

Spotlight: Dr. Felicia Vulcu

Dr. Felicia Vulcu is an Assistant Professor and Undergraduate Program Advisor in the department of Biochemistry and Biomedical Sciences. Dr Vulcu was recently recognized with the President's Award for Outstanding Contributions to Teaching and Learning. Her dedication to teaching and inspiring young students has always been outstanding. She is one of the first professors incoming Biochemistry students become familiar with and most definitely a reason for the program's success. We asked Dr. Vulcu a few questions about how she came to this role and her perspectives on teaching and learning.



Dr. Felicia Vulcu

QUESTION 1.

What sparked your interest in teaching?

Is it what you always wanted to do?

I have always loved teaching and learning. I think both go hand in hand extremely well and I do not believe that you can teach without learning. I learn a great deal from my students. I think of teaching and learning as a two-way communication conduit and this spark came from my wonderful experience here at McMaster, both as an undergraduate and a graduate student.

QUESTION 2.

What would you say your general teaching philosophy is?

My teaching philosophy is an open document, constantly being molded and revised with every passing life experience. At this point in my career I no longer consider myself a teacher first and foremost. I am a learner first, a storyteller second and a teacher/facilitator third. I often reflect on my teaching philosophy and I find trends emerging, from a snapshot reflection of this in real-time versus the teaching philosophy I have amassed throughout my entire time teaching. Though the snap-shot often includes different learning elements, from the flipped-classroom to virtual labs, the overarching end goals are often the same throughout my entire teaching career. One central, tenet to my learning philosophy is safety. The safety to learn, express, create, share and experience. The other practices follow closely with engage, and reflect being the main concepts I implement in every course/curriculum I am involved in. Content, though extremely important, is not the first practice I lead with, but it is at the base of creating certain learning objectives and assessments.

QUESTION 3.

What has been your most rewarding teaching experience?

This is a very difficult question as I find rewarding teaching experiences every day. I am in awe of daily events in my life, and I often find myself taking a step back and reflecting on an experience. I think this is the stuff life is made of: the small, precious moments in day-to-day life that make us stop and smile. I do not believe I am answering the question, sorry about that. If I were to try and answer the question I would say my most rewarding teaching experience is a culmination of daily teaching experiences. I love my job SO MUCH and I am extremely happy to interact with such wonderful and caring students (both undergraduate and graduate) every day of my life. It is a tremendous experience.

QUESTION 4.

Your "active learning" approach, such as the Murder Mystery in the lab, why do you feel this is important? And what are some of the next steps you would like to take?

I feel engaging students in biochemistry is extremely important because it builds practical and transferrable skills. I often struggle with the learning objectives students come out with from a course or workshop I design. Aside from content-based learning objectives I also put a lot of emphasis on other skills, like dealing with failure (i.e. experiments not working), maintaining a positive outlook, communication, motivation, grit, perseverance and my personal favourites: curiosity and creativity. I start off all my courses by establishing a safe, nurturing environment conducive to dialogue and exchange of ideas. I then engage students in the content using various teaching practices, from project-based-learning, virtual lab simulations, case studies, puzzles, etc. Then I facilitate the inquiry process and allow students to develop ideas, create and be curious about the content. This process is truly and utterly magical when you see it in action, and I am thoroughly addicted to it. My next steps are simple: to keep engaging students in this process.

QUESTION 5.

How do you hope that Catalyst helps both graduate and undergraduate students?

I think Catalyst is very similar to my teaching philosophy. I hope this journal will engage students and prompt them to utilize their biochemistry content in creative ways. For undergraduate students, I see Catalyst as a medium to showcase student-led course projects and ideas. For graduate students, I see the opportunity to engage in mentorship and teamwork.

References:

Vulcu, F., & Heirwegh, M. (2015). Dr. Earl N. Meyer, in the lab, with a scalpel: A murder mystery as a biochemistry recruitment tool. *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education*, 43(1), 20–27. <http://doi.org/10.1002/bmb.20830>