

## Teaching Philosophy—Laura K. Palmer

During my time at Penn State Altoona, I've taught classes with as many as 120 students and as few as six students; I've taught science majors and non-majors; I've taught first-semester freshmen and seniors who were in their last semesters of college. I've learned there is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach to lecturing or interacting with students. Adjusting to new student populations and classroom dynamics is a continual challenge, but one I find exciting and incredibly rewarding.

Many teachers prefer to teach students who come to the classroom with good study skills, intrinsic motivation for learning, and a clear desire to succeed in their coursework. While Penn State Altoona has its share of these students, there is also a considerable population of "higher-risk" students. Many of these students are first-generation college students who are away from home for the first time and are not only adjusting to the rigors of the college classroom, but to living independently for the first time as well. It is this population of students that I feel I've had the biggest impact upon, and who've had the biggest impact on me as an educator. Below, I'll summarize some of the goals I've developed for myself as a result of these interactions:

**Goal #1: Establish clear expectations within the classroom.** I feel it is important to be as clear as possible regarding how a student should conduct himself/herself in order to be successful in my courses. I've put substantial effort into creating syllabi that are detailed enough in this respect without being so long that they overwhelm a student on the first day of class. I strive to be fair in my assessment of student learning, and have found that articulating my expectations in writing not only holds students accountable for their actions throughout the semester, but holds me accountable for enforcing these policies as well.

**Goal #2: Challenge and motivate students.** I do not feel it is adequate to simply give a lecture, leave the classroom, and go about the rest of my day. As a professor, it is my responsibility to find ways to reach students, whether this takes place in the classroom, in my office, in my research lab, or somewhere else on campus. I especially try to take advantage of the "teaching moments" that happen outside of the classroom, as these opportunities are often initiated by a student's curiosity of a particular topic. Whether it is talking about an article on science from a current newspaper or discussing a recent episode of "C.S.I." or "House", not only do these moments show students that the material they learn in class is applicable to the world around them, but they help students learn to think critically, make sound scientific judgments, and sometimes even refute claims presented in the popular media.

**Goal #3: Facilitate student involvement.** Particularly in large classes, it can be difficult to engage students and get them actively involved in the classroom. One of the things I try to do in each class (including large lectures of 80 students or more) is learn the names of all the students. Once students are recognized by name, they seem to feel more comfortable and included in the classroom. They recognize that I view them as individuals and care about their personal progress, and often respond by participating in class.

**Goal #4: Be a mentor and role model.** Mentoring students is a role I take very seriously. I work hard to "practice what I preach" to students regarding being prepared for class, respecting others, and holding myself accountable for my actions. I also think it is important for students to see how I handle situations where I don't know the right answer to a question or appropriate course of action to take regarding a problem. Teaching students that it is OK to say, "I don't know, but I'll find out" is a valuable tool; often, exciting discoveries develop from situations where the "unexpected" initially happened.

**Goal #5: Encourage an interest in life-long learning.** I often use the analogy that the facts, mechanisms, and skills students learn in class are just "tools" they are adding to their "toolbox" of knowledge, and what ultimately matters isn't necessarily how many tools a person obtains, but how well they utilize and take care of their tools over time. Tools that receive little use become rusty; it can become difficult or impossible to use them if this happens. I want to encourage students to fill their "toolboxes" with good tools that they can use for the rest of their lives. If I can teach a student *how* to study, he/she can apply that to any course, not just biology. If I can show a student *how* to go about finding an answer to a question posed in class, he/she can apply that skill when posed questions in the future. By taking an active role in modeling *how* to learn, I feel I am preparing my students not only for their intended careers, but to become life-long learners as well.