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Engaging and Mentoring Students

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Engaging and mentoring students

On a warm fall afternoon, Jeff Summers sits before his class in a rolling office chair, discussing how markets work. As he talks, he wheels slowly down the center aisle between the 20 or so students. They are just beginning that day's worksheet, graphing changes in demand based on various factors. They talk softly about the problems as Summers circulates around the room, listening to conversations, looking at the work, quietly explaining the concept to a group of three students. When a conversation prompts a question he heads for the whiteboard, drawing a graph to help explain the issue.

It's clear that Summers, who became the first Dave Hansen Endowed Chair in Economics on July 1, loves teaching. There may be more lucrative positions for economists, and he tried some, but teaching is his niche and it can be traced directly to his undergraduate experience.

"I enjoyed the rapport, support and mentoring that I received from my professors at a small college; it made me want to work with young people," Summers said. "There's nothing more exciting for me than sitting in a classroom, explaining something and a student says 'Ah, I see!' That is extremely rewarding and that's why I do it."

Summers tries to limit lecture time in his classes. While he almost always provides an introduction to set the ground rules and review some particularly knotty economic theory, most class time is spent working with students in groups or individually or sending them to the board to explain a concept to the rest of the class. In most classes he provides students with discussion questions ahead of class to give them an opportunity to prepare.

"You have to get them engaged individually, rather than have them sit and listen to me talk," he said.

Levi Altringer '15 said he appreciates Summers' style of teaching because he has the opportunity to study the discussion questions and come prepared for class.

"If you are struggling with a question, you can take more time on that concept or ask about it during class," he said, "You are able to work at your level, but you can also go to him with any question and he's happy to help or explain it."

Summers says the most important lesson he can teach students is to be comfortable with the fact that there isn't always a correct answer to every question.

"There are more questions without good answers than there are questions with good answers," Summers said. "My job is to help students understand what the questions are and how they need to think through the associated issues."



The Summers File
At Linfield since 1992
7 years as associate dean of
faculty (2001-08)

Education
B.A. Wabash College
M.S. University of Oregon
Ph.D. Purdue University

Prior teaching experience
Wabash College
Reed College

To see a video of Summers, go to
youtube.com/linfieldcollege/videos.

Linfield as a research laboratory

Linfield is a ready-made laboratory for Summers' research interest – the economics of higher education. Every day he is surrounded with the real-world workings of economics as part of higher education and that has resulted in a number of research projects and internships with students.

Matt Vance '99 had an internship with Summers in 1998 during one of the most dynamic periods in Linfield's history. The college was in the early stages of acquiring the property from Hewlett-Packard, now known as the Keck Campus. Vance and Summers had first worked together on the strategic planning committee exploring growth at the college. For the internship, Vance worked alongside Summers analyzing large sets of data relating to admission, financial aid and enrollment, then used the findings to develop models illustrating how increases in the student body could impact the college and identifying the corresponding costs and potential revenues. Summers made an indelible impression on Vance, now a partner at VergePointe Capital, LLP, a private equity firm in Lake Oswego, and he has put many of the Linfield lessons to use in his professional life.

"Jeff taught me to never walk into a meeting without having done your homework," Vance said. "You need to understand the agenda and to make sure you have reviewed the data you will need.

I put that into practice with clients and in meetings. But not everything can be driven by data. Jeff taught me that you need to be educated and informed but you also need to be flexible."

Summers treated Vance not just as a student, but also as a colleague. "He was a very good person to work with in a professional environment," Vance said, "He treated me with

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– Jeff Summers, Dave Hansen Endowed Chair in Economics

professional respect, while teaching me along the way.”

Vance compared Summers’ teaching style to that of Professor Emeritus Dave Hansen. “Both walked in the door to class and were there to make learning happen,” Vance said. “Jeff is very smart and very focused and he delivered a high level of education within the four walls of a classroom, yet he was always easy to connect with outside of class.”

In addition to Vance, Summers has teamed up with a number of students on research projects and papers. (See sidebar) This past summer, thanks to funding provided by Peter Fisher ’96, managing partner of Human Investing, Summers and Altringer collaborated on two projects. The first, “Is College Pricing Power Pro-Cyclical?” looked at whether a college’s ability to raise net tuition revenue through raising list price is dependent on the business cycle. During a recession, can colleges increase revenue when they raise prices? And, during economic expansions, is it easier to raise the price and increase net tuition revenue?

The second project was a benchmarking analysis comparing Linfield’s financial performance from 2005 to 2012 (including the Great Recession of 2007-09) with 120 other baccalaureate arts and sciences colleges to get a sense of how Linfield fared.

The challenge of research, according to Altringer, a math and economics double major, is that you have to be self-motivated, persistent and prepared for the fact that you don’t always succeed and sometimes need to start over. Not only did he have the opportunity to polish his writing skills this summer, he also was able to explore economic theory that he had not yet studied in class.

“Dr. Summers was incredible to work with,” Altringer added. “He taught me some of the heavier economic concepts within a short amount of time. Being able to use and understand those was really rewarding.”

Hansen Endowment

The Dave Hansen Endowed Chair in Economics has allowed the department to add a full-time faculty member and hire Brittany Teahan, who recently received her Ph.D. in economics from Purdue University. Among other courses, she will teach experimental economics, which has not been offered before. In addition, the endowment provides support for research and travel, making funds available for student-faculty collaborative research.

Summers said the opportunities the endowment offers for collaborative research with students represent the best of Dave Hansen, dean of students and professor emeritus who retired from Linfield in 2012, because “when you think of him, you think of his interactions with students both as a professor and as an administrator.”

–Mardi Mileham



Sample of collaborative projects with students

“Does Administration Crowd Out Instruction at Private, Four-Year Colleges and Universities?” with Ben Pappas ’04

“Factors Affecting First-Year Retention at Linfield College” with Allen Tyler ’11

“Factors Affecting Retention at Private Baccalaureate Arts and Sciences Colleges” with Tarun Fernandez ’12

“Baumol and Bowen Effects at Private Liberal Arts Colleges” with Geoff Hamilton ’12

“Is College Pricing Power Pro-Cyclical?” with Levi Altringer ’15