

The Learning Community

Newsletter of Perlman Center for Learning & Teaching

"The essential purpose of the LTC is to develop programs to promote faculty and student reflections on and conversations about teaching and learning, thus enhancing even further the quality of student learning and faculty vitality."

WINTER, 2014

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News from the LTC Director, Fred Hagstrom

In this issue of the LTC newsletter, I wanted to share some responses from colleagues who have used the student observer program. The LTC Fellows, who serve as the student observers are a lot of fun to work with. They are eager, very interested in teaching, and are insightful when they are visiting classes, as well as in the other programs that we run in the LTC.

I also share an opinion piece about how consciously we lead our students into an understanding of what a liberal arts education really means. As always, I would be happy to speak with any of you on these topics if you are interested in following up.

Thanks—Fred Hagstrom

In the Spotlight: Student Observer Program

The student observer program has been around for a number of years. This program, where faculty members can have a student visit their classes to offer feedback, is an example of one of the many things we do to try to keep the level of teaching at Carleton high. It used to be overseen by the Associate Dean's office, but it moved to the LTC some time ago. When Louis Newman directed the LTC, he set up the LTC Fellows, formalizing this work-study position for students to observe classes and offer feedback to professors, and expanding the role to include projects that relate to teaching. Each year a new group is selected through an interview process. This helps to assure that the students chosen for this role are serious and well prepared. I can say that my experience of working with this year's fellows is one of the most enjoyable parts of directing the LTC. They are a very good group, thoughtful, motivated, and perceptive.

The student observer program is a bit underused. For a variety of reasons, I think it is somewhat taken for granted. Some years ago I used an observer to sit in on my drawing class for an entire term. I wanted to know if the instructions I gave were clear to someone who had no experience in art. I had the observer basically take the course, giving me feedback periodically on what seemed to go well, or not. I found it helpful. It was a way to assess what my class felt like to someone who was starting from scratch and encountering material that was all new.

I would like to put the student observer program a bit more in the spotlight. To do so, I have asked some colleagues who used the program during fall term to write a brief piece about how it went for them. Their comments are below. In order to keep this a general topic, rather than reflecting on the performance of a specific student observer, I have changed the name to "Carl". Other than that, I have left their comments unedited.

Faculty Experiences: Student Observers

Faculty Member: Jon R. Olson, Political Science

As a visiting lecturer in the Political Science Department during the fall term of 2013, I chose to explore the value of the Student Observer Program offered by the LTC. My choice proved invaluable to me. Shortly after requesting support from Fred Hagstrom for this program, I was contacted by Carl. Carl came to our first meeting fully prepared and brimming with questions about how he could support me in crafting and delivering the most effective lectures possible to the students in my class.

As a retired commander in the U.S. Navy, and a career intelligence officer, I am a 25-year veteran of public speaking and presenting formal presentations and briefings to admirals, generals, and high-ranking public officials on subjects as varied as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, human intelligence operations, et al. However, I had never faced a classroom full of students with the kind of enquiring minds possessed of the students in my class at Carleton College. I quickly found my students were far more informed and engaged than most college students, even students at other top-level schools around the United States. Additionally, my Carleton students demand answers to sensitive and nuanced questions – which I was prepared to deliver. But, with Carl's able assistance, and working in conjunction with him weekly during the term, I was able to hone my teaching techniques to achieve maximum effect, and I am certain I delivered a much better course to my students thanks to Carl's involvement.

I owe Carl a debt of gratitude for his assistance in my course, and for helping me to become an even better lecturer for every course I teach from this day forward.

I recommend the Student Observer Program to every professor at Carleton College. Regardless of how many lectures you may have delivered in your years of teaching, there is always room for improvement. The students who will support you in this program will prove their worth after the very first session. It is likely you will gain insights into your teaching style which you had never before considered, and this will be of immeasurable benefit. I am certain you will be fully satisfied with your decision to request support from the Learning and Teaching Center.

