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An Interview with the 2016 Edward L. Hamm, Sr. Distinguished Teaching Award Recipient

By Zina T. McGee, Ph.D.

Each year, Hampton University honors and recognizes outstanding faculty who serve as models of excellence for their profession and as exemplary mentors for their students. This month, I had the pleasure of interviewing the 2016 recipient of the Edward L. Hamm, Sr. Distinguished Teaching Award, Mrs. Snehlata Pandey, Assistant Professor, Department of Biological Sciences.



Mrs. Snehlata Pandey

Briefly describe your teaching philosophy. What strategies do you use to create a student-focused learning environment?

My philosophy on teaching is that every student has the ability to succeed, but learning must take place in a safe, interactive environment. Cell phones are turned off, students arrive to class on time, and I will not begin my lectures without their full attention. I believe that a good teaching environment enables students to succeed both inside the classroom and beyond with the pursuit of learning and curiosity in their daily lives. The comfortable learning environment that I create allows students to talk to me on a one-to-one basis, beyond my office hours. I try to incorporate many engaging opportunities and interactive lessons to enhance their learning during the semester. For example, they are expected to take greater responsibility for the biology lessons since they receive lecture notes and PowerPoint slides as handouts to follow along with my instruction. I make use each day of the Smart Board, Whiteboard, PowerPoint slides and whatever is accessible

to allow students to learn more about the material from each chapter. More importantly, they are given the opportunity to see the connections between each daily lecture as they are expected to review the notes ahead of schedule for the next lesson, and then come to class with their questions for discussion. I also spend much of the time asking my students questions that relate to the material. In many ways, they are expected to present the material to me as well, which reinforces their learning. This also helps the students to prepare since many of them have different learning styles, and this form of learning is more student-oriented.

How do you recognize creativity and innovation both within and outside of the classroom setting?

Within the classroom, I tend to test my students by giving out free response questions to get a sense of their style, creativity, and depth while learning through writing. I also tend to use take home assignments and quizzes, and provide the students with additional materials for examination reviews. Additionally, I often collect the notes that they have prepared to make sure that they are truly capturing the content of the material and that they are reading and understanding the lessons.

Outside the classroom, I recognize creativity and innovation through the assignments I provide to my students and seeing the products they create. Our classroom discussions and lectures form the basis of what they will then apply to their innovative, creative assignments. By using real-life situations, such as studies of health-related issues in their families, I allow the students to incorporate their ideas and use information gathered from their family's history to contribute to class discussions relating to biology. Here, they are expected to apply key concepts to health-related issues as they relate them to their own family trees. It is an excellent way to promote creativity and innovation while reinforcing what they are learning. Using that information, students are able to prepare an in-depth research paper and present it in class at the end of the semester. The papers are written in APA format and are presented in a critical manner as they are able to apply what they have learned to real-life situations. Their creativity is then shared with the entire group as each student is responsible for presenting an interactive, innovative PowerPoint presentation to the class with key questions for their peers to answer based upon their demonstrations.

In what ways do you stimulate self-growth and professional development among your students?

In many ways I feel as though I have a "magical touch" as I observe many of my students' performances in their introductory biology classes. I am able to stimulate growth early on by identifying and selecting the top one percent of my students from these beginning classes to later serve as my teaching/lab assistants. I also prepare my students for graduate school and beyond by allowing them to work independently in prepping labs, handling current students' concerns, and mentoring them through their college careers. It is so important for us to tap into our students' potential at the beginning stages if we can. They need to have our understanding and encouragement as they begin to make major decisions about their lives and careers. This strengthens them and helps them to build self-confidence for the "real world." I encourage students to embrace biology and the material learned in class to enhance their studies in preparation for their careers, and with my continued support and encouragement, several of my student mentees have become Schwarzman Scholars, Rhodes Scholarship finalists, and Truman Scholarship

finalists, while others have received many additional prestigious scholarships. For example, I noticed the potential of one of my students during her freshman year and helped her get accepted into Honors College even after the deadline had passed. That student is now both a Schwarzman and Rhodes Scholarship finalist. I have worked very closely with Dr. Sabin Duncan in Honors College to identify many of our “best and brightest.” Additionally, many of these students continue to work with me each year which allows me to contribute to their growth and development while giving them as many opportunities as I can to prepare them for graduate school. I have always shared a close bond with my students that extends beyond my classroom and office hours. It is important for me to be available for them as much as I can to help them to “blossom into the stars” that they can be with confidence and perseverance.

