

# STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING: WHAT IS IT?



Keith Hatschek — Conservatory of Music

BY SHERI GRIMES

“Pacific’s mission is to provide a superior, student-centered learning experience...”

But, what does student-centered really mean? Pacific Review interviewed professors from each of the University’s nine schools and colleges to find out.

Student-centered education is focused not on test scores and statistics, but on the individual lives of each student. It’s about creating the educational experience students need to reach their potential and achieve their dreams. Pacific faculty are preparing students for life and life-long learning by developing close relationships with individual students and engaging them in their education, giving them practical experience to test and enhance theoretical learning, fostering inquiry and teaching them how to do research and evaluate it.

## Students Are Why We’re Here

“Student-centered education means realizing students are the focus of why we are here,” says Dr. Rajul Patel ’01, assistant professor of Pharmacy Practice in the Thomas J. Long School of Pharmacy and Health Sciences.

Keith Hatschek, associate professor and chair of Music Management in the Conservatory of Music, says being student-centered “means getting to know the students on a level where I can really gauge their progress and provide a variety of indicators so students know how they’re doing. No two students are the same or need the same approach,” he says.

Speaking with faculty members from each of Pacific’s schools and colleges, it is clear that they are focused on teaching and the quality and effectiveness of the student learning experience.

“Student-centered education requires more of the professor,” says Susan Sample, associate professor of political science in the School of International Studies. “The professor has to ask what the students know, what their experience is, what they need to know, how they will use the material and how best to guide them through the material.”

Geoff Lin-Cereghino, professor of biology in the College of the Pacific, uses skits, games, and what he refers to as “hokey demos” in his biology lectures. “You try to engage the students, to make the lecture something they want to come to,” he says.

Rajul Patel is testing audience response software in some of his classes to help him gauge how well students are grasping the lecture material. Stephen Wheeler, professor of accounting in the Eberhardt School of Business, challenges students with simulations of real-world business situations. In the School of International Studies, many classes use team teaching. It enables the student to see a topic through different lenses, such as the anthropological view vs. the sociological view, that of the political scientist vs. the historian. The classroom becomes a study in cultural understanding.

“Pacific places tremendous value on teaching. It’s by far the largest portion of faculty evaluations,” says Stephen Wheeler. The smaller, more intimate environment and emphasis on teaching attracted him to Pacific. “This is more what college ought to be.”

### The Student as a Professional

An important aspect of student-centered education is how the student is viewed and treated. At Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry, it is called “Humanistic Education.” From their first day, students are treated as colleagues and professionals. They can expect to be given clear expectations and positive support, and are expected to set very high standards and to take personal responsibility for their learning process. Faculty members are expected to be models of the profession’s highest standards and teach in a way that encourages and energizes students.

This approach is taken throughout the University. “I tell students from the first day they’re in the music management program that I’m going to treat them as a professional,” says Keith Hatschek. “We try to get the students to embrace the fact that their reputation, knowledge and skill set are how they’ll be measured in the field. It’s not just a grade on a book report or a quiz.”

Students are seen as collaborators in their education and the total learning experience. They serve on administrative committees and advisory boards, including faculty tenure committees. “We have a tradition of asking students for their ideas and recommendations here,” says Cindy Lyon, chair of Dental Practice at Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry. “The Dean has a brown bag where they have the opportunity to give feedback, and students are active on various committees and task forces.”

### Faculty Mentor vs. “Sage on the Stage”

Student-centeredness hinges on the faculty-student relationship. “Faculty truly care about student learning,” says Hector Estrada, professor and chair of civil engineering in the School of Engineering and Computer Science. “If students miss class, I’ll get in touch with them and find out why,” he says.

Professors also maintain regular office hours and an open-door policy. “Student centered means I know their name and something about them,” says Julie Davies, professor of law at Pacific McGeorge School of Law. “They can come and talk to me and feel that I care about how they’re doing and that they can get the help they need.”

In most of Pacific’s schools and colleges, professors serve as academic advisors, meeting regularly with students to assist them in developing their academic goals and staying on track for graduation. These meetings frequently foster lasting relationships that extend beyond graduation. Many faculty members also serve as advisors for student clubs and organizations. “I am a faculty advisor for three clubs,” says Julie Davies. “It really gives me a chance to see the students as leaders and citizens.”

Pacific’s small class sizes facilitate relationship-building and more classroom interaction. “Every student wants to feel recognized, to be an individual,” says Geoff Lin-Cereghino. Though Lin-Cereghino’s introductory lecture classes are larger, with up to 100 students,



Stephen Wheeler —  
Eberhardt School of Business



Kellie Cain '99, '05 (left) —  
Benerd School of Education



Geoff Lin-Cereghino —  
College of the Pacific



Cindy Lyon —  
Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry



*Julie Davies —  
Pacific McGeorge School of Law*



*Rajul Patel '01 — Thomas J. Long School  
of Pharmacy and Health Sciences*



*Susan Sample —  
School of International Studies*



*Hector Estrada —  
School of Engineering and Computer Science*

he makes an effort to learn each of their names. “I walk around and talk to them before and after class to try to get to know them.”

Kellie Cain '99, '05, assistant professor in the Benerd School of Education, earned her teaching credential and graduate degrees at Pacific. “From the moment I began classes I was just struck with the care and concern of the faculty,” she said. “It was the interactions and relationships with my professors here that influenced me to do my best work and were a big part of the reason I chose to continue at Pacific for my advanced degree.”

### Learning that Makes Sense

Practical learning that applies to the real world is a key component of student-centered education. Small group problem-solving activities based on case studies give students a chance to apply theory to real problems. “Sometimes they come right out of the headlines,” says Keith Hatschek.

In the Benerd School of Education, students get in the field in their first year. “The students begin with observation in their freshman year,” says Kellie Cain, “and then move from working one-on-one, to small groups, to teaching individual lessons before they ever begin student teaching.” In the health sciences, students provide a variety of health services and education to the community in addition to formal classroom and clinic experiences. Law students provide a variety of legal services through legal clinics and other community service outreach.

Undergraduate students are encouraged to participate in research. Geoff Lin-Cereghino has students each semester working alongside him on NIH grant-funded research projects. The Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry recently launched a new research initiative. “Second-year students are matched with a faculty mentor to research a topic of their choice,” says Cindy Lyon. “It gives the students a one-on-one working relationship with a faculty member and integrates learning across the disciplines,” she says.

Independent study projects give students the ability to dig further into a topic of interest or study a subject where a formal class may not be available. “Last spring a student that had done work on foundation engineering in his co-op wanted to do more research on buildings with problematic foundations and soils,” says Hector Estrada. With a faculty advisor, he conducted an independent study project to research a building on campus that had a crack in the foundation, proposed a solution and made a formal presentation to the Dean.

### Educating for Life

Student-centered education isn't focused on passing a test today; it's about passing the tests of life tomorrow. “It's not enough for students to memorize a bunch of facts,” says Cindy Lyon. “The volume of information is so large that students need to know how to access and evaluate it. They need to know how to do research and how to identify good information.”

In the School of International Studies, one of the first classes students take is Contemporary World Issues. Professors work students very hard, honing their writing skills, teaching them how to organize study groups, how to keep focused on a topic in small group discussions and take responsibility for their own learning. “We want them to know how to continue learning on their own,” says Susan Sample, “because in four years they won't have the professors, but they'll still need to keep learning.”