

Limed: Teaching with a Twist

Season 3, Episode 2 – Journey to the Professoriate

Matt Wittstein (00:00:11):

You are listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy.

(00:00:22):

Hi everyone. This month I had the pleasure of reconnecting with Pierce Johnson, a former Elon student who is starting his second year of a cognitive psychology PhD program at the University of Albany. Pierce is somewhat unique because he knows early on that he really wants to be a professor at a teaching focused institution. Our panel included Marcella Borge, associate Professor of Learning design and Technology at Penn State University. Leo Lambert, professor of Education and President Emeritus of Elon University and Sophie Miller, a first-year doctoral student at Purdue University. The panel had some great advice for Pierce to ensure his graduate training aligns with his professional aspirations. We talk about skills, great teachers have mentorship and much more. Our conversation reminded me of the importance of my role as a mentor, but also the many ways we can create experiences for ourselves at any stage of our careers. Enjoy the episode. I'm Matt Wittstein. Hi Pierce. Welcome to the show. It is so great to see you. Before we get started, I want to know how is grad school going for you?

Pierce Johnson (00:01:30):

Hey Matt. Great to be on. Things are going well. I am a grad student at University of Albany. Just finished up my first year this last year and I'm going into my second at the end of August here. Things are going well, doing a little bit of research over the summer, getting prepared to gear back up for a fall semester and get things going on research and looking forward to getting to speak on the podcast.

Matt Wittstein (00:01:49):

So tell me a little bit more about your first year. What were some of the highs and lows?

Pierce Johnson (00:01:52):

I was transitioning from being a research professional. I took a post-back position at the University of Denver. It was very different transition going from college student and then transitioning. Still working on a college campus as a researcher, but I'm not a student and it's really not for me. I am just a working professional in a lab and so going from that environment back into the classroom again as a student researcher wearing many different hats as a grad student, it's been kind of a wild transition back into that world again. It's been a lot of fun. I have a lot of great people in my program. My lab mate is absolutely phenomenal. Love him to death. He and my advisor really made the transition a lot easier for me. Just a fantastic group of people that I get to work with here. I'm glad that the first year is done.

Matt Wittstein (00:02:36):

I can relate from my own graduate experiences that the people around you are really important to equality experience and it sounds like you have some really good people mentors supports nearby, so that's fantastic. I understand that you are in cognitive psychology program. You're obviously interested in research. I know some of your background of you having done some neuroscience research, but I also knew that you are really interested in becoming a teaching professional, so tell me a little bit more about that.

Pierce Johnson (00:03:05):

Yeah, my interest in teaching really started at Elon and my time as a student there. I had the incredible opportunity to work with a lot of people, mostly in the philosophy department. My degrees were philosophy and psychology and so I spent a lot of time doing research on the psych department, but a lot of time teaching and thinking about what teaching looked like and what I liked about it and how to be a better teacher in the philosophy department and it was an incredible environment. I spent time as a TLA or teaching learning assistant with Dr. Cahill. In that role I got really great mentorship on what their thought processes were as far as teaching goes and what they look for and how they want to engage their students so that their students get a rich educational experience in the classroom and can take what they're learning from the class and apply it to their own lives. And so I really spend a lot of time thinking about pedagogy and what good teaching looks like and how I can show up as a better teacher in the classroom for students. That was the start of that passion. A pretty large reason why I decided to go to grad school. I really want to get into teaching following my research career here, and so that was the driving force behind my desire to continue my education at grad school.

Matt Wittstein (00:04:10):

In your teaching and learning assistant program, what types of responsibilities did you have?

Pierce Johnson (00:04:14):

Yeah, it kind of varied week to week depending on the class, the classes that I was teaching and were philosophy classes and I would help with prepping material occasionally the professor, they would trust me to teach a class period or two. I would get the okay about what the content that I was bringing to the class was or teaching some of the material that they already had prepared and facilitating class discussion outside of the classroom. My responsibilities extended to what pedagogy, what that really meant, what it means to responsibly build an experience for students and what kind of considerations you need to have in the classroom so that you're effectively presenting material to students in a way that they can engage with and be excited about. A lot of my time was spent reading some pedagogy, reading some theory about how should I structure a class, what should I do to engage students at the beginning and the middle and the end of the class and how do I create kind of an overarching theme even across a semester that students can latch onto and organize their thoughts about whatever the content that I was teaching the class was.

Matt Wittstein (00:05:13):

And how have those experiences translated to your post undergraduate roles as a research professional and now as a graduate student?

Pierce Johnson (00:05:23):

It's kind of been a little jarring. I started in that environment at Elon. The classes that I was TAing were the smallest one I had was five students and that was the entirety of the class and it was really geared towards philosophy majors and so going from the largest class that I TA'ed for was 30 person intro philosophy class to my post undergrad experience where the two classes that I TA'ed for over my first year were a personality psychology class and an intro psychology class, and the intro class was 67 students and the personality class was 208. And so just a very different experience as far as size of the class and what kind of considerations I need to have as a teacher and how I show up for students in those roles has been very different. Even with the differences between those two experiences, it's kind

of shown me the breadth of what teaching looks like at the college level. I think it's focused where I see myself as far as after I get my degree and at the stage where I'm thinking about teaching as a professor.

Matt Wittstein (00:06:17):

Well, how did University of Albany prepare you to be a TA for those larger courses?

Pierce Johnson (00:06:23):

The training kind of was bare bones. The stage in our careers that our advisors and that the administration really assumes that we are focusing on right now is our training as researchers and as scientists and so we didn't get a lot of preparation to be TAs and I think part of that speaks to the variety of the experience that different TAs are going to have based on the kind of professors that they're paired with. In my own case, I was paired with a fourth year grad student who was teaching the class and even though she was responsible for teaching the 208 person lecture, my responsibilities has really took on coming to class, making sure that I was available for office hours, grading assignments when I needed to grade. I proctored all of her exams with her. My experience, I'm sure was very different from other grad students and other TAs. We didn't get a lot of in-depth training going in. The assumption really is, Hey, you're researchers, you're scientists we're training you to be scientists. And so that's kind of the focus they had. They didn't give us a lot of front end preparation to be effective TAs.

