

No More Ivory Tower:

Faculty Adapt in Changing Times

By Dr. Beth M. Schwartz

In less than a year as Heidelberg's provost, Dr. Beth M. Schwartz has already assumed an essential role in leading Heidelberg's transformation, improvement and growth. She joined Heidelberg's senior leadership team last July, after having served as assistant dean at Randolph College in Lynchburg, Va. What's more, she has nearly a quarter century of teaching and academic leadership in the field of psychology, which makes her ideally suited to comment here on the evolving role of the college professor.



Many people outside of the world of higher education see the role of the college professor unchanged over the last few decades. And indeed, many aspects of the life of a professor remain the same. Yet, external factors have forced professors to re-evaluate their roles on campus and modify how they do their jobs.

Talk to faculty members at Heidelberg, and you'll hear that they still spend many hours preparing for the next day's classes and evenings grading stacks of exams or papers. On a weekly basis, they still spend hours meeting with students to review class material, have discussions with majors about their future or simply talk about life in general.

What many outside of higher education do not realize is that when not in class or with students, our faculty often serve the university on numerous committees such as Heidelberg's Academic Policy Committee or the Faculty Development Committee – all in place as part of the governance structure. These responsibilities are not likely to change; they are full-time commitments during the academic year. As scholars, faculty also carve out time to maintain expertise in their discipline and continue their research or performing in the arts. This focus on teaching, service and scholarship will always be on the to-do list for all full-time professors. The strength of an institution depends on it.

But professors' lives – especially those at smaller institutions like Heidelberg – are evolving. A number of variables come into play, including, for example, pressures from accrediting agencies (evidence, assessment, accountability), innovations in technology, findings from the scholarship on teaching and learning, changes in student demographics, concerns about enrollment and retention and ongoing challenges from skeptics about the value of the liberal arts. Faculty are aware of these variables and the changing landscape of higher education – a landscape that shifts focus onto these institution-wide issues. As a result, faculty are expected to be more cognizant of issues both inside and outside the classroom, extending their focus from teaching, service and scholarship to broader issues.

What does this mean in terms of changes in our daily lives? Take a look at examples of syllabi, and you will likely find some faculty including a technology policy. Many professors are determining how or if new technologies belong in their classroom and reconsidering their pedagogical approaches.

At the beginning of my career as a faculty member about 25 years ago, I would have never imagined that my students would be able to respond to questions using personal response systems (i.e., clickers) or their cellphones (especially given that cellphones then were rare, came in large bags and were used only to make phone calls). Smartphones and clickers have become a common way for faculty to gather immediate assessment of student understanding of material.

Today, faculty are also faced with many students using their laptops to take notes. Initially, use of laptops prompted the question of distraction. Recently, academicians have questioned the type of information processing that takes place, leading to some interesting scholarship that illustrates that students more actively process information when taking notes manually rather than typing. These findings are starting to shape the technology policies considered by many faculty.

In the 1990s, outside sources used in the classroom came in the form of videos and visiting speakers. Now, both faculty and students can enhance the learning experience with “the touch of a button” to access the web. Of course, this also brings up the need to assess the legitimacy of online material. That was not the

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We're told millennials are anxious students who expect immediate gratification and can't take care of things. They need handholding. We forget the benefits of teaching this generation.

DR. MARJORIE SHAVERS
Assistant Professor of Counseling

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When I graduated, students knew if they did well in the classroom they could go out and get a job. Now that's not enough. They need internships and experiences to prove they're ready to employers.

DR. JOHN COOK
Associate Professor of Finance

Teaching the Millennial Generation

Millennials have a bad reputation. They're needy. They have helicopter parents who do everything for them. They can't handle failure. While the merits of these generalizations can be debated, Assistant Professor of Counseling Dr. Marjorie Shavers believes professors shouldn't ignore the benefits of this generation.

“They're much more willing to try new things, more so than other generations would have,” she said. “They're resourceful in a way that wasn't possible a while ago.”

Millennials, Shavers said, like to figure things out on their own. Whether through research or YouTube, they have an ingenuity

and entrepreneurial spirit that baffles some professors who don't use new resources or technologies as frequently or as enthusiastically as students.

“We shouldn't put parameters around assignments that limit what they can do because we don't understand the technology,” Shavers said. “My goal is to create an environment where students can engage. I try to put the responsibility on students to help generate classroom discussions.”

Colleges across the country have seen an increase in mental health issues that some attribute to the negative traits of this generation. While they don't like asking for

help, they feel constant pressure to be perfect and have success.

“Students compare themselves to distorted ideas, which causes them to second-guess themselves,” Shavers said. “Social media creates a world where their friends create an ideal self – only sharing things they approve of as consistent with their perceived image.”

Only time will tell what this generation will offer to the world, but professors should consider that it might look different from the past. And that's not a bad thing.

Technology in the Classroom

The media bombards us with messages that the job market is tough, unemployment is high and student loans are out of control. This outlook puts a lot of pressure on college students to feel the need to make themselves stand out and find their first job.

Understanding this pressure, the School of Business created a Seven Steps to Success program that hosts events focusing on resumé-building activities and professional skills that will help students not only secure an internship, but also excel there.

“We're preparing them to be able to get that first internship or job,” said Dr. John Cook, '80, associate professor of finance and accounting.

One of the ways Cook is helping students prepare for their careers is by embracing technology in the classroom.

