Tenure Statement: Teaching (abridged)

1. High Expectations

I believe that low expectations and easy grades encourage laziness, not learning, while high expectations push students to accomplish more than they originally believed they could. My best professors in college treated me not like an ignorant child but (to my amazement) as a budding scholar in my own right. I strove to fulfill their vision of me. Now I seek to give my students the same opportunity.

I can only have high expectations and tough standards if I am willing to supply my students with all the tools and resources they need to achieve the goals I set. At the very least, this means being crystal clear about what my expectations and standards are. My students compliment me on my well-structured syllabi and clear assignments. I grade quickly (despite the agony of it) and always hand back student work within one or two weeks, so my students know where they stand.

In my first few years of teaching, I encountered some problems due to the contradiction between my high standards and students’ (incorrect) perceptions that SOAN is an “easy” department and Intro is a “gut” course. Every term I found myself confronted by a few students who complained that I was “rigid” and “nit-picky.” At my Third-Year Review meeting, Jack Dovidio, Ellen Kraly, and I discussed the fact that the problem was not that I was rigorous, but that my students did not understand the justification behind their scores. I realize that I needed to clarify not just what my expectations were, but also why I had them. For example, in Intro Sociology, students were most unhappy with how strictly I graded their definitions of sociological terms on the first midterm exam. I now explain that I am strict about these definitions because those terms will be used throughout the rest of the semester. I point out that they would be much better off if they lost three points now on a definition than to bomb a 20 point essay on the final exam because of a shaky grasp of a key sociological term.

However, I also go beyond making a simple case for better grades. I remind my students that they are in my class not just to learn sociology, but also to learn broader liberal arts skills of research, analysis, public speaking, and writing. Although most of them will not become sociologists, they will all need to be able to write clearly. The real purpose of writing well, after all, is not to extract points from a professor; it is to convey complicated information and ideas to
people who do not know them already. This has helped shift the conversation from, “Why did you dock me two points?” to “I understand more than I’m getting across on paper. I can see why you took points off for this, but what can I do to become a better writer?” I am pleased to see that students had become more aware of the skills they were gaining. On SETs, students note that their writing skills and study skills have improved, that they learned how to put together research papers, analyze data, read challenging texts, and take better notes.

2. Strong Support for Success

Because I expect a great deal from my students, I believe they should expect a great deal from me as a teacher. Of course this means being accessible to students, both face-to-face and via e-mail. Besides holding regular office hours, I make it clear that students can make an appointment with me almost anytime between 9:00 and 5:00. But being passively accessible is not enough; I look for ways to actively encourage them to seek my help and receive my feedback. For example, a week or two before students are to give a class presentation, I ask them, date book in hand, if they would like to schedule a meeting with me. Every student who scores below a C on one of my midterm exams receives a handwritten note asking them to drop by my office hours, or to make an appointment with me.

It is my experience that the students who do most poorly are often the ones who want to avoid any interaction with the professor, even though they are also the ones who need personal attention the most. By “forcing” them to come into my office, I can show them that I am not a scary ogre or condemning judge, but a resource for them to do better. In the office, I signal my approachability by using more informal speech and body language than in the classroom. I express empathy: “It must have felt very frustrating to get a grade like this when you had studied so hard. Let’s think of ways to make sure that on the next test, you can do a better job of showing how much you’ve learned.” Even students who seem nervous and hostile eventually relax.

I also build support into the structure of my courses. Every class with a research project has a meeting at the library, so that students can begin their research while I am available to answer questions. Before a research paper is due, I ask students to turn in proposals, outlines, and rough drafts, and I offer copious comments every step of the way. In my 300-level courses and senior seminars, students not only turn in rough drafts, but read each others’ drafts in small
group rough draft workshops. I split up the class into groups of three or four, and every student must not only read all the other group members’ drafts, but fill out an evaluation form for each. Then the whole group meets together, and we discuss each draft in turn. This is very time-consuming for me, since I must prepare evaluation forms for every student’s rough draft and oversee all the workshops. Yet it is worthwhile because it pushes my students to write better papers.

On my SET forms, students often mention that I am well-organized and that my classes are well-structured so that they can absorb a great deal of information without feeling overwhelmed and confused. Before class begins, I write the important terms and concepts on the board, in the order in which they will be addressed. I also do a quick review of the important information from the previous class or two. When teaching with a difficult concept or theory, I first give them the whole thing, and then take it apart piece by piece before building it back together again. For each segment, I give data, examples, or relate it to our reading, until the students seem to grasp the main idea. After students have a firm grasp of the whole concept or theory, we discuss implications and applications.

3. Comfortable and Cooperative Classroom Environment

Another aspect of treating students as scholars and adults is to encourage them to learn from each other. This requires a comfortable class environment where students feel safe enough to speak up. Unfortunately, creating a comfortable class environment for all students requires the active intervention of the professor. The 2003 ALANA Affairs Colgate Campus Climate Survey revealed that one of the most important factors determining student satisfaction at Colgate is whether they feel comfortable around and respected by the other students in the classroom. Unfortunately, students of color and students who were less wealthy were much more likely to agree with statements like: “It is hard to find classmates to study with,” or “When I try to speak up in class, I am sometimes interrupted or ignored.”

I engage in a number of proactive strategies to counter these problems. In every one of my classes, even Introduction to Sociology, student participation makes up a substantial portion of the final course grade. On the first full day of each course, we spend most of the class time playing a “get-to-know-you game.” I am the first to admit to my students that this game is mildly humiliating (mostly to me). But I also explain the purpose behind it: to create a
comfortable and cooperative community to enhance their learning. Last year I added a new twist: students are literally quizzed on their classmates’ names. The quiz is not graded; they simply have to keep retaking it until they get a perfect score.

In order to facilitate relationship building, and to encourage cooperation rather than competition, I often have my students work in group activities, like class presentations, debates, and role-playing. Many of these group projects are not graded. In these cases, I do not allow students to choose their own group members, so that students cannot choose to work only with their friends. In my upper division courses, the rough draft workshops are also a valuable way to teach cooperative learning. These workshops not only improve the quality of the research papers, they also teach students the skills of critique and the value of collaboration. Students often believe that it is a sign of weakness to need help from others. At the rough draft workshops, I make sure to tell them that this is what real scholars do – we depend on each other for feedback.

Because there is so much information to convey in every class, there is pressure to simply lecture at the students for large chunks of time, especially given the challenge of facilitating a discussion in a class of over 30 students. Yet 75 minutes is a long time to endure a lecture, even for the lecturer. Moreover, lectures do not meet every student’s learning style. Therefore, I only lecture for a few minutes at a time before I invite some interaction from the class. Sometimes the interaction is brief, one or two questions. Other times, we pause for ten minutes for a more in-depth discussion. To make sure that discussions are not dominated by the same few people, I make sure to call on different students when the next mini-discussion comes up, so that more students have a chance to speak. When students come see me in my office, I always make a point of either praising them for their class participation or encouraging them to talk more in class if they have been quiet. As a result, many students who are quiet in the first part of the semester are participating frequently by the end of the term.