

## **UNC CHARLOTTE**

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### **PRESENTING QUESTIONS AND GOALS**

This project was designed to clarify what counted as effective and engaging instruction from the student perspective. We sought to find out in precise, concrete, and detailed terms what exactly was happening when students thought a class was going well.

### **PROJECT ACTIVITIES**

We conducted electronic surveys of and focus groups with students in January and February 2016. After gathering information, we produced a report summarizing what students had to say about their classroom experiences. We had a day-long conference for all full-time faculty in the department to discuss the findings of the report. At the conclusion of this conference, we identified topics that we thought merited further attention. We also agreed to encourage faculty to observe one another's classrooms so that we could continue to learn from each other. In fall 2016 and early spring 2017, we scheduled monthly conversations on the topics from the conference. They focused on our view of the goal of good teaching, strategies for teaching writing, strategies for teaching critical thinking, assignments beyond writing and exams, in-class activities beyond lecture and discussion, and effective assessment. In January and February 2017, we contacted students who had participated in focus groups the prior year and asked them whether they thought we had gotten it right and whether we missed anything they thought it was important for us to know about effective, engaging teaching. We then produced a summary of the eight student reflections. In April 2017, we hosted a conference for religious studies faculty in the region to discuss the findings of our research. Roughly twenty faculty, in addition to full-time faculty from UNC Charlotte, participated in this conference. The conference was organized around a keynote and closing reflection provided by Bobbi Patterson, Professor of Pedagogy from Emory University, frequent Wabash collaborator, and recipient of the AAR Excellence in Teaching award. In addition to conversation about the findings of our research, the day included focused working groups on specific topics, and time for institutional teams to work out one specific goal for the coming year.

### **RESULTS**

For the most part, the project confirmed what we had long been telling ourselves about our teaching: we are effective, engaging teachers and our students “enjoy” their experience in the classroom. They appreciate that they are challenged, taken seriously, given skills and knowledge that relates to their lives and helps them engage their world more critically and thoughtfully. There were three key insights that we gained from the research. First, as much as students appreciate discussion and open-ended, “active” pedagogies, they expressed a need and strong desire for structure and for a knowledgeable, authoritative instructor who can tell them what they need to know and what is important and central to the topic under consideration. Second, as much as we have tried to get away from a model of religious studies organized around traditions and religious literacy, we learned that this is what interests students and what draws them, initially, to our courses. They want to know about people they perceive as different from themselves—what they believe, think, and do. This makes students courses that cover non-Christian traditions more attractive, even though students recognized the risk of exoticization and that courses that made the familiar unfamiliar were also valuable. Third, we learned that what makes our classes successful—engaging and effective—in the eyes of our students is what makes them problematic in the eyes of our administration. Our students value discussion, attention to writing, and individualized attention—all of which require relatively small classes. What was striking is that students themselves are aware of the pressures and challenges that a small department faces in a large public institution. Finally, our students confirmed that most people are either unaware of religious studies generally or what religious studies is more specifically. This means that one of our central challenges relates not to what happens in the classroom, but is about getting people through the door in the first place.