

Student Perceptions of Teaching Excellence at Virginia Tech:

A White Paper Highlighting the Interactions of an Undergraduate Student Panel with the Academy of Teaching Excellence (ATE) at Virginia Tech

Presented by

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Background. On Monday, November 3, 2014, the ATE held a business meeting at the Inn at Virginia Tech. At this meeting, a panel of undergraduate students (Chloe Benner, Classical Studies, chloeb9@vt.edu; Aidan Hughes, International Studies, aidanh12@vt.edu; Catherine Klancher, Biological Sciences, cklanch@vt.edu; Rachel Montague, Architecture, rachelm1@vt.edu; Mai Ngo, Chemical Engineering, nmai11@vt.edu; and Tanushri Shankar, Communication, tanushri@vt.edu) shared their candid perceptions of teaching excellence at Virginia Tech. This lively discussion led to a working dinner on November 14, 2014, where representatives from the student group and the ATE translated these perceptions into a call to action. This white paper is a result of the meeting and the dinner; it is a call for (1) Virginia Tech to develop a formal engagement plan to inject teaching excellence into the University and (2) the ATE to formalize student participation in the annual Fall meeting to continue to develop shared ideas for raising the standard of excellence in teaching at Virginia Tech.

Teachers at Virginia Tech are expected to be engaged, knowledgeable, fair and tolerant. An *excellent* teacher at Virginia Tech is someone that:

(1) expresses interest in student development outside of the course(s) they teach. This is vital to capturing and retaining student interest in specific disciplines. Some advisors were not deemed appropriate for these engagement activities; their talents were best applied to logistical issues to keep students on track for graduation.

(2) incorporates students into class activity. Consider learning the names of the students, and placing students into stories and examples in the classroom. The students become the tool for engagement, and the inclusion is the driver that fills the seats and captures the attention of students. Consider involving a narrative in their in-class activity that encourages developing a working knowledge of individual students.

(3) clearly articulates the rules, regulations, and expectations for the course.

Why learn something you can look up? Clearly articulate the goals of the course, and why the course is important for the students. Set boundaries for distractions in the classroom (e.g., the appropriate use of electronic devices during class). Why are you here? Why are you learning this stuff? Why are you waking up early to go to class and walk across the drillfield in subzero temperatures? When are you available for office hours, and are you committed to be available during that time period? Why should a student attend your class if they can look it up? What is the difference from being in a class and watching a lecture on YouTube?

(4) listens and responds to student feedback about the course. Provide opportunities for the students to give feedback for the course throughout the semester. And the response to the feedback should be considered dynamic; iterative revisions of the style and nature of the course. There should be an efficient mechanism to deliver student assessments to faculty in an appropriate amount of time.

(5) asks the students to summarize the content of what was taught/learned.

This engagement becomes a query of effective teaching. The faculty member now can match intent to teach with what was really taught, and modify the teaching style appropriately to adequately convey concepts.

(6) allows the students to provide self evaluations of their performance in the course throughout the semester. This is a unique opportunity for faculty to allow students to give balanced observations; consider aspects of where they don't measure up, and what they might have done differently to make things better.

(7) brings experts to class to provide engaging guest lectures on related course topics. This provides a unique opportunity for students to learn from the leaders in the field, often connecting students directly to a career path or a job opportunity.

(8) provides engagement opportunities outside of the classroom, such as field trips, internships, and technology immersion. For example, teaching concepts of fabrication inside a fabrication facility.

(9) uses props to enhance the lecture. For example, a lecture on the production of truffles might include an opportunity for the students to sample truffle oil.

(10) provides small breaks to energize the students (and the teacher) in the classroom. For example, consider two-minute breaks spaced throughout the lecture to engage the students and the teacher in lively discussion.

(11) tells a story that is relevant to students and the world they live in.

Consider making concepts current and relatable; bringing the real world into the classroom.

(12) flips the classroom. Consider teaching material first, and then having students follow up with specific readings. Focus should be on concepts in the classroom, and specific, supporting information at home (i.e., teach the main concept in class, then assign vocabulary and practice exercises as a follow-up).

(13) creates controversy. What is the opinion of the professor, and what is that of the author of the article or textbook? How do these opinions differ? Who is right?

(14) is humble. Faculty should own up to the fact that they don't know everything. And if they don't know, they should find out, or find someone who does.

(15) creates opportunities for students by connecting them with subject matter experts. For example, consider sending emails connecting students to experts at other institutions, including the students in the conversations.

(16) has a syllabus demonstrating a clear vision for the course. The syllabus should highlight what the students are going to get out of this and why it is credible/reliable. Credible resources. Explanations of how grades and curves work, and the philosophy of grading. Provide information about resources that are available for students that need help; sickness, need more time, learning disabilities, etc.

(17) gives exams that fit inside the time frame allotted and are an appropriate assessment of the knowledge learned.

(18) teaches in a physical environment that facilitates and enhances student learning. Classrooms should be void of obstructions (e.g., columns blocking student views), have adequate heating and cooling, be free of mold and dust, have appropriate audio/visual resources, provide adequate lighting conditions, and comfortable seats and writing surfaces.

(19) strikes a right balance between providing students with the traditional classroom activities and utilizing the online course resources to maximize effective learning.