Matt Wittstein (00:07:21):

So you sort of have a mentor as fourth year graduate student you're paired with that had a similar experience I would assume. Was she able to sort of talk to you about her genesis as an instructor and does her interest in being a teaching faculty member in the future align with yours or is she really more on the research side?

Pierce Johnson (00:07:40):

Her experiences kind of meet mine nearly exactly. She TA'ed the personality class that I TA'ed that she was teaching two semesters that she was here. Her experience prior to teaching the class was TAing now as a fourth year, she's the instructor. She's the one who's teaching in the class, and so I think most of her experience comes from TAing. She didn't get specific training outside of being a TA for the class, she sees herself leaving academia, going to industry. She's much more interested in user design, user experience research.

Matt Wittstein (00:08:10):

What other resources are available to you to get some training as a teacher? Do you have a teaching and learning center that you can engage with? Are there other mentors, maybe not in the psychology department, but are there other resources you have at Albany that you've explored?

Pierce Johnson (00:08:24):

We do have other resources. We do have a teaching learning center that hosts classes and workshops on improving your teaching or thinking about what effective teaching looks like. They offer those classes and they open those up to all the grad students at the university. I think one of the issues with the Teaching Learning Center is that we aren't really granted a ton of leeway in using those resources. If we want to sign up for a class, it might be a zero one credit class, it would run the length of the semester,

but it's tough to fit those classes on top of the research load. The grad students have that the TA load it would be in addition to the coursework that we're doing, the TAing that we're doing and the research that we're doing. And so there's not a lot of space made for us to make use of those kind of opportunities.

Matt Wittstein (00:09:07):

What I hear you sharing is that there actually is good opportunities, but maybe there's a few barriers to those opportunities, but you will get the chance to practice teaching in different ways. You might have the chance to take some workshops or do some courses, but you're really looking for something that's a little bit deeper and more fulfilling for you knowing that you want to become an excellent teacher as a professor someday. So I want to ask you, I think this is a really important question for especially young educators to wrestle with is what's your, why do you want to be a higher education teacher?

Pierce Johnson (00:09:42):

I mean, I think back to my experience at Elon and why I kept on taking opportunities to TA, it really came down to the excitement in the classroom that I felt I got just as much, if not more from my experience teaching or helping to teach classes as I did as a student in other classes. Being a teacher in those classes helped me be a better student in the other classes that I was taking. And so one of the reasons why I was so excited to pursue teaching in the future was taking those opportunities to be a better student and to improve the experience of students in the classroom. But I think secondarily, getting to see a student get it was really exciting to me. Having them ask questions, not just because I may or may not have the answers and being a source of knowledge for them and being a resource for them and kind of giving them help and understanding a concept was what excited me the most. And so seeing the light bulb turn on, seeing the excitement of I finally get it, I understand it. That paired with being excited about how can I be a better student in the classroom? How can I improve the experience of my peers even when I'm a student in the class and not a teacher in that space? Those were really the two motivators for me to pursue teaching.

Matt Wittstein (00:10:56):

So as I take this to share with our panel, what are you hoping for them to provide you as you're sort of on this journey to becoming an excellent teacher?

Pierce Johnson (00:11:05):

What kind of preparation do I need and how might it be different than the preparation that I'm currently getting to teach at a smaller university? That's really where I see myself in the future. And so I think most of the training that I'm getting at Albany assumes that I'm going to be teaching for a larger university audience, large lecture hall, and I think that comes out of the necessity that the university has for grad students and the work that we do. They need us to teach large classes because the tenured faculty can't do it all. They need us to supplement and help out in that regard. I'm worried that that leaves my preparation as a teacher and scholar short if I'm applying to smaller universities where I really see myself in the future. There's all of these things that I think that I need to do as a teacher.

(00:11:50):

I'm not on the job market yet. I'm going to be getting there in a couple years. I'm an only second year grad student. I have at least another three or four. But what does going on the job market look like for a

prospective grad student, a prospective faculty member who sees himself at a smaller institution, smaller teaching focused institution look like? What kind of timeline would the panel suggest for engaging in activities that are required for those applications to be effective? I know that I should have a teaching portfolio and some kind of indication of my performance as a teacher, maybe even a diversity statement or a teaching philosophy statement. There are a lot of parts to that portfolio in that application. When should I be developing those? What should I have in them? What do I need to focus on? And then there's kind of the imposter syndrome of is it too soon for me to start thinking about trying to lecture at another university?

(00:12:41):

Am I qualified to teach a class because currently I don't feel like I am qualified to teach a class, but maybe that's just my own imposter syndrome. Even from my experience at Elon, a lot of the sense of agency that I felt in the classroom came from doing it over and over again. There's a lot of imposter syndrome about should I go out and lecture? Should I be applying for smaller jobs even on top of my current grad work? What kind of concerns and what kind of timeline should I be thinking about when I'm preparing myself best to go on to the job market in the next couple of years?

Matt Wittstein (00:13:11):

I can see you're thinking really deeply about this and this process and really considering your future, and I just want to commend you for that because I think it shows a level of maturity thinking about where you want to be individually. So I'm excited to share this with our panel and get back to you with what they say.

Pierce Johnson (00:13:27):

Yeah, Matt, it's been a great conversation. I'm looking forward hearing what they've got to contribute to the conversation as well, and I'm excited to get their feedback and any advice or insight that they have about what the next couple of years looks like for me and the steps that I'm going to take to hopefully be a faculty member at a smaller institution.

