

## **Practical Advice on Teaching From Outstanding Faculty**

A Chinese proverb states that when the student is ready, the teacher appears. If you're a University of Connecticut student, the teacher who appears may be a UConn Teaching Fellow. Each year, University of Connecticut senior faculty and academic administrators recognize exemplary teaching by nominating four professors to receive the honor of being named a University of Connecticut Teaching Fellow. Teaching Fellows are honored with special funds for their instructional programs, celebrated at an awards dinner, and presented with medallions at commencement. In return for these honors, Teaching Fellows give workshops sponsored by the University's Institute of Teaching and Learning (director, Dr. Keith Barker is a member of the UDI advisory board.). In addition, Teaching Fellows allow graduate teaching assistants to visit their classrooms and they also serve as mentors to other faculty. We asked a group of these exemplary professors what advice they would give to new faculty about how to be an effective teacher. Read on as we share their practical tips for successful college teaching.

As a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology, Dr. Janine Caira collects specimens from around the world to share with her Invertebrate Zoology and Parasitology classes. It's not surprising to learn that someone who maintains a large collection of specimens places a high value on being organized. Dr. Caira's advice to new faculty is to do a lot of organizing when you have large quantities of information to present. She works hard to organize the primary literature for her classes, helping her students get the most up to date information on the latest developments in her field of science. Dr. Caira explains that being organized in your teaching shows your commitment to your students. Here are her comments on the importance of prompt

feedback to students: “I think what happens to a lot of people is you’re so overwhelmed, you give an exam, and you don’t turn it back in a timely fashion because you don’t think you have the time. But in the end, you have to grade the exam. Why not make it a priority?” It’s also important to set out the specifics in your syllabus and be able to stick to them, she explains, “But it means you have to spend that little bit of time beforehand getting the whole thing sort of set up. You have to organize at the beginning.” On the importance of clarity in the syllabus, Dr. Cairra advises, “Students get frustrated when it changes over time. Bottom line, if they don’t know what’s expected of them they don’t like it. So I think if that’s clear it’s better for everybody.”

As a professor of psychology who teaches introductory level psychology classes, Dr. David Miller has observed that there is a potential for small disasters in a very large class. Dr. Miller, who uses the latest multimedia technology in his teaching, must also solve some old-fashioned teaching problems, especially in dealing with large classes of less experienced students. “In teaching large classes, a lot is going to go wrong. It’s usually not your fault,” he advises. Dr. Miller encourages new faculty to set their course policies and then to maintain those policies throughout the semester. “People may not make explicit or think clearly enough about what their course policies are regarding things like make-up exams, things like that. So work all that out before you begin and don’t change it within the course of the semester. Modify it between semesters.” As a professor who teaches a lot of freshman students, Dr. Miller advises keeping a perspective on the needs and experiences of your students. “As bad as things might look, they’re probably not that bad in reality. Students at the freshman level have no clue as to what a major Research One university is like, coming out of high school.” Dr. Miller

observes that a lot of freshmen level complaints may be related to these beginning students' adjustment to the new academic expectations of university level study. Course requirements that seem to create problems for freshmen students do not cause the same concerns for sophomores, juniors, and seniors, Dr. Miller notes. In large introductory classes, "You're going to have a lot of very ill-prepared students in there. You've got to decide at what level you're going to teach, and then stick to it," he advises. "The bottom line is: have patience, relax, maintain a sense of humor, and teach a scholarly course."

Dr. Thomas Terry, professor of molecular and cell biology, teaches General Biology for majors and non-majors, as well as General Microbiology and Biology of Human Health and Disease. "All of these are large courses," he explains. "The challenge is how to keep things fair for a large number of people, being sensitive to the exceptions and the problems that come up for individuals." In these large and diverse classes, Dr. Terry observes that the students always share a common interest. "Probably the single item that's of greatest concern to students is exams and grades. And I've found that with a large class the issue of how to give make-up exams is important." Dr. Terry finds that scheduling make-up exams right into his syllabus is helpful. "With a class that's this large it's just an inevitable fact of nature that you're going to have people who are sick, people who have problems. So I believe in make-up exams as an opportunity. I make it very clear that I want advance warning, if possible. I hardly ever turn people down. And having make-up exams gives me the opportunity to occasionally deal with a student who really had a bad day and wants a chance to redeem himself. So I can let them take a make-up and I can average the two grades and give them a chance." This experienced professor anticipates cyclical variations in student attendance and plans exams

accordingly. “I always schedule my exams for Friday, because Friday is the day when people have the greatest temptation not to come to class. It’s nice to have the exam over before the weekend, so you can relax.” If you’re a student who is sick on exam day, this professor of human health and biology has your needs in mind when he sets his course policies on make-up exams. Dr. Terry explains, “Since about half the reasons that people miss exams are due to illness, and typically speaking an illness is over in about a week, I do the make-up a week later. It’s not the Monday after the exam, but the Monday after that.” How specific does he get about his make-up exam policy? Dr. Terry brings up his syllabus on the web and explains, “At the beginning of the semester I draw their attention to the make-up schedule. If you miss an exam, for any reason, and you have my permission to take the make-up, here’s a place and a time and a room.” Dr. Terry finds the advance planning pays off. He explains, “It turns out that just a simple matter like that takes an enormous amount of pressure off all of us.”

Dr. Robert Gallo, professor of physiology and neurobiology, has allowed experience to teach him the value of carefully pacing his lecture content. “When I first started to teach, my first lecture ever, I had no sense of how much material could fit into a class,” Dr. Gallo recalls. Organization and preparation are important in effective teaching, Dr. Gallo advises. When planning your lecture, he believes, “You’ve got to go in there and know what’s going to happen.” Dr. Gallo chooses explanatory material with care. “I always try to make it relevant to their lives, so it’s not just the facts. It’s not something that’s just a subject to study; it’s something that they can relate to.” As a new professor, Dr. Gallo was videotaped while teaching, which led him to new insights into becoming an even better teacher. “When I saw myself writing on the blackboard, I

couldn't even read it. I realized you have to organize the way you put things on the board." In responding to questions from the class, Dr. Gallo advises new faculty to take a straightforward approach. "If you don't know the answer, just tell the student you don't know. I look up the answer, then I come back with the answer rather than stand up there trying to talk my way through it." Investing time in organization and preparation can lead new faculty to more effective teaching, Dr. Gallo advises, "It's just fun, a good feeling when you walk out and you know you clicked."

Across the disciplines, these experienced professors who have been honored as effective teachers all put a high value on being organized. They consider their course requirements and policies carefully, setting them out clearly in the syllabus. They make plans and stick to them. They give prompt feedback to their students. They put a lot of preparation into their lectures, linking facts to real life examples that relate to students' lives. UConn Teaching Fellows believe that new faculty can find their way to effectiveness in teaching through organization and preparation, and that the journey to becoming an exemplary teacher is exciting and rewarding.