Wittke – Jackson Award Recipients: Core Seminar

Seminar Description

The 2014 winners of the prestigious Carl F. Wittke and J. Bruce Jackson MD Awards will offer their insight about student-centered teaching and mentoring undergraduates. These faculty were nominated by their students and selected by a student committee. For more information about the award process, visit https://students.case.edu/awards/wittkejackson.html.

For our fall session, Dr. Yoram Daon, from Modern Languages and Literatures, and Dr. Deepak Sarma, from Religious Studies, will speak. They both won a Jackson award for their mentoring.

For our spring session, Dr. Katia Almeida, from Anthropology, and Dr. Lisa Nielson, from Music, will speak. They both won a Wittke award for their teaching.

The purpose of this seminar is for the CWRU community, and specifically new Teaching Assistants, to hear from those who are masterful in creating positive, helpful connections with their students in and out of the classroom. These faculty will share their best practices with their audiences.

Seminar Objectives

- To hear from faculty and staff recognized for their teaching and mentoring through a student-led award program
- To have an opportunity to ask questions of these faculty and staff
- To add strategies and approaches to your teaching / mentoring repertoire
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Mentoring and Student-Centered Teaching

First-year students here at CWRU spend most of their class time in courses with large enrollments, sometimes with hundreds of classmates. They may feel disconnected from their academic experience because they seldom have much interaction with their faculty except during their SAGES courses, where enrollment is limited to 17 students per section. They may also feel uncomfortable approaching their faculty because they perceive their professors as experts in their respective fields. These students may imagine that their faculty would not understand their questions or relate to their frustrations or challenges with the course content. Therefore, a mentoring relationship and supportive, student-centered teaching strategies are essential for helping undergraduates, especially first-year students, to achieve a foothold in their academic communities. This is where Teaching Assistants (TAs) are key to undergraduates.

Effective Mentoring

TAs, using some really basic interpersonal communication strategies, may establish informal mentoring relationships with their students, encouraging these students to have patience as they master content material, increase their understanding of potential career fields, and just find their place in the academic community. Effective mentoring means being available during office hours as well as before and after class. Before students will feel secure enough to discuss issues with a course, they have to feel comfortable with their TA. Additionally, TAs need to work on establishing a sense of community in their classrooms or labs. This aspect of mentoring is finding the right mix between challenge and support. “The tighter and more supportive to community, the more likely … [students] are to produce consistent and reliable work in an enjoyable manner” (Pita, Ramirez, Joacin, Prentice, & Clarke, 2013, p. 12).

Effective mentoring requires also that mentors are attentive, meaning that if students’ performance is flagging, TAs will reach out to students via email, office hours, and conversations before and after class. Teachers can also stay in contact with students about course progress by breaking up assignments into smaller, more manageable parts that require a check-in.

Finally, within reason, teachers should understand when “undergraduates are under tremendous stress” (p. 13) because of underestimate[ing] the work load and time commitment for their classes [that] their classes require or … [feeling] overwhelmed by the transitions faced in college and the responsibilities of life” (p. 13). While students may have created a situation in
which they cannot salvage their grade, teachers should still try to help these students find the best ways to use campus resources to move forward in subsequent semesters. While ideally, professors should take on the role of teacher and mentor for their students, they may be overcome by the sheer numbers of students in their classes. TAs can help reach out to students within their sections, perhaps being in the students’ lives at the right time when they need help. Teaching is more than just bringing the content to class; it is also about bringing a caring, perceptive attitude.

Inexperienced teachers, especially, may focus more on course content, thinking that students will expect perfectly accurate and interesting lectures and labs. While it is true that students want their professors and TAs “know their stuff,” most students also hope their strengths and challenges are recognized and addressed. Meeting this expectation requires that teachers and TAs offer student-centered educational experiences, by “recogniz[ing] the complex set of social, emotional, and intellectual challenges that college students face” (Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, & Norman, 2010, p. 158). As Ambrose et al. (2010) point out, teachers and TAs should be strive to counsel students about life issues; instead, they should strive to “create more productive learning environment” (p. 158). This climate needs to take into account where students may be intellectually and socially in their development.

While theorists have offered paradigms for characterizing how college students progress through understanding themselves and their academic capabilities, given the variance on student populations caused by an influx of international students, veterans returning from service, nontraditional students in general as well as first-generation college students, theory on student development must be tempered with practiced ways of informally and formally assessing students for their comfort level with the classroom climate, content, and faculty. In other words, “learning doesn’t happen in a vacuum but in a course and classroom context where intellectual pursuits interface with socioemotional issues” (p. 180). While there is no easy answer for how to accomplish this type of nurturing environment, TAs need to be intentional in their efforts to pursue this type of student-centered learning. Ambrose et al. (2010) in their textbook How Learning Works: 7 Research–based Principles for Smart Teaching, off practical suggestions for developing a student-centered curriculum.
Works Cited


Additional Resources

Print


Electronic