Matt Wittstein (00:13:52):

Hi Marcella. Hi Sophie. Hi Leo. I'm so excited to have you on the show. We talked to a former student of Elon Pierce Johnson about his journey to becoming hopefully a faculty member at a teaching institution, and that's what we're going to talk about today to introduce yourself to our audience, share your name, your title, your institution, any other context you want, but I also want to know what is your why for pursuing your personal path?

Marcela Borge (00:14:21):

Hi, so my name is Marcela Borge and I'm an associate professor at Penn State. I study collaborative learning across the lifespan and the ways that technology can help or hinder that. And I guess the reason why I went into education was because I have always sort of been on my own since I was 16. It was kind of hard going for a while, but I had a lot of really dedicated amazing teachers that helped me along the way. And so when I ended up deciding that I wanted to go to graduate school, I actually started in a teaching and credentialing program. I thought I was going to be a science teacher, and then I just kind of accidentally went into a PhD route. There was a rap song that said, I have a PhD, a player hater degree. And I'm like, yeah, I'm going to get me one of those.

Sophie Miller (00:15:08):

I'm Sophie Miller. I am also a grad of Elon. Very recently I'm a doctoral student at Purdue University in the Department for Human Development and Family Sciences. I have always felt as though I was an educator at heart, but I did not want to go right into a classroom in a K 12 system. And so the next best thing was researching that. And so that is what I've done. I've pursued research in early childhood education and I'm continuing on that path and I'm still trying to figure out a little bit more about my why and what my path is going to be. But I do still believe that engaging with my topic as closely as possible through research and then hopefully rounding it back into educating in some form or fashion will be the path for me. But I really just wanted to understand how children are learning and play a integral role in improving their settings without being directly in the classroom. So I'm still navigating that a little bit.

Leo Lambert (00:16:08):

My name is Leo Lambert. I'm a professor of education at Elon. I'm also president emeritus of the university. I served as Elon's president for almost 20 years. I'm the first in my family to get a four year college degree, and I went off to college thinking I was going to be a school teacher, but first year, second semester I was an English major. I took a class in American literature from Professor Jim Skolls. It was an experience that changed my life. I remember first paper he said something to me like, well, I thought you did a good job on your first paper. I'm going to get back to you class. I was expecting an A on it. And it came back just covered in comments and suggestions about how it could be a better paper and it had a B on it. And he said, I really think there's material here for you to write an A paper. Why don't you rewrite this paper, which is words that no first year undergraduate necessarily wants to hear. But I was just so taken up by his encouragement and his sincerity and his interest in the subject was an inspiring class. I wanted to do well for Professor sko and he was one of I think many people along my way that introduced me to the idea that you could teach in another setting, you could teach in a higher education context. And that's how I got started down this road of working in higher ed.

Matt Wittstein (00:17:26):

Well, I really appreciate those stories and I sort of hear this common thread of having meaningful experiences and possibly some mentors that nudged you in directions to get you to where you think you're headed on the path you want to be on. And obviously you've had some success on that path. So I want to quickly recap our conversation. Pierce Johnson is a second year graduate student. He's studying cognitive psychology, the University of Albany, and he knows, and he's known from a fairly early time that he wants to have a strong teaching role when he enters academia after finishing his PhD. That doesn't mean a hundred percent teaching, but he definitely found a joy for teaching and he found that through his experiences as an undergraduate teaching and learning assistant in philosophy courses, one of his undergraduate majors, he said something really interesting that the excitement that he felt in the classroom was as fulfilling as actually learning material and that creativity and insightfulness that you get when you get new ideas.

(00:18:25):

But beyond that, he also finds that teaching acts in sort of a reciprocal manner, that it actually also makes him a better learner. So he sees this really give and take piece to it. Our conversation centered around his experiences as a first year graduate student in TAing a couple of psychology courses. He's been the TA for introductory psychology course with about 67 students and a personality psychology course with about 208 students, and he was paired with another graduate student who was the instructor of record and primarily his responsibilities are to show up to class regularly, have office hours,

do some grading, do some co proctoring of exams, but a little less on the how do you actually construct the course, how do you actually deliver the lectures and create the lectures and the material and learning activities. As he's thinking about his future goals, he's really seeking ways to find additional resources and opportunities to be ready to go on that job market and be highly competitive and highly prepared to be a very effective teacher. So where I want to start this conversation is one, what are the essential skills that a teacher should have? And I mean that broadly as a teacher of any level. I know we typically focus on higher education, but what are some of those foundational skills that all great teachers seem to have in common?

Sophie Miller (00:19:45):

I have most recently been in the student position in classrooms, and so when I'm thinking back to all of my great teachers that I've had throughout my undergraduate experience, I think one of the underlying themes between all of them is that the teachers that are amazing are not know-it-alls. They know that they don't know the answer to everything and that piece of vulnerability when you're standing at the front of the classroom makes them have the ability to create a really wonderful community in the classroom of being able to ask questions and be able to have discussions without the teacher being the ruler of the classroom so to speak.

Leo Lambert (00:20:30):

I'm not so sure, Matt, that it's about skills. I think it's more about dispositions and I think it is the disposition of caring and being the kind of faculty member professor that wants to build relationships with students that sees learning as a relational activity and not a transactional activity. Skills can be taught, dispositions have to be formed, and that I think is the harder work here, the more important work too. This past September, I had the privilege of going back to Syracuse University for the 30th anniversary of a program that I started there called the Future Professoriate Project, which is now the Future Professoriate Program. And the idea behind the program was that doctoral students not only should have a mentor for their scholarship, but they also should have a mentor in teaching over a multi-year period in the FPP as we called it, students would gradually move to more and more independent teaching responsibilities until they reached the point where they would have an independent experience that was mentored.

