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
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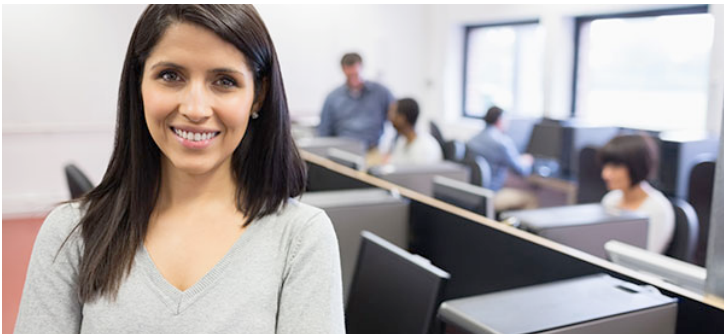
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The Faculty Factor: How to Pick the Best Professors

- May 28, 2013 6:00 am
- [admin](#)
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Scheduling a semester is a delicate equation. You're juggling a number of different variables to map out the perfect schedule. Beyond the standard subject matter and course number, you're picking classes based on topics that you're interested in and will get credit for, at times that don't overlap and can work around a job or internship. But some students forget that one of the most important parts of that equation is the person who will ultimately be teaching that class.

In fact, the professor — the person who will guide you through your understanding of the course material for the next few months — may be one of the most important factors when it comes to your college career.

“A good professor-student relationship is an important element to encouraging student success in college,” says Dawn Dillon, Director of Advising and Learning Services in [William Peace University](#)’s Office of Academic Services.

The Qualities of a Great Professor



What makes a great professor, well, great? The qualities of a stellar professor are highly subjective, based on a student’s own learning style and preference. Is the professor an expert in the subject matter? Are they available frequently during the week? Do they have a sense of humor? In the end, student engagement and learning are key, and the findings of the paper “[Faculty Do Matter: The Role of College Faculty in Student Learning and Engagement](#),” by Indiana University research analyst Paul D. Umbach and Michigan State University assistant professor Matthew R. Wawrzynski, suggest that students report higher levels of engagement and learning at schools where faculty members “use active and collaborative learning techniques, engage students in experiences, emphasize higher-order cognitive activities in the classroom, interact with students, challenge students academically, and value enriching educational experiences.”

These qualities are all interrelated. Students feel more supported and engaged in their learning when they are actively involved in their education, such as contributing to class discussions, working on class projects with other students, and presenting in class, and are engaged. It’s not just a teacher standing at a podium, reading from a script.

“Students rarely remember the lectures that their professor gave, but more often than not, they remember the projects they did with their professor and the discussions and experiences that they had with a professor,” says Dillon. “Lectures and readings are important to understand the basic principles of the subject, but the best professors are able to take those tools and turn into active learning opportunities where students take away lifelong skills and develop a passion for the discipline, which is what great professors will provide for your education.”

Learning that takes place outside of the classroom is also equally important, and frequent interaction with professors can lead to greater gains in personal development and general education knowledge, the study found. It’s all about having a professor who is accessible.

“If you can go to a professor’s office and ask him or her for help, you will be able to learn a lot more,” says Will Cantrell, an associate professor of physics at [Michigan Technological University](#). “A lot of university-level material is difficult. You probably will get stuck on something. There’s no substitute for having someone who has already mastered the material help you get unstuck.”

Professor reputation isn’t about finding the teachers who will give out the easy A, either, but the ones who will challenge you academically. Rather than looking for teachers who end class early, cancel class a lot, or give lots of extra credit, Dillon advises students to look for teachers who know their subject matter, offer meaningful examples of the subject in their lectures, have engaging and informative lectures, are open to asking questions and dialoging with students, and provide out-of-class opportunities.

“Remember that you are paying for an education, not to get high grades,” says Dillon. “Students are cheating themselves when they seek professors that require little study, provide extra credit, and regularly cancel class.”

One factor not mentioned in Umbach and Wawrzynski’s paper that is also relevant to the conversation of teaching quality is the type of professor teaching the course. According to a recent report in the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#), about 70% of instructional faculty at colleges is off the tenure track, or adjuncts, and that number is on the rise. Adjuncts can be perfectly qualified teachers, but because they often lack the support, stability, and job security of their tenured counterparts, they may be at a disadvantage — to the detriment of the student. “Studies show that [students] suffer when they are taught by adjuncts, many of whom are good teachers but aren’t supported on the job in the ways that their tenured colleagues are,” according to the Chronicle. For instance, many adjuncts don’t have office space, making it difficult to meet with students on campus. Because of a lack of job security, they also may be hesitant to push students hard academically for fear of poor evaluations.

