Moving the Needle Ep 2 Transcript

ERIN HAGAR: Welcome to Moving the Needle. Casual conversations about ways, big and small, to impact student learning. Brought to you by the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. I'm Erin HAGAR. Let's move the needle.

Today's episode features Dr. Carlos Faerron Guzmán, Assistant Professor of Global Health at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. Trained as a physician, Carlos directs the Interamerican Center for Global Health in Costa Rica, where he designs practical and experiential learning for students in global health. Our conversation today explores things to consider when designing on the ground experiences for students, the importance of a democratic perspective when teaching, and what he's learned by being a student and a faculty member in different countries. Carlos, welcome.

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you for having me.

ERIN HAGAR: Oh, it's our pleasure. We're really excited for today's conversation. Let's start with your current work. You currently run a small academic research center that, among many other things, places students in experiential learning opportunities where the students are really on the ground getting their hands in the field of global health. Your own career changed after a similar experience. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: Sure. I should start by saying that I actually studied medicine and I'm an MD. However, that really last portion of my medical degree I spent three months away from the hospitals and away from the clinics of central San Jose, which is the capital of Costa Rica. So I had never lived in a rural area before, I had never encountered working with populations that are considered vulnerable.

When the opportunity arose to actually go far from home and live in a rural community, I chose the farthest places I could go. I actually wanted to go really, really far from home. So I chose this little town in the southern region of Costa Rica which borders with Panama which is called San Vito de Coto Brus. San Vito de Coto Brus became basically my home in the future.

And what I encountered there was work with indigenous populations and with migrant populations. And sometimes those two overlap. Sometimes there is indigenous migrant populations. Being there and having really good mentorship from a person who I still keep a close to my circle of friends, which is Dr. Paolo Ortiz, who had worked 30 plus years in the region really led to an expansion of the understanding of health.

I went from understanding health from being it a lack of disease. And when you're studying a health profession, you're actually studying to become a disease expert. And that is the case for most curriculums around the world when you're studying a health profession. You're actually studying disease, not health.

So going to this place and working with someone that has a human rights perspective, a social justice perspective, and a health determinants perspective, you understand that health is much more than just lack of or the absence of disease. So it really opened up my understanding of what is health and also my understanding on how to work effectively with communities. Something I had never learned through my six year medical career was how to actually encounter, and talk, and work with communities. I was always I was always taught to work very,

vertically. And in this experience I really, really got the opportunity to work horizontally with community leaders and other institutions that were in place.

One of the other things that really changed during that period of time was the fact that I had never encountered critical literature, what I call critical literature. I will encounter mainstream medical texts and this is how you do things, and this is the theory, and this is where it come from. And that's also a very from the global North perspective. I started reading a lot around Latin American authors that had critical perspectives on not just history and development in general, but also about health and interculturality among others.

I think those combinations of factors really opened my brain up. And my first decision back then was to actually postpone going into a residency program and becoming a specialist to actually explore what it meant to be a community health worker, what it meant to work as a health professional in the community for a couple of years. And during those two years that I had taken off to work in the community setting, it actually just veered my career completely and started working in public health. Eventually led into grad school again and the rest of the story is that I don't do any medicine formally for the last six years now. And I basically work in public health, global health, and the intersection of those things with a higher education.

ERIN HAGAR: Well it's certainly not an understatement to say that that experience moving to that rural location, working with that community really set your life on a different trajectory. And there's two things that I'd like to follow up on and the first goes back to some phrases you used. I wondered if you could explain what you mean by them a little bit. You talked about the difference between vertical and horizontal engagement. And I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit how you interpret that in medicine and what do you think it might mean for education as well.

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: Sure. So I'm borrowing these terms from the development field. And for anyone out there listening asking what is included in the development field I would say any work that someone is doing that is trying to change something for good is development. You might think of everything that people that work in infrastructure building to actually education and health and human rights. If they're working to change something for good, then they're working in development.

And then the importance there is that good needs to incorporate what the people that are benefiting from this work consider good. And that's a little bit of one of the principles of horizontality is actually including the people that you're working with in not just the outcomes, and what do you think is a good outcome, but actually in how do we get there. How do we evaluate these outcomes? Who is included in the work? Who takes the decisions? Who manages the accountability? All those things are considered when we think about what is vertical.

Vertical would be a very top down approach, where there's a very hierarchical power structure. There isn't a lot of transparency around accountability. The power, the decisions are made somewhere far away from the place where work is being done. And horizontally is very much about integrating those people that you're working with or those communities that you're working with in those processes. So horizontal versus vertical is what I'm meaning. It's also called top down or bottom up approach.

Then how do we incorporate this into education? Well the principles still remain. And unfortunately, university and institutional structure don't always allow for those things to happen. Sometimes you'll have to stick to a specific format on how you want to build the course that is

recommended by your institution. But in reality is that in development there's this mantra that I evangelize people around, which is nothing about me without me.

And when you're thinking about learning, nothing about me without me includes the student. So the student and the student perspective should be included in the design process. And again, if you're an educator out there listening to this you're thinking, well, how am I going to do that? How am I going to include student in a design process if he or she's not even enrolled in my class before I start designing it? And that's where what I mean by then institutional structures don't allow us to be as effective as possible as we want to when we're designing courses for students.