“Technology has been a big change in the way I teach. We used to do everything by hand and if you wanted information about a company you had to send them a letter of request. Now students can find out more information faster on the Internet,” he said.

In Cook's investment class, students use a stock market simulator to practice trading on the stock market.

“It's the closest thing I can do to make it real. That's where the learning takes place – when

students are doing it,” he said. “They can read everything about it, but until they're doing it, it's not real. Hands-on experience is essential in today's market.”

In a data-driven world, students need to be able to find and filter the right information and know what to do with it. Embracing the ability of technology to help students build their resumé is something professors are increasingly seeking out.

case when students were sorting through card catalogs not long ago or requesting interlibrary loans for peer-reviewed articles.

Finally, one cannot ignore the influence of technology with regard to distance learning or online classrooms like the ones offered through Heidelberg's School of Education and Master's in Counseling programs. No longer do students need to be face-to-face with their professor in the classroom. Importantly, teaching effectiveness in this context goes beyond learning the technology. Faculty must also rethink the teaching techniques that are most effective in that different classroom environment.

Over the last decade or so, faculty have also learned more about teaching techniques that create an engaged classroom environment, where students are not just sitting and listening but are actively part of the learning process.

Step into a Heidelberg classroom and you'll likely find students engaged in small group work, creating a more interactive learning environment. Evidence from the scholarship of teaching illustrates that active learning approaches promote deep and lasting learning. In turn, many faculty are going beyond lectures, using techniques such as self-guided instruction, case studies, cooperative learning strategies, peer-led teaching and short reflective writing activities. No longer are faculty simply focused on what content to cover, but equally on creative ways to articulate their material.

Our teaching approaches must also change in part based on the students who are in our classrooms. New college students over the last 20 years or so enter our classrooms with much more diverse preparations. Faculty teaching first-year students need to know how to assist with the transition to a different set of expectations and approaches to learning. This is one goal of Heidelberg's AIM (Advise, Inspire, Mentor) Hei course for all first-year students. AIM Hei helps students better understand the college classroom and articulate what it means to be a student in a liberal arts environment, connects them to faculty outside their area of academic interest and identifies their strengths and areas for improvement.

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Everyone expects their [students'] attention all the time. They are always connected and they allow themselves to be through social media. It's hard for other generations to understand why they let this happen.

DR. ROBIN HEATON
Assistant Professor of Communication

These days we've often heard the term "teaching to the test" at many secondary schools. The high stakes tests have led to student learning perspectives that are difficult to adapt to the college classroom. In a sense, relearning how to learn must first occur for students to be successful in college. Faculty are often involved in that relearning process, again going beyond class content and focusing instead on teaching students how to learn.

While new students often focus on careers or what they consider to be practical skills, faculty are faced with teaching students the value of the content and skills learned from the liberal arts curriculum. Institutions are attempting to unite what some would call practical skills with intellectual skills. Students are often motivated by an education that they believe leads to employment opportunities, so faculty must understand how to communicate how skills such as problem solving and critical thinking are essential, regardless of career choice. Many faculty are reconsidering

The Changing Social Media Landscape

For better or worse, social media is a driving influence in the lives of college students. While some professors fight it and others embrace it, its impact in the classroom and on students is undeniable.

Dr. Robin Heaton, assistant professor of communication, taught a new class this year – Computer Mediated Communication – as part of the interpersonal component.

"That's where a lot of communication takes place now, through a computer or phone," she said.

That ability to communicate with anyone, anywhere, at any time has impacted college

life in and out of the classroom. Through social media, it is easier for students to stay connected to their high school friends, especially if they feel they aren't fitting in at college. They're not forced to find a new cohort of friends at college because they have the option to stay connected to old ones.

"Every generation has unique challenges," Heaton said. "This group tends to have more relationships, but they're flexible and fragile."

Heaton believes the importance of communication skills will continue to grow as social media increasingly becomes integrated in all professional careers.

"Organizations are recognizing that if employees don't have communication skills, it doesn't matter what other skills they have," she said. "Students are aware of branding themselves and of how they're perceived online."

For some students, the outcome or grade is more important than the process of learning, and Heaton works hard to help students understand why they're learning, what they're learning and how it becomes applicable to their careers.

"These students are great problem-solvers," she said. "Sometimes you just need to help them understand the why."

how to integrate internships and on-the-job training into the curriculum, while others are examining cross-disciplinary curricular options to best prepare students with a multi-disciplinary approach. With funding from the Great Lakes Internship Grant, even more opportunities for internships are available to Heidelberg students. This approach will allow students to be prepared for the ever-changing careers of the 21st century.

Finally, faculty now must think about measuring student learning, with accountability both at the institutional and federal levels – a foreign concept for those not trained in assessment beyond the assignments in their classes. They are asked to state clear learning goals and determine evidence to illustrate that students achieved those goals.

All of these changes require an institutional culture that supports faculty to embrace innovative pedagogical approaches, new technologies that promote more engaged learning environments, valid assessment tools and an understanding of student demographics.

Some higher ed experts contend that faculty must recognize that the ivory tower approach is a thing of the past. Today, we must profess the knowledge of our fields, and also keep in mind the many variables that influence student success and in turn the success of the university as a whole. To ensure that we continuously improve the value and strengthen the impact of a Heidelberg education for our students, we must keep a sharp gaze on the world beyond the ivory tower.

In my role, I look forward to building a supportive environment for faculty as we evolve to meet the challenges of teaching in the 21st century.



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