(00:21:32):

They built a teaching portfolio as a part of their work with their faculty teaching mentor. They had the opportunity to earn something that Syracuse has offered for 30 years now called a certificate in university teaching, which they could earn alongside their PhD. And this program I think has made an enormous difference in reconceptualizing doctoral education at the institution in a way that honors the importance of preparation in teaching over time as a part of a graduate program. As we were saying earlier before our formal conversation started, most doctoral students like peers are not going to end up teaching at research one institutions. They're going to be teaching in community colleges and liberal arts institutions and regional public universities as well as our ones. And so it really is incumbent upon graduate education to rethink its model, I think, to better prepare students for the world of professional opportunities that they face.

(00:22:32):

Syracuse also has had a mandatory teaching assistant program of the graduate school, a two week introduction to teaching for all new graduate teaching assistants at the institution. That's 300 new

people a year. They come into campus and they have time with a peer, someone that's called a teaching fellow, an experienced outstanding teaching assistant that they have an opportunity to do a lot of small group work with as well as work with some of the institution's most celebrated teachers. So it starts off with trying to give graduate students a toolkit to be successful from day one. And there's departmental training on top of the university wide training as well, but it just doesn't end there because teaching is complicated. Syracuse wanted to give students an opportunity to really go deep in learning about university teaching. I think it's also important to put on the table that even today after there have been many important reform efforts in graduate education to try to center the importance of including preparation for teaching as a part of graduate education.

(00:23:40):

There are still these enormous cultural currents in doctoral education that work against students and challenge students because they're hearing very different messages from some faculty in their department. And those messages, there are many of them, but I'll just put two on the table, one of which is research is all important. Nothing else matters. Everything else is a waste of your time. Stay in the lab, focus on your research, get your dissertation done. And those still are the norms of the research. Primacy of R one institutions is not going away. That context gives culture shaping messages to graduate students. The other norm that I think we have to break down is that one mentor is going to prepare you for all the things you need to master and become expert at before you have your first teaching responsibility as a faculty member yourself. In fact, like everyone else, graduate students need constellations of mentors.

(00:24:39):

Your PhD advisor might not necessarily be the same mentor or coach for you or your teaching development, and likely that shouldn't be the responsibility of just one person either. But we come from this system of where people pride themselves on this is my doctoral student, this is my mini me, this is the person I'm setting out in the world with my values and doing my research and teaching the way that I did and that kind of thing. That's a really bad model. I think doctoral students need many mentors and many dimensions of their lives, and particularly in teaching because there's so many different ways to be a great teacher and the more teaching mentors that students experience as a part of their doctoral program, the more effective they will be as college and university teachers themselves. Ironically, one of the most significant things that happened at Syracuse for graduate students during my time as a graduate dean, there was the founding of an on-campus bar for graduate students called the Incomplete, which is sort of a riff on a grade that graduate students are oftentimes bargaining for at the end of the semester so they can get all of their work done.

(00:25:48):

It's still going on more than 30 years later. And the reason I think for success is another thing that graduate students are craving is time for reflective conversation in informal settings, particularly with people who are outside their discipline or department about teaching, about research, about the graduate student life, the graduate student experience, Sophie, you might discover that sometimes you get a little tired of just the graduate students in your program that you see every day in classes and it's nice to branch out and meet people who have different perspectives on teaching and research and the university. I think creating spaces for reflective conversations for graduate students is really important. We need to create these spaces for graduate students to have these conversations.

Marcela Borge (00:26:34):

First of all, I love both of those answers. Sophie, you said some things which I know are intuitively from your experience but actually also perfectly aligned with research. It's one of the most important things that you can do for students is to build that sense of safety because oftentimes students are afraid to ask questions because they're afraid that they're the only ones that don't know and everybody else knows when in reality, no one really knows, but everybody's afraid to ask. And so a really good instructor will oftentimes find ways of modeling that vulnerability and making it feel like it's okay to not know. And the best way to learn is to admit you don't know and ask questions. And so that's a really great thing. And then with regard to the skills versus disposition, I do agree that some people have a natural disposition, they're naturally caring and they naturally get joy from interacting with people.

(00:27:33):

But I think that there's also something to be said for this pervasive model that exists, an education of the teacher. As an authority figure though, I've had international students that have come into my program with this model in their head of what a t-shirt should be, someone who knows the answer, someone who's an authority figure and a model of respect where everyone's quiet and they raise their hands. But that's not actually what we are trying to teach in learning sciences. We want more of a community of learners. We want more of a student centered approach. And so when they work with me over a couple of years, that shifts and they become really comfortable in context, especially with young learners. That is what we call organized chaos, where it sounds really loud and it sounds really chaotic, but that's because people are in groups and they're talking and they're engaged, and when you focus in on what's happening, you actually recognize that there's a lot of learning happening.

(00:28:30):

But for someone who's not accustomed to that style of teaching, it's really chaotic. So I would say that to me, a really good teacher, yes, they have empathy and genuine care for their students. They're comfortable with not knowing, but they're also comfortable with a little bit of chaos. And here's a really important thing. I think really good teachers are good at improvising, and this is the hardest thing for new teachers that they might be a little bit worried and so it's harder, but really good teaching is kind of like jazz, and you have to pick up on those moments and build off of those moments that the students are bringing to the table and you have to be okay with leaving your plan. So really detailed teaching plans don't always leave room for that improvisation. Leo was speaking to some of it as well. I think that there are really good programs at Penn State in our program Learning Design and Technology.

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We do one year apprenticeship where with our undergraduate course, our incoming graduate students are kind of like our graduate assistants and they observe how we teach in that first semester. This is similar to a K12, a K12 teaching program, and then we give them some classes to teach and certain interactions, responsibilities so that by the end of that semester they've had some experience. The next semester they are the instructor of record for that course, and then they've seen it taught. We give them all the resources so they have that experience. However, combined with that, personally, I teach my students as part of the research because I do research and education as well. So we're in these informal settings. The more difficult skills that they have to develop is how to teach in collaborative settings, how to observe people as they're learning. And so what I tell them to do is first they watch me.

