

# TEACHING & LEARNING

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## “ENGAGING STUDENTS: Researching and Advocating for First-Year Academic Success”

Dr. Edna Keeble, Political Science

### *The Teaching Scholar Program*

Hard to believe that the end of the first semester is just around the corner, and for many of us teaching first-year courses, we end up making similar observations: where are our students? Why are they not in class?

This question underpins my work as the 2008-09 Teaching Scholar. Third to hold the position, I follow in the footsteps of my colleagues, Shelagh Crooks in Philosophy and Adam Sarty in Astronomy and Physics. They actually helped me to get the ball rolling this year because, along with Roxanne Richardson in CAID, we facilitated a teaching and learning workshop on August 28 about engaging students. Lucky me to be the Teaching Scholar this year because this is a great program that recognizes the importance of scholarly activities that support and promote excellence in teaching and learning at Saint Mary's. And the support for these scholarly activities is real. The Teaching Scholar is given a one-course teaching reduction to focus on the advancement of a particular area within the scholarship of teaching and the promotion of scholarly teaching more widely at the university. In other words, there are two facets to the work of the Teaching Scholar: research and advocacy. As I discuss the two facets of my work this year, I hope that many of you will consider applying for the 2009-2010 Teaching Scholar Program.

### *Researching First-Year Academic Success*

Engagement is crucial to first-year success. As a political scientist, the relationship between civic engagement and student engagement is crucial because my discipline has had a long-standing belief in its responsibility for helping to produce responsible citizens. Civic engagement and

student engagement are connected because active citizenship is nurtured in the work that we do in the classroom. Whether we teach about civic engagement through the use of case-studies, such as highlighting efforts of specific individuals who have worked for the betterment of society, or teach through civic engagement by building the skills necessary for students to live and act as responsible citizens, it is by engaging students in the classroom that we as faculty nurture civically-minded, engaged individuals.

This year, I am engaging my students in the introductory political science course in a new way. They are participating in a nine-week, on-line discussion on the U.S. presidential election with peers in the classroom, as well as with students from the State University of New York in Plattsburgh. In lieu of doing a major research paper, the students participate in a “Democracy Lab.” The Democracy Lab is an on-line educational tool based at the Institute on the Common Good at Regis University in Denver, Colorado. It brings students from two or more universities together in small groups of ten, guided by a facilitator, in order to foster student-to-student learning and to promote civic engagement. Although the current focus is on the presidential election, the purpose is to teach them about deliberation. It is a way of communicating that emphasizes respectful, informed, on-going discussion with others based on cooperation and openness to new ideas and, not surprisingly, underpins the understanding of “deliberative democracy.” This is strictly peer learning so I am not involved in their on-line discussions. Although my students know that I monitor their posts and responses, they are given the freedom and independence to explore ideas away from



my authority as the professor. At the same time, they make on-line contributions taken from work we have done in the classroom. They also, in class, bring up

questions that arise in their on-line discussions. This provides the students with ways of making connections between what they are doing on-line and what we are doing in the classroom.

Because the Democracy Lab is entirely on-line, this tool is directed at the technologically savvy, wired, Facebook/MySpace/IM generation. From a research perspective, I am able to capture a great deal of data surrounding my students' use of the technology (for example, in terms of when and for how long they spend on-line accessing resources, making and responding to posts, and so forth) as well as their exposure to and embracement of deliberation as a way of communicating with peers. Already I have been forced to re-examine some of my assumptions stemming from the literature on the millennial generation. Engaging students, particularly at the first-year level, may have little to do with the technology and more to do with the students. I look forward to presenting the empirical data generated from my students' participation in the Democracy Lab at a future teaching and learning conference as well as one in political science.