Finding the Best Professors



Picking a high-quality professor doesn’t have to be a game of eeny, meeny, miny, moe or sheer blind luck. There are more tools than ever before at your disposal to find the best teachers.

Online ratings

Since 1999, students have been talking about the quality of their professors at RateMyProfessors.com. Today, it's the largest online destination for professor ratings, with 8,000 schools and more than 15 million student-generated comments and ratings on 1.8 million professors from colleges and universities across the U.S., as well as Canada and the United Kingdom. You can find information on professors on qualities such as helpfulness and clarity, as well as lists of the [highest-rated professors in the U.S.](#)

Additional online resources that aren't as extensive as RateMyProfessors include myEdu, where you can browse professors and courses at your school and check out student-submitted reviews, and HeyCampus, where you can browse courses from more than 2,000 colleges and see professor ratings.

Of course, as with any online, anonymous review site, it's important to tread with caution and remember that student values vary. A student may give a negative rating to a teacher that fails him or gives a lot of coursework, or a high score to a teacher that makes the class a breeze. RateMyProfessor even lets students rate their teachers based on easiness.

"I encourage students to take what they learn from those sites with a grain of salt," says Dillon. "Taking a course from a professor who is passionate about his or her topic, demands excellence, sets high standards and is willing to work with students in or out of the classroom is going to serve the student better than the professor who is known as the 'easy A.'"

Ask around

When you're looking for a new dentist or hair dresser, it's almost a no-brainer that you get the word-of-mouth before you're sitting in the chair and it's too late. The same can go for professors. When shopping for classes, ask current students in your area of study for recommendations on teachers they've liked.

"Talk to other students. There is no substitute for this," says Cantrell. "Ask other students what classes they liked, and more importantly, why they liked those classes and professors. Take classes from professors that helped students learn, not just the ones who were easy."

Dillon recommends being selective and checking with student leaders, honor students, peer tutors, upper-division students, and students on the dean's list for their input.

"Often, these students are the folks on campus that are concerned about truly learning the subject matter and being educated," says Dillon. "They can provide insight and hopefully offer strong examples about the professor's style and academic approach to the subject."

Your academic advisor is another good resource and will also be familiar with different professors and their teaching styles. "Your advisor can share experiences of what other students have shared about that professor and provide you a fair and objective view of the professor," says Dillon.

See them in action

Instead of relying solely on public opinion, you can gain an understanding of how your professor teaches by seeing the real deal. If you're able, sit in on a class to see the professor's teaching style firsthand, or search for online lectures uploaded to YouTube or the school's website. You can also check out the course's syllabi to get a sense of how the professor runs the classroom.

Take advantage of opportunities to meet with professors in person, too, through major fairs or just by shooting them an email. Good questions to ask include why a student should take a class in the professor's discipline and what types of projects and experiential opportunities are available for students taking courses in the professor's area.

Read their work

In addition to watching a live lecture or exchanging emails, you can also gain a sense of your potential professor's expertise and personality by reading his or her work. Use search engines like Google Scholar and databases like JSTOR to find professors' published papers, books, and academic reports. You can also look for their Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter pages to get a sense of their online persona, which can be especially helpful to students in online programs. If they have a blog, make sure to check that out, too, to find out what their areas of interest are. You may even find examples of course work or lectures there, too.

Trial and error

Sometimes, even after doing extensive research, you can wind up with a dud. Unlike buying a bicycle or a camera, teachers don't have a return policy. But you may be able to switch out of the classroom if it really isn't the right fit for you. The policy varies by school, but you usually have at least a week to change classes.

Creating a Strong Teacher-Student Relationship



According to Umbach and Wawrzynski, "Faculty behaviors and attitudes affect students profoundly, which suggests that faculty members may play the single most important role in student learning." That is a powerful statement, and it underscores just how important professors are in your college career. But it can be a bit misleading. It's not just up to the faculty to create an enriching, rewarding environment three or six hours out of the week. Students have just as much responsibility for their learning and engagement — especially when it comes to time away from class.

"I strongly encourage students to take the initiative and get to know their professors both in and outside of the classroom," says Dillon. "For subjects that are of particular interest to a student, showing the professor that you are dedicated, capable, and intellectually motivated to learn more about the subject can lead to all types of opportunity for additional research, writing, conference attendance, and other related activities."

As Hallmark-ready as it sounds, professor-student relationships really are ones that can last a lifetime, leading to both meaningful mentorships and friendships. By choosing your classes based on the strong reputation of the professor — and then taking advantage of that expertise and guidance by staying engaged and motivated — you can set yourself up for the best education possible.

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