(00:30:24):

You walk around and you listen. You don't interrupt a group. You have to first listen to see what is happening. You kind of take notes in terms of what's happening, and then you can have these conversations at the end of class sessions about what occurred during that class session. This is

particularly important if you are working in context with underprivileged kids or in places where you have a lot of first gen students because we can discuss issues and problems and then you can work together as a community to come up with strategies for improving all of these approaches give the agency of what is happening in that context to the learner, and so it makes them more engaged and it helps to also build that sense of community. But again, these are sort of a apprenticeship things that students need to see as they happen in action and then be able to do themselves and then we can guide, we can coach them, we can give them feedback, and eventually they take over these spaces.

(00:31:26):

I haven't found a training program video or whatever else that can do that. These are the types of things I feel that really need solid experience to be able to talk about and plan better in the future. I just wanted to build on what Leo said. First of all, I 100% agree. I always tell my students that they should really be trying to build at least 10 mentors, somebody for every different aspect of your life because it really is very, very helpful. And that might be professional and research, it could be teaching, it can be even just someone who's a parent, if you have kids, whatever it is that's specific to your situation, that is extremely important. The other thing that I wanted to speak to, I think that is 100% research. One institutions, particularly in hard sciences, are going to just 100% focus on research.

(00:32:17):

That being said, I feel like it's changing to some extent. And again, I'm in the college of Education at Penn State, and we will always prioritize teaching. Even in research, we are always prioritizing teaching, but we're also really good at asking our incoming PhD students where they see themselves going and what direction because what we aim to do by the time that student graduates is to build the resume or CV they need to end up where they want. As an example, my last five PhD students, one of them wanted to go into industry. One of them wanted to do something with design. One of them wanted to be in an informal space, two of them wanted to be tenure track professors. All five of them ended up exactly where they wanted to be, but I had to work with them to build very different experiences at Penn State so that by the time they graduated and were applying, they would be competitive in whatever market they wanted to. But that looks very different depending on your direction. And I don't think a lot of students, especially first gen or there, students who are new to academia know that and understand how to develop that resume or that cv. And I think that that's really important and it's a conversation that also needs to be had.

Sophie Miller (00:33:40):

I completely agree, Marcella, that experience is the number one thing. I keep thinking back to Pierce and his limited access to these awesome programs that Marcella and Leo have both been talking about at other institutions and that what can Pierce be doing are other people like Pierce that are thinking, oh my gosh, that sounds awesome. I wish that I had opportunity to do that. And I'm thinking about the other contexts that are available to him. So perhaps within the research context, within his lab, he has opportunities to take on project management positions or other leadership positions where he can practice having a plan and it going wrong, and how do I deal with that as I'm leading other people? And so some of these skills that Matt is referring to, he can begin to practice, but I think that it needs to be really intentional practice and thinking about, okay, this is what I did today as a project manager for example, and this is what skills would relate to a teaching context, and this is what went well and this is what I would want to go differently. And so having really intentional reflection about that with his career goals in mind could totally prepare him. And those are great things for him to be talking about as he approaches the job market as well. Maybe I wasn't teaching in a classroom, however, I had leadership

where I was leading peers, other students, and I definitely learned the skills that are necessary to translate into a classroom setting.

Matt Wittstein (00:35:12):

We've talked a lot about mentorship and needing an abundance of different mentors for different things. I've been doing some work recently in some thinking about mentoring constellations and how students actually identify those mentors and are able to take some ownership of that. So Sophie, as you're starting a doctoral program, I'm curious if you've thought about strategies to identify mentors in different spaces in a very new space for you and then Marcella and Leo, if you have advice for how to reach out to potential mentors or how to identify where they might be located in different college settings.

Sophie Miller (00:35:48):

That's a really good question. I had a wonderful constellation of mentors at Elon, and so while that has equipped me with knowledge of what makes wonderful mentoring relationships and the diverse range of what mentoring relationships can look like, I've also been somewhat nervous about entering a new institution and knowing that what I need to be successful is a new mentoring constellation at my new place. Definitely a daunting task. Something that I'm thinking about are the built-in mentors and then ones that I need to be seeking out for myself. So my graduate advisor is obviously a part of my constellation, and that is a relationship that I've been forming over months throughout the application process into current day. But as I'm meeting other people in the department, I am thinking about a couple of different things. One being are my research interests and general interests aligning with this new person that I'm meeting?

(00:36:39):

Do I want to have a conversation with them at a later date about our aligning interests? And then also, are we just getting along? Is the conversation flowing? I had mentors at Elon that even though our content interests were not aligned whatsoever, we got along great and we could go and have coffee and talk about all the other things. So like Marcello was saying, having mentors for all different aspects of your life. So I've been paying attention to all of those different cues and keeping in mind that especially in a graduate program, there are fifth year and sixth year students who have been around for quite some time and even the second, third and fourth year students have all been around longer than I have, and so they would also be great mentors to have as well. So keeping all of this in mind as I'm meeting everybody new and getting settled and knowing that everybody has advice for me, but also that mentoring relationships are reciprocal, so I also need to be bringing something to the table in terms of not just taking advice but creating a mutual relationship with them.

Matt Wittstein (00:37:38):

I want to just take a second to remind the faculty and staff that are listening that it's sort of our responsibility to also participate in some of those mentoring opportunities. I'm thinking for myself, I'm going to be serving as a mentor at a disciplinary conference in a few weeks, and I know when I was a graduate student and participating in it on that level, I didn't know what it was. I didn't know what I would get out of it. I didn't know the value of it, but now being in a different head space, I hope I can bring something a little bit different. So I really just want to kind of bring that attention to those listeners that, hey, we can actually have an active role in this mentorship as well.