### *Advocating for First-Year Academic Success*

Dedicated, committed professors are crucial to first-year student success. That is why I have brought together a group of professors who regularly teach first-year courses. Calling ourselves “A Community of Practice of First-Year Academic Success,” this group is composed of 11 professors from all three faculties (Arts, Commerce and Science), reflecting gender-balance, representing all

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# Teaching Scholar Program

## Call for Proposals – 2009/10 Academic Year

In 2006/07 Saint Mary's introduced a Teaching Scholar Program. The purpose of the program is to promote the development of inquiry into teaching and learning within the university. At the core of the program is the Teaching Scholar.

**The Teaching Scholar** will be both an advocate for teaching and learning initiatives and a teaching scholar in his/her own right.

**Advocacy:** The Teaching Scholar will identify a teaching/learning issue; bring it to the attention of colleagues and others within the university, and possibly further afield; and act in an advisory, consultative capacity on the Quality of Teaching Committee and across campus.

**Scholarship:** The Teaching Scholar will build on his/her Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) interests by conducting a teaching/learning focused research project and disseminating the results.

The Scholar will be given a one course reduction (1.0) in teaching for an academic year and will be associated with, and supported in their work by, the Center for Academic and Instructional Development (CAID).

For further information on the Teaching Scholar program including detailed submission procedures and criteria, please refer to the CAID webpage: [www.smu.ca/administration/caid/scholar.html](http://www.smu.ca/administration/caid/scholar.html)

### Submission Procedures

Interested faculty should forward a 4 – 5 page proposal to the Director, Center for Academic and Instructional Development, outlining:

- Teaching/Learning Issue
- SoTL Research Topic and Goals

- Rationale and Relevance to Academic Plan Priorities
- Methodology and Results
- Dissemination Strategies

The ability of a faculty member to participate in this Program during the 2009/10 academic year should be compatible with the operational requirements of the Department. Proposals should therefore be supported by the Chair of the Department and the Dean of the Faculty.

### Submission Deadline

Proposals should be submitted to the Director, Center for Academic and Instructional Development, by January 7, 2009.

### Proposal Consultation

Applicants who wish to discuss their ideas and/or proposal before submission, are invited to contact previous Teaching Scholars – Shelagh Crooks, Philosophy; Adam Sarty, Astronomy and Physics; or Edna Keeble, Political Science.

### Selection Process

Applications will be reviewed by the Director, CAID; a sub-committee of the Quality of Teaching Committee, and the Vice-President, Academic and Research. The successful applicant will be notified of his/her selection by February 28, 2009



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ranks (Full Professor, Associate Professor and Assistant Professor), and including part-time faculty. We will meet six times throughout the 2008-09 academic year in order: 1) to understand the context, challenges, differences and similarities of the first-year experience of our students; 2) to share, learn, and reflect on the best ways to engage students, specifically at the first-year level; and 3) to provide input to an end-of-year document about how to create and sustain individual faculty champions for first-year student success.

According to Etienne Wenger: "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." After just one meeting, our community of practice has specifically endorsed, and will actively pursue, institutionalized faculty access to their students' pictures along with their class lists. Anyone who has tried to remember

their students' faces and names will relish this idea, and for those who haven't, there won't be an excuse! We know that professor-student relations are crucial to student success, and our priority is to make student engagement a top priority in the first-year classroom at Saint Mary's.

We know that there are various reasons why students may not be in our classrooms these days. Not having to abide by requirements for mandatory attendance as in high school, they may be relishing their newfound freedom. Not used to the demands of university courses, they may be using classroom time as study time for other courses. Or, maybe, just maybe, not feeling engaged in what is happening in our classrooms, they decide not to come. In that case, we need to ask: what can we do?

Researching and advocating for first-year academic success has become my passion this year. I hope that you will think about what teaching and learning issue captivates you and then consider applying for the 2009 – 2010 Teaching Scholar Program.

See Etienne Wenger's homepage:

<http://www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm>.

The theoretical underpinnings of his work can be found in Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998; reprinted 2003).

### Stay in touch

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this and future issues of *Teaching & Learning*.

Email [margaret-anne.bennett@smu.ca](mailto:margaret-anne.bennett@smu.ca)

Tel 420.5087

or visit our office at MM202C