

# Remembering Our Mission to Teach

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Have you ever become so frustrated with students and overwhelmed by your workload that you start questioning what you are doing? At times it can feel suffocating. Baruti Kafele, an educator and motivational speaker offers a perspective of being *mission oriented* to educators and others working with young people in our nation's classrooms. He suggests affirming your goals and motivations to facilitate successes among students. However, in the college classroom, it is also essential that we, as faculty members, remember and affirm our purpose, acknowledge the contributions we make in students' lives and professional pursuits, and respect the call or passion that brought each of us to the teaching profession.

## What is Mission Oriented?

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In this context, mission orientation acknowledges how faculty members serve, impact, and influence the lives of others. It begs to question: How do faculty members, energize, reignite, and in some instances, recapture that which motivates our work with students? What contributions are we making to the lives of the students we teach? Have we become derailed from the mission to contribute to others in a profound and significant way? And, if so, how do we get back on track?

It is in the spirit of mission orientation that we offer in this article two contributions faculty members should consider—thinking deeply and building relationships. Both contributions represent and respect a mission to teach and influence the lives of others.

## Teaching and Thinking

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Teaching and thinking are paramount to the mission. However, it's not just teaching students the content; it's helping students think deeply about the content that is most impactful. Faculty members are invested in, and passionate about, their content. We seize upon opportunities to impart knowledge to, and share their passion for, the discipline with our students. We plan activities and exercises to help students apply the content in a real world context. Faculty members comb the Internet, attend conferences, and read professional literature to enhance our expertise. We do all of this to ensure students have a deep and rich pool of knowledge in which to swim.

Processing all of this new information often causes moments of cognitive dissonance for many students. Faculty members engage in discussions that require students to reflect, analyze, and synthesize information in a larger context. As students begin to value and organize this new information, old schemes of thinking are challenged, deepened, or replaced. The freefalling emotionality of thinking can create uncertainty and discomfort for students. As Henry Ford said, "Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is the probable reason why so few engage in it." However, it is that cognitive dissonance which supports a deepening of students' thinking. Affording students opportunities to think deeply about the information shared in college classrooms greatly contributes to the mission of helping students find successes in their personal and professional pursuits. Certainly, teaching students to think deeply about their course content is arguably one of the most important contributions we make. However, there is another contribution that has the potential to impact students' lives in a real and significant way—relationship building.

## Building Relationships with Students

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When faculty members create quality relationships with their students, it becomes a bridge between the faculty member and student to confer, collaborate, and communicate. For example, it provides a path for faculty members to support students' disposition development for learning and life. It helps faculty members advocate for students' needs, and it creates a space to learn who our students are—their backgrounds, cultures, and personalities.

It also can cushion the impact when we have to engage in difficult conversations with students, or serve as a catalyst when we want to recognize students who have distinguished themselves in an exceptional way. Through the relationships that we create with the

students, various avenues open and honest conversations emerge about the student's needs, struggles, successes, and triumphs. It also allows for faculty members and students to strategize together how best to bolster the successes and address challenges.

Modeling relationship-building strategies contributes to the mission of helping students find successes in all aspects of their lives. Students can use the strategies they learned from faculty as a skill later in life to build relationships with others. As a part of the contribution, it is important for the faculty member to model and equip students with not only the content knowledge of their discipline, but also the skills to see other perspectives and seek opportunities to help others find success, as they have. Building healthy and meaningful relationships with students provides powerful opportunities to impact their lives, and hopefully, the student will pay it forward.

In conclusion, helping students think deeply and building quality relationships are certainly not the only contributions faculty make to the mission. But, they do stand as two pillars rooted in the foundation of the mission to teach and influence lives. As we remind ourselves of this purpose, we must also remember and reflect on the contributions we make to the mission, the many students whose lives are impacted, and the unique gifts we offer. Remembering the contributions to the mission of teaching can be energizing and uplifting, and may help answer that question, "What am I doing here?" Hopefully, the answer is, "I am here to teach and influence the life and professional pursuits of the students I work with every day!"

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