Marcela Borge (00:38:16):

But I think the hardest part about building a network of mentors is building relationships. That's going to be your first thing, and I'll say this just to give advice to undergraduate students as well. One of the best ways to do that is go to office hours, start there. That's what that's for. Start building that relationship with your professors. The other thing that you can do is if you've had sort of any jobs or positions within your college, there's often research assistantships, graduate assistantships, those are opportunities to build relationships. Thirdly, look up professional organizations. So within my area of learning sciences, they have early career workshops. That is one of the best ways to build sort of relationships because what we do is we're creating sort of these opportunities for them to ask questions to get mentorship, and we're already reaching out to leading scholars or people with experience.

(00:39:11):

We're matching the people to the students so that they get the best possible mentorship, and those are people who enjoy mentoring and who are really willing to help that person for a long period of time. Those types of opportunities are really, really important. The more that you can reach out and build those types of networking relationships, that is the best way to start creating your team, your collection of people who are going to be helping and guiding you. I've been so blessed to have great mentors and I had a gentleman by the name of Alan Collins who was a good mentor of mine, and he always instilled in me that the greatest contribution that we can make to science is to mentor the next generation. And the same thing is true for the greatest contribution that we can make for education and for teaching as to mentor the next generation as well.

Leo Lambert (00:40:00):

I think the thing that I would most strongly recommend is to make sure that your constellation of mentors includes people who are different from you. I have worked in my previous careers for a female chancellor, for a female vice president, for a female director. It's been very important for me to have women in my constellation of mentors who taught me so much and helped me become the person that I am today. As just one example, we've mentioned imposter syndrome already. In my experience, imposter syndrome runs is pretty rampant among new graduate students, but I think it can easily and effectively be dampen and lessened with relationships, and those people will gain confidence as they build relationships. I found that to be true throughout my career. I think within most doctoral context in academic departments, there tends to be this hierarchy of teaching responsibilities for graduate students, you might start off reading a recitation section or grading papers or something like that, but quickly, opportunities to move up and become a head or a lead TA to be a teaching fellow and get involved in leading teaching assistant preparation programs.

(00:41:11):

University-wide opportunities for more independent teaching responsibilities will be offered to those that show interest and promise. So my advice, I often use the same metaphor with undergraduate students, but I think it's equally as applicable to graduate students. Just be awake for these tap on the shoulder moments that people that care about you are going to come up you and say, there's this opportunity that I see coming down the road. You'd be really good at that. Why don't you think about it? So pay attention to those moments and value those people in your life that are looking out for opportunities for you because people will help find graduate students that show a lot of promise. They'll naturally want them to advance and give them more responsibility, hopefully more compensation as

well comes with those responsibilities. I'd say stay awake to tap on the shoulder moments. Always good advice.

Marcela Borge (00:42:00):

The one thing that I just want to say just from an equity perspective, because unfortunately it's a reality that black and brown students don't get tapped on the shoulder that much, and so don't wait for someone to invite you to be in a leadership position. Recognize that you have the capacity to be in a leadership position and you can create spaces to be in leadership positions. And if that does not happen naturally within something that you're doing, whether you are TAing or you're in the research lab, then you can ask for those experiences. And if those experiences that are not given to you, then you can be in a position where you can create those experiences for yourself, whether you're volunteering at the YMCA, whether you volunteer to be a substitute teacher because the profession is very much in need of it, unfortunately that is extra time and effort, but there are many opportunities that you can do to put yourself in the position that you want to be in.

Matt Wittstein (00:42:56):

That makes me think of something that graduate students might think about as they're developing is to actually take on some of that mentoring of younger graduate students that Sophie sort of referred to in the opposite direction. How do you think that evolves? Is that something that graduate students should take on? I know when I was a doctoral student, it probably would've felt like an extra thing, but how would you navigate having that in a meaningful way as something that you could actually put on your CV as you're applying for positions?

Marcela Borge (00:43:25):

At NR one, there's always opportunity to volunteer to do research. And again, when I went in because I was not from an academic background in my family, also sort of first generation in the United States to go to university, I didn't understand any of this. So as an undergraduate student, you can volunteer to be in a research lab and that starts to build your resume and cv, but also it can give you leadership opportunities within that research. So usually you'll come in and you might do some of introducing people into a laboratory state or getting their name, doing that type of stuff, but you can eventually work yourself up to sort of managing the research, training other undergraduate students and really bringing them into that research. That'll make 'em a lot more marketable for graduate school. But again, it gives you that experience of being in control, of managing, of teaching. It builds that confidence that Sophie was talking about. And so those types of experiences are really important. I would imagine that there might be analogous types at sort of a teaching institution or at a different institution either with organizations or clubs or societies or things of that nature. There are a lot of paid positions to work in research laboratories, but if that's not available, the most important thing is just build experience. So then I volunteered

(00:44:51):

As an undergraduate because I didn't really understand the system, but yeah, find somebody who has funding and then you can also be compensated, which is absolutely important, especially for those students who are working their way through college.

Sophie Miller (00:45:06):

I was just going to add in thinking about if it's worth it for a graduate student to take on these mentoring opportunities and that they have a lot of other stuff going on, but then it's also important to be involved in a mentoring constellation in both directions as a mentor and a mentee. I think what I would have to add to that is that it totally is worth it. Obviously balance is key and you need to be thinking about what you can take on. However, the mentoring relationships, I believe are embedded in what you're already working on. So whether it be an undergrad in the lab or an undergrad in a class that you are TAing on, those are opportunities where mentorship can blossom without it being an additional buddy program or whatever it may be. Additionally, as I was applying to graduate programs as an undergraduate student, I was reaching out to all sorts of people that I was getting in contact with, and a lot of those people happen to be students that are currently in programs that I was pursuing and reaching out and asking to talk to them.