I was so pleased recently when one of my former students came back to visit me to let me know that when she thinks of Hampton University, the first person that she remembers is me as she recalls how I shaped her overall development. It meant so much to me to hear her say that.

What strategies do you use to facilitate reflection, professional learning and enhanced student accomplishment?

I regularly get feedback from my students and my mentees to make changes and to better serve them. I try to enhance student accomplishments by providing guidance and needed support beyond the classroom and also consistently writing strong letters of recommendation for their achievements, sometimes at a very short notice. My maternal instinct and mentorship during my upbringing have translated into my passion for stimulating my students’ educational successes and overall well-being. This allows me to bring out the best in them, and in many instances, they are able to reflect on their own accomplishments. I also reflect on my success in the classroom and beyond and the extent to which students begin to view their own achievements. It is very important that students are able to connect all of the information that is discussed in their classes, and they are also able to reflect on what they have been learning and answer questions about anything that we have covered relating to biology. This allows them to begin to think about the significance of information in different and innovative ways.

Enhancing Learning through Zest, Grit, and Sweat

By Lolita Paff*, Ph.D.
From FacultyFocus.Com

Early in my career, I focused most of my efforts on teaching content. That is, after all, what most of us are hired to do, right? With experience and greater understanding of how learning works, my attention shifted toward metacognition. I began investing lots of time and energy reading and identifying ways to help students grow as learners while they learned the content.

It was an improvement, but I had nagging suspicions that important contributors to learning were still missing from my teaching repertoire. I considered the ways teachers influence student behaviors (generally lots of carrots and sticks). What

about motivation? What makes students want to learn and want to become better learners? My research identified three overlooked aspects of learning that teachers should consider promoting through their instructional practices: student curiosity (zest), an academic growth mindset and persistence (grit), and an understanding that true long-lasting learning takes effort (sweat).

Fueling zest

Zest is my word for intellectual curiosity, student interest, and enthusiasm. When we're interested in what we're learning, we pay closer attention. We think more carefully, make more connections, and dig below the surface. When we're curious, we are motivated to work harder and longer. Zest isn't about entertaining. It's about leveraging the mind's natural tendency to attend to and expend energy on that which engages and stimulates.

Addressing metacognition without considering students' curiosity and motivation is like heading out on a long bike trip to an unfamiliar destination. Simply having the roadmap doesn't ensure the desire to ride or the will to finish. Zest entices us to hop on the saddle; it's a call to adventure. Teachers incorporate zest when we

- **Connect to students' interests and make work relevant.** Tap into questions, topics, and issues that matter to students. Ask students to identify topics or questions they care about. Use their questions as a means of learning content.
- **Make it real.** Study real-world events, analyze historical cases, incorporate web-based writing, and provide opportunities for service learning.
- **Bring passion to the table.** Teacher enthusiasm covers a multitude of sins and fosters student interest. Enthusiasm can be contagious.

Promoting grit

Terms like grit, tenacity, perseverance, and persistence describe students who approach learning with a long-term focus. These students endure; they view challenges as temporary setbacks. Students with a fixed mindset focus on performance measures like grades, not learning. Mistakes are perceived as failures, not a necessary part of learning. Resilient learners persist in assignments, courses, and programs like cyclists who dust themselves off and get back on the trail after a mishap. Gritty learners view academic difficulties and confusion as speed bumps, not roadblocks to learning. Teachers promote grit when we

- **Identify appropriate challenges.** If goals are too easy or too difficult, student motivation is decreased. Too easy suggests the value or worth is low. Likewise, students may not put forth sufficient effort if a task seems "impossible."
- **Provide low-stakes practice.** Learning requires practice. Multiple, low-stakes opportunities, with timely feedback, promote grit.
- **Offer specific feedback.** To be most effective, feedback needs to be specific, and timely. It should identify strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations for future action.

