

8-16-2011

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Recommended Citation

University Marketing and Communications, "08/16/2011 - Engaged Students Make A Satisfied Professor.pdf" (2011). 2011. 52.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/press_releases_2011/52

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Intellectually Engaged Students Make for a Satisfied Professor

Aug-16-2011



As a professor of history at Eastern Illinois University, David Smith has taught all levels of students - freshmen and graduate students, majors and non-majors even adult learners.

And he likes that varying interaction, especially when a student of whatever age comes into the classroom excited and ready to learn.

"My favorite student is a student who is fully engaged," Smith said. "It doesn't matter if the student is strong academically or struggling, if he or she is willing to keep thinking, working, questioning, I'm excited to be alongside, offering whatever guidance I can."

It is, in part, his ability to instill excitement and enthusiasm into reluctant learners that earned Smith the recognition as Eastern's 2011-2012 Faculty Laureate -- an honor presented by the Council on Academic Affairs. As such, and in addition to his duties as a full-time faculty member, Smith will spend the coming school year as the university's official spokesperson on the importance of a general/liberal education.

His first opportunity will take place at 9 a.m. Friday, Aug. 19, when he delivers the keynote address at this year's Convocation, a welcoming ceremony for incoming students.

Lisa Cerny, a former student of Smith's, indicated he has "a gift of storytelling, bringing life to history in every lecture."

"I had to consciously make myself take notes in his classes, because I got so wrapped up in listening!" she said. "He infuses enthusiasm for his subject matter with his sense of humor."

In addition, "Dr. Smith never just tells stories, however; he asks students to dig deep into the stories to divulge a larger meaning.

His ability to present history as a narrative draws students into history."

Smith, himself, affirms that his mission is not to teach students what to think about the past, but, rather, how to think about the past.

"It is quite apparent that Dr. Smith not only enjoys history but teaching his students to use historical thinking," Cerny continued. "(He) revels in seeing the light bulb of understanding in his students."

"History begins with stories," Smith said, "but not simple little morality tales. They are stories filled with contradictions and surprises. And those contradictions and surprises are a great place to begin asking questions. Why did that person do something that seems so absurd? Was it absurd to him or her? Why did he or she think in those ways? Why does the world make sense to them in those terms?"

"It seems ludicrous to us to accuse someone of witchcraft when a cow stops giving milk, even to torture and execute that person. But it made perfect sense to many people in the sixteenth century. Students often begin by thinking, 'Well, the person making an accusation of witchcraft wasn't using logic,' but, of course, that person was using logic. His or her logic, however, was based on very different foundations and assumptions than our logic.

"It is very exciting to see students start to look at documents as portals on to entirely different ways of thinking and then begin to analyze those documents to understand the culture and society behind them."

Cerny added that Smith teaches students "how to critically analyze sources to develop theories of our own. He utilizes the teaching technique of scaffolding to first show students how to use these sources and gradually guiding us students to dissect the sources ourselves. He presents history in a way that encourages students to truly think for themselves."

Another former student, Ian Nelk, heard about Smith before even beginning coursework at EIU.

"Many friends had spoke of (Smith's) ability to engage students in historical thinking," he said. "Most of these friends were not history majors, but (yet they) developed an interest in many of the subjects highlighted by Dr. Smith.

"He is able to teach history in such a way that not only keeps students' attention but, whether they know it or not, subtly imparts deeper aspects on history and historiography that they might not be able to grasp otherwise," Nelk said.