(00:46:11):

And usually it was nothing more than a 20 minute zoom call or a phone call where I was asking 'em questions. And I am so unbelievably grateful for all the people that spoke to me, and I can imagine that those people that are taking those calls and responding to my emails that all of that work and volunteering that they were doing to help me out was I'm sure noticed by somebody else. So all that to say, if as a graduate student you're interested in taking on more mentoring opportunities to do exactly what Leo was saying and respond to the tap on the shoulder moments, even if they're really, really small, because someone will notice that you're doing it and building up that experience and are passionate and caring, and so always say yes to those things. Again, keeping balance in mind,

Matt Wittstein (00:46:55):

We've generated a lot of ideas and really good discussion here. I want to sort of conclude with what is one piece of advice that you would give to peers of things that he can do to sort of tailor his experience where he doesn't think he's getting the exact teaching experience that he wants to have as a professor someday? What's one piece of advice that he can do to sort of tailor his experience at University of Albany? So he is reinvigorated excited, learning a lot and ready for that job market in a few years.

Leo Lambert (00:47:23):

I would say to Pierce, try not to become jaded or cynical. I don't recall a time in my career in higher education, which has been a long one where the terrain has been as tough as it is right now, the loss of public confidence in higher education and the attacks on DEI, just the overall questioning of the value of higher education. I think there were times when you say I was a college president, I was a college professor, and those were careers that were held in high esteem in our nation. I think that's less so today, but in many ways, the thing that I hope Pierce keeps in mind is that this is a wonderful career. It is a wonderful life in many ways. It's terribly meaningful and privileged life, not privileged in the sense of perks and benefits and salaries necessarily, but the opportunity to be immersed in the world of ideas and to be surrounded by other amazing people that just take your breath away all the time with their ideas and most importantly, the opportunity to have a life where you have the opportunity in meaningful ways to shape the hearts and minds and spirits of other human beings.

(00:48:29):

I can't think of a better way to spend your life. I'm biased. That's the way I've spent my life. My signal message would be this is a great choice of career and you can build a wonderful and meaningful life in the academy and hold onto that. Don't let the cynicism wear you down.

Marcela Borge (00:48:46):

I couldn't agree with you more. In my area, I have a lot of folks that go into industry because I do sort of learning and technology, so folks that are going into ed tech, they make a lot more money than I do, but I love my job. I have so many things that keep me busy and when the research gets stressful or things aren't going the way I want, I get to be with students who bring me joy. And so I get a lot of joy from interacting with the students that I work with, undergraduates, graduates, and even the ones I work with in K 12, they are all amazing and unique in different ways. What I will say to go back to what advice would I give, he is at an R one. So there are opportunities for him to build those networks should he desire those networks within research laboratories.

(00:49:34):

Now I know that he wants to do more teaching, but within the academy, the more people you know, the more access you might add to other opportunities. So building that network is really important. The other thing that I would say is it's important to have conversations with people in your program, talk to the folks in the program, let them know the direction that you want, let them know that you would like more experiences and the types of experiences when we know that we can keep that in mind and start either talking to folks that we might know, finding out whether there's more opportunities for teaching or even creating sort of apprenticeship type opportunities. That's the most important thing that I would say, because they have a responsibility to peers and most places take that very seriously. So they're going to do their best to try and provide that for peers.

(00:50:27):

Peers. And what I will say in general, for those of you who are applying to graduate school, think about what you want and remember to interview your programs and make sure that they're going to give you the opportunities that you want and that they are committed to giving you a diverse range of opportunities as well. Because I would want for students to really end up somewhere that is going to provide them with the content and experiences that they need. I think sometimes students are just trying to be accepted, but recognize that those folks need to be making a commitment to you too and to your wellbeing and your long-term success.

Sophie Miller (00:51:07):

Those answers were so inspiring and inspirational, and so I'm thinking about how similar me and Pierce are. Were very similar stages in our academic and professional careers. And so I think the advice that I have is that we are so young. I'm 22, I'm thinking peers can only be a couple years older than I am, and that is a really early stage in all of this. And so it doesn't all have to be right now that every little thing can be a bit of experience, even if it's just not traditional classroom experience in terms of teaching, but that also means that there's a lot of time to develop and understand what your goals are. Obviously Pierce really wants to teach in a classroom, but what are the supplements to that? What does that really mean to him? So there's a lot of time to figure that out, and there's also a lot of time to change your mind about things, and that's okay too. So maybe not being on the most directed, just focused on exactly what you think you want is a blessing in disguise and that you can learn a lot of other things along the way and really develop who you want to be when you become a grownup.

Matt Wittstein (00:52:17):

I think those are some fantastic nuggets of wisdom, and thank you all for your time and your perspectives. I can't wait to share this with Pierce.

Leo Lambert (00:52:24):

Been a wonderful conversation. Thank you.

Marcela Borge (00:52:26):

Thank you so much for having me here today. It was a pleasure virtually meeting you all.

Sophie Miller (00:52:30):

Yeah, thank you so much for having me back on the podcast. This was an awesome topic to discuss with you all.

Matt Wittstein (00:52:51):

Hey Pierce, welcome back. It's good to see you.

Pierce Johnson (00:52:53):

Hey, Matt. Good to be back. Thanks for having me back on the show.

Matt Wittstein (00:52:56):

So I got to talk with Sophie Miller, an Elon graduate starting her doctoral program at Purdue University in childhood development. Marcela Borge, an associate professor of learning design and technology at Penn State University and Leo Lambert, professor of Education and President Emeritus of Elon University. Your panel had some inspiring advice that might be helpful for you or anyone seeking their way into teaching focused academic programs. The panel talked about some of the skills that are essential and often associated with great teaching faculty. While we often think of our research as our selling point, they described more of dispositions and characteristics. Sophie talked about humility and vulnerability as traits she noticed in her best professors. Marcella commented that those traits align with research and added empathy, comfort with chaos, and an ability to adapt plans. Leo described these all as sort of a disposition of caring and reminded us that learning is relational.

