

## **Northern Essex Community College Students Participate in Focus Group**

*“The reason that course was the best for me, personally, was because the professor was available. He was approachable before and after class, to ask questions to.”*

*“She (the professor) has made herself available in the lab, to help the students that feel they are falling behind.”*

Students with learning disabilities from Northern Essex Community College (NECC) offered these comments about their best professors in a focus group for the Universal Design for Instruction Project. Northern Essex Community College (<http://www.necc.mass.edu/>) is located in Haverhill Massachusetts. NECC offers two-year associate and transfer degrees and certificate programs in over 80 fields of study, and serves students in the Haverhill-Lawrence, Massachusetts region. Northern Essex Community College participates in the Universal Design for Instruction Project as a Collaborating Institution. (See a description of Collaborating Institution activities in the previous issue of the UDI On-line Newsletter.)

Student focus groups such as this one, conducted in April 2001, provide an opportunity to learn about effective teaching strategies from the student point of view. “I felt this forum was a great learning experience for myself and the students,” stated Susan Cunningham, Disability Services Manager of Northern Essex’s Learning Accommodations Center, who helped facilitate the group with Roxanne Cirelli, Director of the Center, and Dr. Sally Scott, Project Coordinator of the Universal Design for Instruction Project. The students provided a lively dialogue that offers their insights into the importance of the role of the instructor in presenting an effective college course. “I was very impressed with the group and the way they were able to articulate their

feelings,” Ms. Cunningham said, “The group mentioned some specific teaching methods or strategies that were helpful to them.”

A good college course is a course with a professor who is approachable. Being approachable, the students stated, means being receptive to students’ questions. Learning is enhanced for all students when a professor creates a classroom climate of trust. Professors who create trust in the classroom make it possible for students to come forward with their questions.

When these NECC students ask questions, they appreciate getting answers from their professors, or even some strategies about what to do if they are feeling lost in the material. “Basically, he would let you know what he was looking for,” one student said of a favorite professor. Speaking of an English professor who helped with editing, an appreciative student described the professor’s artful strategy for using questions related to writing papers, “ She’ll just give me more ideas to go on if I’m puzzled about what to put in the next sentence. The way she teaches, she won’t do the whole thing. She’ll make you think, she’ll ask you questions. She’ll give you key words that make you think and figure out on your own.”

Taking questions to the professor can be a daunting experience for students, and they are sensitive to how their questions are received. An atmosphere of mutual respect in a community of learners encourages students to take the initiative and ask about things that need clarification. Answers and strategies offered by the NECC students’ favorite professors are truly appreciated, but students in this group advised that less structured responses to their questions sometimes led to frustration. One student noted her

preference for having a dialogue with the professor rather than receiving a professor's advice to "think about it and come back later."

In the eyes of these Northern Essex Community College students, being an excellent professor involves more than simply being available in office hours. They appreciate feeling that they can ask questions when they need help and will get a supportive response. The students don't necessarily feel they need a formal, extensive, individualized question and answer session in their professor's office. Rather, students stated that they prefer a class atmosphere that allows for questions, or some time immediately before or after class to ask the professor about something that isn't clear to them. A student in the focus group described a favorite professor who built in time for questions as part of the daily routine of the class. "It wasn't a separate office hour," he stated, speaking of his favorite professor who made time before and after class for questions from the class. "It's the one-on-one attention that makes the difference. I don't think it is specifically for the learning disabled students. I think it could apply to any student in the class," he explained. "Just, basically, become involved with your class."

Some professors at Northern Essex Community College go beyond just accepting student questions. They turn the tables on the students and ask them the questions to keep tabs on their progress and learning. Individually focused questions are used in classes and labs as a strategy for assessing the progress of a class overall in mastering a concept. Some of the students' favorite professors use this technique to adjust the pace of a course to meet students' needs. Pacing the development of course concepts carefully can be an important influence on how students build their comprehension of course material. An understanding of what is essential to students' learning combined

with a knowledge of how to get the individual student to progress in the course are effective guides that professors can use to set a pace for optimal learning.

Experienced professors seek feedback from their students to determine if the pace is appropriate for a particular class. A favorite NECC algebra professor got high marks from students for using this technique. “She’s always inquiring with all the students on where they’re at, on an individual basis,” explained one student. “And she’ll slow the class down, she actually won’t move on until the class has their studies down.” he added. “It’s not just the structured ‘Let’s get through the book’. It’s more about comprehension.”

Another student, describing a professor’s use of this technique, stated, “She is marvelous in understanding that not everyone is going to understand the prescribed concepts of the class at the same time. She can focus on that, and go further if you don’t understand it. She can stop at any time. She literally takes control of the schedule at any time.” This professor meets the students’ standards for approachability because of her willingness to field all levels of questions about algebra concepts and respond to the individual’s needs. As one student stated, “There isn’t anything you couldn’t ask her that she probably hasn’t already been through in this material.”

The student focus group at Northern Essex Community College provides important insights into which teaching strategies students find to be the most helpful. Although the students represented diverse majors and described favorite teachers from several different academic disciplines, they showed agreement in describing their best professors and best courses at college. As Ms. Cunningham observed, “The pervasive theme was that the students learned most effectively from teachers who were

approachable, flexible, and showed a willingness to understand individual learning needs.”