Sincerely,
Jon R. Olson
Commander, U.S. Navy (Retired)
Visiting Lecturer, Political Science

Faculty Member: Sarah Jansen, Philosophy

Carl visited my class and was able to pinpoint some of the ways I could be more in tune with students and less concerned with necessarily pushing the lesson forward as planned. It was very helpful, in getting me to divert more of my attention away from pushing through a preconceived lesson plan and toward reading students' body language and being conscious of their individual pedagogical needs. All in all, it was a very positive experience, and Carl was professional and thoughtful. I enjoyed our conversations about pedagogy, which prompted me to think more carefully about my interactions with students.

Faculty Member: Lauren Osborne, Religion

I'm in a one-year position here at Carleton, and I'm interested in growing as much as I can as a teacher while I'm here. When I heard about the LTC's student observer program at the beginning of the year it sounded intriguing – like it could offer a different type of perspective on my teaching, as opposed to my own, that of a colleague observing, or that of students in course evaluations. Facilitating discussion in smaller classes has always been a challenge for me, so I requested that a student observer attend my class on the Qur'an fall term, which had 14 students and tended to focus on close reading and discussion. The student observer attended my class for one session that I knew would be particularly discussion-heavy, and he kept complete record of everything that took place during that hour. We met to talk immediately after the class. He had good suggestions and points of comparison to other discussions he'd seen, but probably the most helpful part was hearing the complete report of what had happened in the class reported to me from someone else's perspective, and especially from the perspective of a student who didn't have a stake in the class. Much of this was a great relief. Pauses in conversation weren't as long as they felt in the moment, and ultimately those short silences seemed like they allowed students chances to think over the material and put their thoughts together. Surprisingly, although I felt like I heard from a couple students much more than others, almost every student in the class spoke that day, which is something that I had completely missed while teaching.

Lauren Osborne

The Liberal Arts

By Fred Hagstrom, LTC Director

Before starting at the LTC last summer I had the opportunity to go to Transylvania University for a summer symposium on the liberal arts. It had a fairly heavy list of readings that covered the history of the liberal arts and institutions of higher education. The group included faculty members from Colleges and Universities from across the country in a variety of disciplines. Transylvania decided that for their teaching center, rather than focusing on internal matters of teaching, that they would try to affect the national culture of how teaching and the liberal arts are viewed. They devote considerable resources to this annual seminar. I found this experience to be helpful as I prepared to move into the LTC. I followed up on it by expanding my reading, learning more about the often-contested definition of the liberal arts and different viewpoints on the basic goals of higher education.

I normally have a habit of doing a good deal of reading and research about any topic that interests me. When I find an artist, author, or subject that is new to me, it is a typical practice for me to immerse myself in whatever I can read about that subject. When something feels important and significant, this is the way I go about learning more about it. But for some reason, I had never done this in regards to one of the most important experiences of my life, namely, attending a liberal arts college. That experience changed my life, set me on my career path, and showed me how to remain intellectually engaged. Yet I had done very little to inform myself about the history and definition of the liberal arts. This realization was a bit shocking to me. It made me wonder if I am alone in this, or if many of us, even at an institution that is devoted to the liberal arts, have taken the concept somewhat for granted. Perhaps I am alone in this, and others have devoted a good deal of thought to understanding the history and purpose of the liberal arts. But I suspect that is not the case, and that we could gain something by looking at and discussing what we mean by the term that defines our school. This is especially important at a time when economic pressures are affecting the curricula of schools across the country. Even in our athletic conference, schools offer many pre-professional programs and have expanded their offerings outside of the liberal arts. Some of these schools offer post-graduate degrees, and some offer undergraduate courses in specific professional training. As we are faced with decisions about our curriculum, I have some concern that we might make choices without stepping back to remember what new things might or might not be consistent with the mission that we have as a liberal arts college. It is easy for things to change gradually, perhaps compromising important principles.

We have a responsibility to inform our students about what constitutes the liberal arts. That is not a matter that is at the forefront of their thinking as they begin college. I know that this is one of the goals of the Argument and Inquiry seminars, but I have some concern that it has remained implicit in our campus culture. When the concept of the liberal arts is being challenged in multiple ways, leaving our definition of the liberal arts implicit is not enough. I hope that in the coming years the LTC can be a part of examining this issue and making our discussion of what we see as the essential qualities of a liberal arts education a central part of our life at Carleton.

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