(00:53:46):

Importantly, while these aren't things you might learn in a textbook, the panel did acknowledge that you can learn these humanistic qualities, but it often requires a lot of varied experiences. While you might get some through directly teaching and taking courses, you might develop others through leadership positions in your laboratory or engaging with a graduate student association or other organizations on your campus. We also talked a lot about finding mentors, and one thing that was obvious is that you should have multiple mentors. Leo described the Future Professorate project he helped develop at Syracuse University, a precursor to the National Preparing Future Faculty Program as telling every graduate student that they should have a mentor for teaching in addition to one for research. One of the important reminders here is that you can and should have mentors that can provide support in different areas of your personal and professional life.

(00:54:32):

I know we talked a little bit about your lab mates, research mentor and instructor for the courses. You are a ta, but ideas to find other mentors included looking for professional society mentorship programs include peers from different programs and try to intentionally seek mentors that are different from you and can challenge some of your own perspectives. It came up that one mechanism to dampen the

effects of imposter syndrome is through relationships and conversations with a wide array of people. I wrapped up our conversation by asking each panelist to provide you with a small piece of advice to help you find your way as you're on your professional journey. Leo shared that higher education is experiencing a very difficult time with people questioning its value, but that it is truly a wonderful and meaningful life and career. So do not become jaded or cynical. Marcela wants you to explore diverse opportunities and build a broad network because those research experiences might open the door to more job opportunities and within academia, the more people, the more opportunities you hear about and potentially get. So if you're reflected on you both being at similar stages and your professional trajectories and suggested being mindful that you are both still so young and everything doesn't have to happen right now. So as we're recording this, a new semester is approaching and based on your panel's advice, what is one thing that you will do now to help cultivate the experiences that you want to have over the next few years of your doctoral program?

Pierce Johnson (00:55:50):

Through our conversation, I have kind of, and the advice of the panel realized that I had this really great network constellation of mentors and advisors really at Elon, and I haven't been maybe intentional or considered the people around me currently at New Albany as mentors in the same way. And so I think I might start looking at those relationships even in informal ways as mentorship opportunities, whether getting mentorship from my peers, my labate, my pi, those are the obvious ones, but even the fourth year grad student instructor who I TA for and even opportunities to mentor to act as a mentor myself for the undergraduate students in my lab.

Matt Wittstein (00:56:28):

So I know last year you were the TA for, I think you said personality psychology and intro to psychology. I want to know what are your teaching plans for this upcoming year? Do you know what you have been assigned and how do you see that growing over the next year?

Pierce Johnson (00:56:40):

Yeah, it's still up in the air. They kind of keep us on our toes. We don't get our teaching assignments until pretty soon before the start of the semester. So I actually don't know what classes that I will be TAing for.

Matt Wittstein (00:56:52):

So I think that not having your assignment yet might be an opportunity to explore Marcella's advice, being adaptable and being comfortable with not knowing and chaos. It is a difficult thing to prep courses quickly, but hopefully that's something that the instructor of record might be able to sort of help you think through how you would approach a sudden shift in what you're teaching because that is a real thing that happens at a professor that you're teaching load changes. So I'm wondering who makes your teaching assignments and if that's somebody that you can actually foster a relationship with to get better teaching experiences and sort of navigate having the CV that you want when you graduate?

Pierce Johnson (00:57:32):

Yeah, no, that's a really great question. Our department's administrative assistant who's phenomenal, she does the work of 10 people, works to put together the teaching assignments in collaboration with

the faculty. And so I think that's a great idea as far as looking to even the app of the department, which I think often get overlooked in those kind of mentorship opportunity conversations.

Matt Wittstein (00:57:52):

I can think back to my PhD days and how important those professional staff were to just get answers to know. They often know a lot more people at the institution than the individual faculty. So they may even also serve as a connecting point of I want to get into X, who would I talk to, serve it in that way. So that's a great idea that we're thinking about. I want to close with this. What are you going to get involved in at University of Albany to sort of extend yourself outside of what you were given a research advisor, a TA, and how are you going to expand yourself to maybe get connected to other students and other opportunities for leadership and for mentoring and experience that'll be valuable in three or four years?

Pierce Johnson (00:58:37):

Yeah, I think one of the spaces that I've been scared to join is professional development groups that are led and hosted by professional societies. And so I really haven't seen those as spaces for me because a lot of them are focused towards a level grad students or people about to go on the job market and are catered towards those individuals. And so I think I'm going to be more intentional putting myself out there in those kind of spaces because I think that's one place where I really haven't looked for much support, but support is being offered. And I think I'd really benefit from engaging with students in those societies and hearing what their experiences have been at their institutions and seeing what kind of practices they're engaging in to become better teachers and better academic professionals.

Matt Wittstein (00:59:16):

And that just made me think of, so I'm involved in the American Society of Biomechanics as one of my conferences, and they have a pretty active student organization within there that has professional development specifically for students, but then they also have the formal mentoring programs. And one of the things that I think about immediately is like, well, you should do it now because then you can do it two or three or four times before you graduate and you'll have two or three or four different professional mentors at different stages of their career with different things, and it sort of leans into that whole network building. Pierce, it's been great to have you on the show. I wish you the best of luck in the upcoming years and in your training as a doctoral student, and I hope to see you in a teaching role in the not too distant future.

Pierce Johnson (00:59:57):

Thanks, Matt. It's been a lot of fun being on the show. I've really enjoyed speaking with you again and the advice from the panelists, it's been really valuable to hear. Thanks for having me on.

Matt Wittstein (01:00:15):

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(01:01:14):

Listening and stay zesty.