerns, amplifying faculty voices and, when needs be, serving as your ombudsman. Please utilize our services fully, continue to share your concerns with me personally and tell us how we can do better.


John Richardson

Areté is often equated, seamlessly, with the English terms ‘virtue,’ ‘excellence,’ ‘goodness’ and ‘knowledge.’ It embodies a belief that “the highest human potential is knowledge and all other human abilities are derived from this central capacity.”

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Social Science Research Lab (SSRL)
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Effective Teaching

Lyn Stallings

When I was approached about writing a brief article on effective teaching, it struck me that I would have to limit the discussion to a very few highlights to maintain the condition of brevity! Obviously effective teaching is a function of thorough content knowledge and awareness of theories of learning. And while there are many other important aspects about effective teaching, self-satisfaction is probably the most indispensable. It is a personal commitment to excellence in teaching that distinguishes the effective teacher from others in their field. It may come as a surprise to some that part of investing one’s “self” into teaching takes only a few moments. I’d like to share a practice that effective teachers employ that contributes to their self-satisfaction.

Whether you are teaching a new course or a “routine” course – even one that you have taught frequently, take a few moments to consider the overarching theme that you would like for students to retain. From your perspective,

“Students are quick to spot disorganization”

what are the “Big Ideas” of the course? If students were to recall taking this course some years later, what would you like to see at the heart of their recollection? What are the underlying themes that support the larger ideas of the course? You can then think about the methods you going to use to reinforce those important ideas.

You may find that as a result of exploring these questions, you may want to try a different approach to the course. The actual planning of the course should revolve around how you want the students to discover the larger ideas along with the supporting themes. You may want to experiment with a combination of lecture, discussion, group work, or explorations that would reinforce key ideas. Plan out particular times in the semester during which you remind students of where you started, where you are now, and where you are heading. Making these long term connections helps with the continuity of the subject-matter and provides you and your students an opportunity to gauge where you have been and where you are heading.

Effective teachers find that this process of reflection helps them to value even the most routine courses and encourages them to experiment with different pedagogical approaches. Identifying what you value in a course gives a sense of personal commitment that students appreciate, even if it is not their favorite subject!

Faculty Profiles: Nathan Harshman - CAS

Engaging Students through Hypothesis-Building in Class

“One of the standards in physics classes is to do demonstrations in front of the classroom,” said Nathan Harshman, an assistant professor in the Computer Science, Audio Technology and Physics department in CAS.

“However, these demonstrations sometimes just wash over the students’ heads,” Harshman said.

If you can make the student form a hypothesis before you do the demonstration, it makes a lot more impact, he said.

“For example, in class I had a big fish tank of water and a boat in it with a weight in the boat. I asked the students what happens if I took the weight out of it and dropped it in the fish tank. Will the water level rise, sink or stay the same? After they have made their first guess, I have them discuss it with their neighbors, and then I do it.”

The water level sinks, by the way, Harshman said. “From there, I usually explain what really happened and why.”

Harshman uses personal response pads to ensure that each student forms a hypothesis before each experiment. The personal response pads which look like remote controls for

“If you can make the student form a hypothesis before you do the demonstration, it makes a lot more impact”

televisions allow every student’s choice to be anonymously recorded on a receiver in the front of the classroom before a demonstration. Harshman will explain more about using personal response pads in classes in an afternoon workshop during the Ann Ferren Teaching Conference at 1:45 P.M. on January 10, 2004. Faculty seeking training on personal response pads can call the Center for Teaching Excellence at ext. 6077 or 2553. Faculty seeking to reserve personal response pads for use in their classes should call the Faculty Corner at ext. 2734. –Jim McCabe

Faculty Profiles: Peter Kuznick - CAS

Creating Space for Controversy in the Classroom

“The key to establishing the proper climate in the first place is to be very straightforward with the students as to one’s own philosophy of teaching and one’s own biases and political views,” said Peter Kuznick, an associate professor of history in CAS. “ I explain to them at the very beginning that I consider teaching to be a process not only of imparting information but an act of persuasion, and what they receive in my classes is going to be my interpretation of history and my choice of issues and topics that I consider most important for their understanding,” Kuznick said. “This is particularly the case because I offer courses that deal with some of the most controversial and troubling aspects of American history including slavery and racism, war and peace, the struggle for social justice within a capitalist-dominated world order, the treatment of women throughout U.S. history, sexual freedom and repression, the cultural impact of mass media, science and social responsibility, the history of American radicalism, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the subsequent threat of nuclear annihilation, the Cold War, and the U.S. invasion of Vietnam.

“But I always make it clear that other historians may have different interpretations of many of these controversial issues. I explain that history is not about the truth with a capital ‘T,’ but is an evolving process of interpretation and analysis based on the strongest possible evidence. I encourage them to feel free to express their views honestly and passionately and let them know that they will not be rewarded in terms of grades for agreeing with me or penalized for disagreeing.

“Because the students tend to be liberal, I often find that I have to bend over backwards to create an environment where conservative or otherwise dissenting students feel free to express their views openly. I often find that other students can be impatient with or dismissive of students who express unpopular views. For example, there is little patience for or acceptance of attitudes that suggest opposition to diversity or any racial intolerance. I have also seen this erupt when students defend the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or U.S. policy in Vietnam.

“One of the keys is for me to engage the students seriously and respectfully. Often instead of challenging a student’s views directly or responding with information that would discredit those views, I gently pose questions that

would allow a student to think for him or herself about the deeper implications of what he or she is saying which is also the key to forcing the students who are in the majority to

think about the deeper implications of what they believe.

“I often find myself having to run interference for some of the more conservative students. I usually call on them more than students in the majority. The key to being a good teacher from a pedagogical standpoint is to skillfully listen to what students are saying and use the concerns that they express and the points that they raise to force them to become conscious of underlying assumptions and conceptualize the issues on a deeper and more profound level. The most valuable thing I can teach students, even more than the specific information I might impart, is the ability to think critically for themselves—the ability to ask the right questions.

“The students who I enjoy the most and connect with the best are the ones, whether liberal, conservative, or neither, who care about what is happening in the world and take ideas seriously,” Kuznick said, “understanding that ideas have consequences and how one understands the past will shape how one acts in the future.” –Jim McCabe

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