



Unlocking Teaching Excellence: Strategies for Growth

SPEAKERS

Ken Alford, Tierney King, Maryellen Weimer, Ann Taylor

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor Conference. This year, join us in New Orleans from June 7th through the 9th, where you'll collaborate with other educators, gain innovative teaching solutions, and hear bold ideas from some of higher ed's most respected voices. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. Today, we're going to talk about how you can propel your teaching career, and what advice some of our great higher ed instructors have for you. In this episode, you'll be reminded of the importance of remaining open to learning, how to seek mentorship, and how to foster meaningful connections within your academic circle. Additionally, we'll cover prioritizing work-life quality over monetary incentives, along with truly understanding your teaching methods and recognizing both your strengths and weaknesses. Through insightful anecdotes and practical advice, this episode offers a roadmap for those of you seeking to elevate your teaching practices and advance your careers. Up first, we have Ken Alford who offers strategies to take your teaching career from good to great.

Ken Alford 01:13

So my first suggestion would be to be teachable. You know, you remember what it's like coming out of high school, when you've got the world by its tail, and then you enter into college thinking you're going to be on the top of the pile, and actually, you're a lowly freshman. Well, that same kind of experience happens when you leave your graduate program and enter into a new faculty. You're now just starting out again and need to build a new reputation and to build the other portions of a successful career. So what I would recommend you do is find a mentor of your choosing. Hopefully you're in a program that has assigned you a mentor. But I would encourage you to go out and look at, especially mid and senior faculty career members in your department, and find someone who you can ask to serve as a personal mentor for you. And then I would encourage you to be teachable, if you're willing to listen, and you may not understand all of the suggestions that they make and all of the ideas that they offer or when they explain why things work and how they work in your department, but being teachable goes a very long way. And so concentrate on those relationships. You have an opportunity to work with some extremely amazing and talented and bright individuals, develop relationships with them, get to know them, socialize with them if your circumstances allow and understand who they are. Because it's often on the personal relationships that we have, that we're able to do additional and unique things. And in

that vein, I would add, be a peacemaker. Part of respect, I think, is trying to make peace. We live in a very divisive world today, and it's just not helpful. Do what you can to bring peace to your department, especially faculty members. The old joke is that politics and departments are so vicious is because they matter so little. And that's sometimes been my experience that it's true. People seem to be willing to fight to the death over things that are really, at the end of the day, almost meaningless. But don't contribute to that. Associated with being humble, I think, is to admit when you don't know something. If you get asked a question in class, there's absolutely nothing wrong with saying, "Wow, that's a great question, John. You know, I hadn't thought of that. Let me see what I can find out. I'll share with you next class what I've been able to figure out or find, and may I invite you and the rest of the class to also look to see what we can find on that topic." And it lets your students know that you're humble enough to recognize you don't know everything about everything in your field. Although you do know a great deal, no one knows everything. So part of being humble, I would suggest is to well, quite frankly, leave your ego and your politics off campus if possible. Ego gets in the way, especially in academia, because a lot of academia is about us, our publications, our classes, our, our, our. It's very inward focused, and you're not going to have the same political views as everyone in your faculty and you know, that's okay. But when you bring politics into the classroom, or bring politics into the faculty, or with the staff, when it's really inappropriate, it may have nothing to do with physics or math or law or whatever you're doing. If possible, I again, would just recommend that you leave your ego and your politics off campus if you can. Now, if you if you teach political science that maybe maybe a little more difficult, but even then I would recommend presenting both sides of an argument, and keeping your students guessing on where you personally stand. It makes you more approachable and my experience has been can help the classroom.

Tierney King 05:22

In addition to teaching, you may find yourself leading in this program. Ann H. Taylor goes through some of the best leadership advice she's ever received.

Ann Taylor 05:30

Another piece of advice that I learned very early on was that the quality of your work life matters more than money, or prestige. I'm sure we've all know someone who's taken in another job because of the lure of a better title or more money. But I also know a lot of people and I've been one of them who have followed that lure, only to find they didn't realize what they were giving up. My best example was a young woman who I worked with many years ago, who left business and industry to come work at Penn State. And we were chatting a bunch of us and we found out that she'd actually take a pretty significant pay cut and a title downgrade, it sounded to us. And we said, "Oh my gosh, why did you do that?" She said, Ah... well, by the time she got done telling us what her former job was, like, we got it. She had left for a better work life, a better quality of life. And it made all the sense in the world. Another wonderful piece of advice, again, came probably two decades ago, one of my first supervisors at Penn State, I was all excited, I was young, I just gone to my first university committee level meeting, came back full of all the information and the advice that this committee had given our group to share with my boss. And I said, this is what they say we should do. And he goes, "Well, who was there?" And I told him, and he said, because he knew the people, he said to me, "You have to be careful. If you ask people for advice, they'll give it to you, even if they're not qualified at all." And I've learned the importance over the year of making sure you have the right people at the table. So now anytime we're launching a new initiative, or

