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From Student to "Dynamic" Professor, Benedict Comes Full Circle

Aug-12-2009

Reed Benedict credits a certain "dynamic 'Intro to Sociology' professor" he had while in college for leading him down the path to his life's work.

"I didn't even know what sociology was," Benedict said, recalling the class he took as a young undergraduate in his home state of Kansas and the struggle he was having trying to decide on a career.

Twenty-five years later, he's come full circle. Benedict's back in the classroom, but now he is that "dynamic" sociology professor who's helping to shape young lives. And for his excellent efforts, the Council on Academic Affairs and his colleagues at Eastern Illinois University have named him the institution's 2009-2010 Faculty Laureate.

As such, and in addition to his duties as a full-time faculty member in the Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Benedict 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. 21, when he delivers the keynote address at this year's freshman Convocation, a welcoming ceremony for incoming students.

Gary Foster, recently retired department chair, recalled that Benedict, who joined Eastern's staff in Fall 1994, "eagerly immersed himself in the general education curriculum," seeking opportunities to teach general introductory courses in sociology in addition to courses in criminology, his area of expertise.

Additionally, Benedict has kept a more upper-level course, "Deviant Behavior," free of prerequisites so that non-majors are able to enroll.

"Despite the fact that it is not part of (Eastern's) general education curriculum, the course consistently experiences maximum enrollment, with half or more of the students typically from majors other than sociology," Foster said. "Many of those students had initial exposure to Dr. Benedict in their general education offerings and subsequently took him for other coursework, even outside their majors, precisely because they recognize his dedication to students."

Benedict says he truly enjoys working with students who have never before taken a sociology class. As a sociologist, he wants young people to learn the importance of society as a whole and how it can influence them and the world around them. More importantly, however, is his ability to introduce issues which students have never seriously considered.

"For me, academics is not simply a matter of earning a 4.0 (GPA); rather, it is about the exchange of ideas, the willingness to think critically, write cogently, examine a position and support that position in interacting with others," Benedict said. "If each of my students has contemplated vital social issues from divergent view points, I have succeeded as an educator."

Further evidence of Benedict's commitment to the ideals and value of a liberal education is the summer study abroad trip he hosts annually to Maastricht, The Netherlands.

Colleague Craig Eckert has traveled with Benedict and his students.

"Since I had the pleasure of team-teaching with Dr. Benedict on one occasion, I (know) first-hand about how enthusiastic Reed was about encouraging students to experience Europe, to immerse themselves in the culture and, at the same time, to give their best effort in the traditional classroom aspects of the class," Eckert said. "I sincerely believe that he was an inspiration to me as an instructor and to the students, as well."

"Dr. Benedict is clearly one of the most demanding, passionate and knowledgeable professors in our department. He is meticulous in his lectures, encourages critical thinking and engages his students. One need only go to his classes to see that his classrooms are routinely full, that students are asking and answering questions, and that students are both enjoying themselves and learning -- a rare combination indeed!"

In addition to his teaching duties, Benedict has volunteered his times and service to many university and community services/committees, including the Council on Undergraduate Research, EIU's Faculty Senate and the Charleston Fire and Police Board. He is also a team captain/coordinator of Eastern's Faculty Fellows Program and co-adviser for EIU's Criminal Justice Club, spending considerable time and effort coordinating/arranging weekend fieldtrips and projects.

His involvement in the community is just one of the reasons Benedict is considered to be such an effective teacher.

"He teaches classes geared toward criminology and police work, so it is fitting that he sits on the (Charleston Fire and Police Board)," said William Meyer, a former student of Benedict's. "Nothing gains you more respect from your students than to have been involved or be involved in the real-world application of what you are teaching. The direct experience and the hands-on insight you gain from the application of what you teach shines through dramatically in the classroom."