Encouraging sweat

Completing a cycling trip requires stamina and good planning. It's common for novice riders to underestimate the challenges, overestimate their ability, and fail to plan or plan poorly. Inexperienced learners face these issues too. Learning, like cycling, is hard. It takes time, things go wrong, and you're not going far without putting forth effort. Fortunately, teachers can help students work smarter, harder and longer when we

- **Incorporate reflection.** Reflective questions can be part of class time or incorporated into assignments. Why was this question asked? How is X related to Y? What is the most challenging topic in the chapter? How does this material connect to what you learned before? When students make these connections, learning takes on a long-term perspective.
- **Provide study tips.** Provide or develop with students a list of strategies that promote deep learning. Suggest a timeline for study based on “spaced learning” principles. Or better, ask students to submit a timeline or project plan for studying, writing a paper, or completing a project. Develop practice tests or ask students to write questions to use as part of a “testing to learn” strategy.
- **Mind cognitive load.** Complex assignment instructions, confusing website navigation, and disorganized course materials increase unproductive cognitive load. Cognitive load should focus energy on the subject, not on the periphery.

Lifelong learning is more about the ride than the destination. Integrating zest influences what students think and motivates them to start the journey. Strategies attending to grit and sweat influence what students do and the efforts put forth by helping them advance along the paths of learning, now and in the future.

Recommended Readings

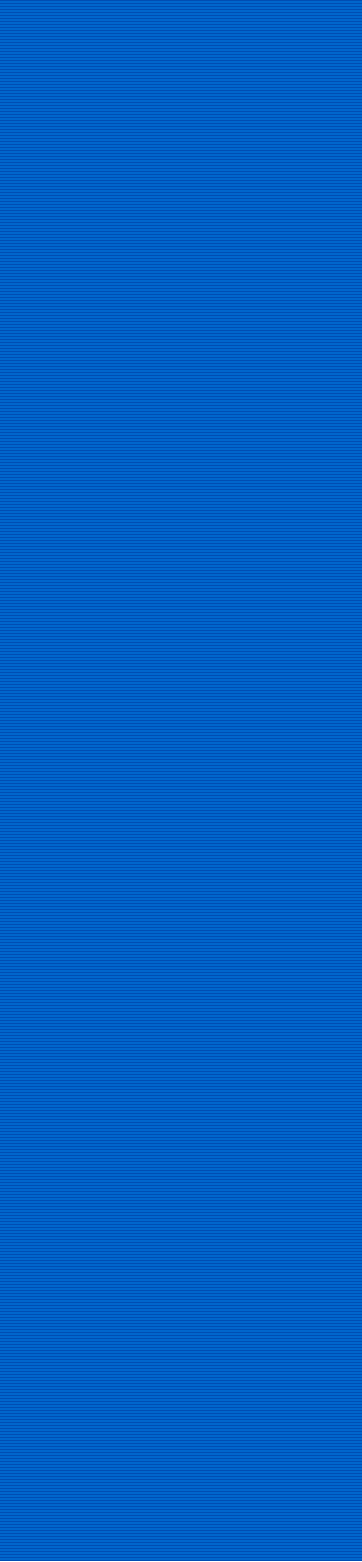
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**Dr. Lolita Paff is an associate professor of business and economics at Penn State Berks. She also serves on the advisory board of the Teaching Professor Conference.*

Announcements

- **AAC&U Meetings and Events**

AAC&U sponsors a variety of continuing programs—meetings, workshops, and summer institutes for campus teams—that bring together college educators from across institutional types, disciplines, and departments. AAC&U activities nurture the talents and creativity of higher education's current and future leaders. Attendees of recent meetings have described them as powerful and transformative—providing participants with innovative ideas and practices, and shaping the direction of their educational reform efforts. Visit www.aacu.org for more details.

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- **2017 Annual Meeting: Building Public Trust in the Promise of Liberal Education and Inclusive Excellence**
January 25, 2017 to January 28, 2017, Hyatt Regency San Francisco, San Francisco, CA
 - **Student Activism and Liberal Education: Faculty Engagement in Turbulent Times**
January 25, 2017 to January 28, 2017, Hyatt Regency San Francisco, San Francisco, CA