we're looking into trying a new strategy, or I'm involved at a university level with a big strategic initiative, I try to help make sure we've got the right people around the table, people who actually know what they're talking about, about the topic, and can help move it forward and really inform it, not just people who seem to have the right title. It's worked pretty well. So for my advice, number four, I've known this since I took my current job in 2011. But I just heard it phrased so beautifully recently that I wanted to make sure I shared it in those words. And that was, you don't have to be a visionary. You just need to be opportunistic. I love that. I was so intimidated when I took my current job. My predecessor had been a trailblazer, had been super innovative. He had been launched online education in our in our college, and it's part of our university. And I was taking over a very well established group, but yet was still being asked by my dean, "So what's your moon step going to be? What are what are you going to really shoot for? And, you know, what's that next next big thing?" And it was intimidating, because I don't see myself as that kind of a person. These words that I heard recently said so well about not having to be a visionary, just being opportunistic. I thought, that's me. I'm really good at taking advantage of opportunities and making sure that I have really smart, creative people around me. As the saying goes, it takes a village and you really don't have to do it all on your own. If you are that visionary, if you are that innovative person, that's awesome. Make sure everyone feels like they're part of helping you make that vision. You also want to make sure that you always default to empathy. We just talked about people not being malicious. It is my absolute belief system that people are not malicious by intent. But too often, when someone doesn't hand in their work on time or they're late to work, especially if we've seen this before. We immediately jump to conclusions and they're quite often negative, when in reality, there might be a really good reason behind what's going on with them. A case in point I had a faculty member that I've been working with for several years who had some room for improvement, shall we say, when it came to being responsive. But by and large, we were mentoring him on that and things are going pretty well. But then it started to not go well, and it was really going downhill. And, again, I started hearing the, well, you know, he's just lazy. He just doesn't want to have to work. He's all into spending time with his family. And he's just thinks this is an easy job, and so on and so forth. And I thought, that doesn't ring true to me. I dug into it, I found out, they were really going through some big personal personal issues that we had no idea about. And I was able to actually help him find some resources to work on that. And everything completely turned around. If I hadn't defaulted to empathy, and tried to figure out what was really going on. I might not know that, and I might be out what is actually a very, very wonderful instructor. So it's just a good lesson to remember.

Tierney King 11:02

Lastly, Maryellen Weimer always has good teaching advice to offer. In this program, How Can I Move My Teaching Forward Midcareer?, she offers advice and understanding who you are as a teacher and strategies to keep your teaching moving forward.

Maryellen Weimer 11:15

So we're not talking about rocket science here. But we are talking about something that a lot of faculty don't do very systematically. You need to start with a clear understanding of how you teach. And you know, well, that sounds really simple and straightforward, it's not always easy to come up with. First of all, we're terribly emotionally invested in how we teach. And so even as we describe it to other people, even as we think about it ourselves, often we're seeing ourselves as a teacher, we'd like to be as opposed to the teacher, we actually are. And you couple that with the fact that right now, there are

really strong expectations as to how we should teach. In other words, lectures kind of out, you should be using a lot more kind of active learning. And so we sort of persuade ourselves that we're doing what we're supposed to be doing as teachers because we like to meet people's expectations for us. I wanted to mention a kind of a damning study by Diane Ebert-May and a group of colleagues, in which they looked at faculty who went through a fairly intensive training period six to 12 days. Now, these were mostly new faculty, but what they were trying to do was to get the faculty to implement more active learning within their classrooms. At the end, they asked faculty whether or not they were implementing what they had been what they had learned about in the training, and 89% of them said that they were, however, down the road, they did some observations of those teaching, and discovered that despite what faculty said they were doing, 75% of them were still doing predominantly lecture-based instruction. So sometimes, we're not always accurate in describing or thinking about what we're doing when we teach. How do you develop that accurate understanding? I think first off, you've got to focus on describing what it is that you do as a teacher without making a lot of judgments. And this is not as easy as it sounds. I used to teach a course on college teaching for graduate students at Penn State, and I would have those students write a two or three paragraph description of how they taught without making judgments. And it usually wasn't until the third or fourth revision that they were actually able to describe how we teach. I think that's important because what the judgments do is that they make it difficult for us to be objective about ourselves as teachers. So I would recommend that you try to write a description of how you teach. And then I would recommend that you live dangerously and give it maybe to a few trusted students and ask them how accurate it is. Or maybe you give it to a colleague and invite that colleague to come and observe you teach thing and have them check the description for accuracy. That is really a good way to start developing this accurate understanding of yourself as a teacher. Now the thing that I found really interesting in preparing for this program and thinking about instructional growth is exploring the relationship between strengths and weaknesses. And the fact that sometimes strengths can cover for weaknesses right. So in my own case, the lack of organization can sometimes be compensated for by enthusiasm and energy and sort of a spontaneity, which I would list is one of my teaching strengths. If you genuinely care for students, if you're enthusiastic about the content, if there's a zest to your teaching, if you love learning, those strengths can overcome some of the weaknesses. But you need to think that through you need to understand when and how that's happening in your teaching. The other thing that's kind of interesting and intriguing about strengths is that you can overdo a strength. Okay? For example, I have a penchant for telling stories, I love to tell stories. And, you know, I can recount them in a fairly dramatic sort of way. I have been known to tell too many stories. I have had people remember the stories and not the point that the stories were making, and so to overdo storytelling, to overdo humor, those kinds of things can transform what is potentially a strength into into a weakness. So that interplay of the aspects of the characteristics of our teaching, I think is really is really interesting and important part of developing this accurate understanding of who we are as a teacher.

Tierney King 16:07

Whether you're driving to work, or you just need a 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.