INTRODUCTION

I believe that teaching is an art. As in any art, it takes plenty of practice to hone your skills as a teacher. Practice alone, however, won't make you an *effective* teacher. If it did, we wouldn't have all those teachers who stay in the profession for years and years and yet don't seem to get any better at their craft.

So, in addition to practice, effective teaching takes some good direction with respect to what works in the classroom. College teaching is unique in that preparing for it involves mastering a discipline but not necessarily learning the art of teaching. That's why I've written this book — to give you some guidance in the art of teaching, especially as it relates to getting your classes off to a productive start that establishes a positive, learning conducive classroom atmosphere for the entire semester.

If you're a graduate student interested in pursuing college teaching, a teaching assistant, an adjunct instructor, or a new full-time faculty member, I hope this book will provide you with some of the tools that are essential for becoming an effective teacher, from "Day 1" of each of your classes. Becoming an effective teacher is not about achieving a goal and then stopping. Rather, it's about continually evolving, constantly trying new strategies, and always striving to do better. For that reason, I expect that veteran teachers will benefit from this book too.

I wrote this book at this particular point in time because I believe we need to develop new teaching strategies to reach our changing college student populations. If you're teaching at an Ivy League institution, for example, you'll probably be teaching students who are not only very bright and well prepared for college-level work, but who are also highly motivated to learn, to do well, and to achieve. Throughout the rest of mainstream colleges and universities — especially at community, commuter, and urban institutions — you'll be working with many students who lack the

educational preparedness to be successful in college. Particularly at community and commuter colleges, many of your students will be juggling work schedules and family responsibilities in addition to their course loads. Many of these students will need to learn *how* to learn; they'll need to develop study skills and organizational and time-management skills, and they may need to make up for reading, writing, and mathematical deficiencies before they can even start college-level coursework. If you teach (or will be teaching) at such an institution, you'll need to develop teaching skills that go far beyond delivering a well-thought-out, thorough, and interesting set of lectures.

College teaching can be a pretty isolating experience. I'm fortunate to be at a college where my colleagues and I have many opportunities to talk about what's happening in our classes. Many of us who eat lunch together use our time to discuss what has worked well in our classes, and sometimes we share what has bombed as well. Often, one of us will pose a problem he or she is dealing with and the rest of us will try to strategize and offer solutions. In addition to lunchtime conversation, we also have some grassroots groups that meet on a monthly basis to discuss some aspect of teaching. For example, we have a committee called Writing Across the Disciplines (WAD) that meets to explore how we can enhance the writing and oral communication skills of our students. We also have a group known as the Mercer Curriculum Project (MCP), which I chair, which aims to transform the curriculum in terms of inclusiveness, and to create a more welcoming classroom atmosphere. In addition, we have a group called Master Faculty that meets to share the trials and tribulations of teaching. Some meetings have the feeling of group therapy. At other times, we observe each other in the classroom, not for purposes of evaluation but simply as a way to enhance our own teaching skills.

All of these groups are voluntary and apart from our duties related to college governance. My friends and colleagues at other institutions tell me that what we have going at my college, in terms of collegial sharing about teaching, is pretty rare. My suggestion to you as you start or continue to develop in this profession is that you connect with your colleagues and talk about teaching. Without the back-and-forth dialogue, it's easy to feel like you're all alone.

My hope for *Successful Beginnings* is that it will help you become a more effective teacher and promote student success. As the title of the book suggests, I believe that the early part of the semester is crucial for setting a tone that motivates your students to persist in your course. If students drop a course, they're most likely to drop it in the first six weeks of the term. So to improve our retention rates — and thus give ourselves a chance to teach students what we want them to learn — we must be effective from Day 1.

In this book, you'll learn how to get your course off to a positive, fruitful start so that your students will be motivated to participate and engaged in their learning right from the very start. I begin in Chapter 1 by covering "The Nuts and Bolts of Successful Beginnings" — making your expectations clear, creating a welcoming classroom environment, and helping students thrive in your classroom.

Chapter 2 describes some innovative activities you can use in the first couple of class sessions to "break the ice," learn students' names (and help them learn each others' names), and set a productive tone for the rest of the semester. After your first class, you want your students to look forward to coming back for the next session ... and the next ... and the next.

Chapter 3 explores how you can create a welcoming, inclusive classroom environment. I present some research about "The Chilly Classroom Climate." This is a phrase coined to denote the differential treatment of females and other "minority" groups in schools at all levels. In order to create an atmosphere in which all students feel welcomed, included, and encouraged, I offer tips in this chapter for building rapport and connecting with students. I also discuss strategies that promote student-student interaction.

Chapter 4 is all about motivating your students, especially the ones who seem disengaged. Here I offer suggestions for getting your students to become *self-regulators* — that is, helping them take charge of their own learning. I also outline some tips on teaching your students *how* to learn and how to improve their own learning skills. Chapter 4 also points out ways to make your classes more interactive. Most educators agree that students learn more and retain more when they're actively involved. Thus, this chapter is designed to help you raise the level of student participation in your classes. I deal with how to make your lectures more interactive, how to improve the quality of your classroom discussions and bring more people into them, and how to create and implement *collaborative* and *cooperative* learning experiences.

Earlier I mentioned the changing nature of our national college student body. Something else has changed in the last few decades at our colleges and universities: the college culture itself. Students' expectations and demands have changed. There is a new "consumer" mentality; some students believe that, because they're paying for the course, they get to run the show. What we as teachers used to take for granted in terms of college student behavior can no longer be taken for granted. Although the majority of our students are respectful of their teachers and honest in the work they produce, there are some students who simply don't know what is appropriate behavior for the college classroom – or perhaps they choose not to follow the conventions. So Chapter 5 helps you take on the challenge of dealing with *incivility* in the classroom. I hope the suggestions throughout

this book, and from this chapter in particular, will promote a classroom climate that is not conducive to incivility. There are many things we can do as teachers to prevent inappropriate and disruptive behavior from occurring in the first place, and I talk about them in Chapter 5 — along with what you can do if disruptive behavior does occur.

Chapter 6 addresses the challenge of keeping students engaged during the "mid-semester blahs," and suggests ways to motivate them to complete your course successfully. Additionally, I discuss the role of writing in keeping students engaged with the course, and in promoting learning and critical thinking. I also describe some active learning exercises that will help you keep students "hooked," and a few closing exercises to foster retention of the course material and help students achieve a sense of completion as the course draws to a close.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I summarize the material the book has covered. Following that closing chapter you'll find a brief Appendix offering you guidance and resources if you're developing a course syllabus — especially if you're doing so for the first time. A "Helpful Teaching Resources" section then highlights some books, periodicals, web sites, professional organizations, and professional conferences that will help you in all of your efforts to create positive learning experiences for your students — right from the start of each class you teach.

My hunch is that if you're a college teacher, or you're about to become one, you love your discipline, because you're choosing to share it with others. I believe that anyone who chooses college teaching is interested in helping students develop critical thinking skills and become intellectually curious. My own observations of teachers have led me to believe that most of us feel as if we have a vocation, a special calling to make a difference in the world by educating people. There is nobility in teaching. Heaven knows people don't aspire to become college teachers for money! We don't usually get rich in this profession. But we do enrich the lives of others, and thus we find rewards that are far deeper and more meaningful.

To quote the abstract of Thomas Cronin's (1992, 149) article, "On Celebrating College Teaching":

> Great teachers give us a sense not only of who they are, but more important, of who we are, and who we might become. They unlock our energies, our imaginations, and our minds. Effective teachers pose compelling questions, explain options, teach us to reason, suggest possible directions, and urge us on. The best teachers, like the best leaders, have an uncanny ability to step outside themselves and become liberating forces in our lives.

Good luck on your journey. I hope this book is helpful to you.