So meeting students at where they're is one thing that is key. The learning process is not the same allowing for those diverse learning processes is very important. Allowing for a method to evaluate student outcomes that take into consideration the student capacities is something really important and also.

And again, if you're out there listening it's like, this sounds very burdensome. And the learning process sometimes is burdensome if you want to tailor it, and you want to make this a worthwhile experience for those students and actually shift and transform perspectives and values and attitudes. It's not just about that knowledge transfer, it goes beyond that. Those are some of the thoughts I had around vertical, horizontal and how you do that.

ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. It sounds as you're talking the word that comes to my mind is really the idea of empowerment. We're empowering the communities that you're working with and for on the community health side, but also empowering your students to really take ownership of where that educational process is going for them, where it's leading them, what it's connecting them to.

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: Yes, indeed. It's about empowering, but it's also about recognizing their agency in the learning process. It's also recognizing their expertise that they bring based on their experience. They're also knowledge holders of other types of knowledge maybe not the that content based, but they're definitely owners, and have experiences that they can build on and learn on, and they can share with their peers. So it's definitely about promoting that agency and, as you say, empowering them to take control of their learning process.

ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. Given the way that our educational system and our university system work here where we pride expertise in one's discipline. A PhD is really a testament to expertise in one area of research. And I think sometimes faculty can feel uncomfortable with the idea of maybe not being in a position to share all the expertise that they have and turning that over a little bit to the students.

Have you ever experienced that? Have you encountered that? Either in the health setting or in the education setting? And what do you recommend for faculty to ways that they might become more comfortable with making their courses a little more horizontal, a little more democratic?

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: Well let the burden of the teaching fall a little bit into the students I would say. It's their also their responsibility, and you want them to take that responsibility. It's not just about giving handouts, it's about as you were saying providing that agency to students to feel that they can build and create.

So I would say if you let go a little bit, if you allow spaces for conversation instead of just professors speaking to student, open up spaces for dialogue to happen not just among you and students, but among the students themselves. That is a really easy way to get conversation

going and to take the burden off yourself as an educator and hope, let's say a two hour class can become a dialogue. It can become a conversation. It doesn't have to be content heavy and top-heavy. It can be really, really relaxing.

I remember with great esteem the first time I encountered a classroom like this one. And it was in Scotland in which I was preparing for a very top down, theory based social justice class. And the first class the professor introduced himself and he just presented a picture of a scene in Italy of the city, just the city of Milan, I think it was. And it was just a picture of the city.

And there were some situations happening in the picture. And we just talked about the picture for two years and extracted what we had learned from the theory that he had left us to read. And then we just talked about the picture and how that related to the theory.

And I thought that was much better than having him speak to me. Oh, this person invented this theory, and this person contraposed this other theory, and these are the basics of this theory. But we actually applied them in the classroom.

I remember that very vividly because that wasn't 'til my masters. I had already finished my medical degree and no one had ever taught in that way. It was always content top down, six years of this. Six years of content top down. And the first time I encountered someone saying, look, there's another way of teaching it was amazing. So allow yourself to just let go of the power in teaching and you'll see how enriched your students and the learning experience will become.

ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. You mentioned earlier the role of your mentor during your experience in the rural community and it seems as though the role of the mentor in this approach to education is going to be not just a special relationship, but something very important to the structure of this kind of education. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about your mentor, about how he approached training you, developing you in this new space you were in.

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: Sure. I must say that I as now being a mentor myself, I recognize some of the things he did back then. And then some of the things I also want to step away from. And he was at the end of his career. He was ready really soon to become an pensioneer and retire when I encountered him in my last year of medicine.

But I think because of that, he was really skeptical of some things that were happening and so he taught me how to see things through skeptical eyes. And that kind of biased me to also be very skeptical. I think I'm trying to stay away from that and trying to impose skeptical views in students. I think if they want to be skeptical, I'll just allow them to be skeptical by themselves and through their own critical thinking process. So that's one thing.

And then the other thing is that he was really hands off. And again, he was at the end of his career and he was really hands off. He literally said I would come home sometimes and have coffee with him and I would ask all these questions. Why is this happening? Why can't we do this? Why can't we do that? What's the reason why these things are continuously happening wrong?

And he wouldn't give me an answer. He would just point to a book. He's like I'm going to send you an email, just read that, or go to my library. Take this book. So very hands off.

But that learning process, I mean, I was an eager learner. I was super going through this very reconstructive phase of my life. I was about to graduate. I didn't know what to do with my next steps. So I was really an open sponge to all of those things.

And again, I recognize that not everyone will be able to have a successful learning process in that way with a very hands off approach. There's some students that are going to need a little bit more of reinforcement. And I've encountered students that actually benefit a lot from that. And so that would be one thing.

And the other thing would be about learning about mistakes. And because he was really hands off I really learned from my mistakes. But looking back, some of those mistakes actually cost the health of a community, or because I took a wrong approach. I delayed a process that could have been quicker, that could've been beneficial for a community. Or I might have threw up a process of design which didn't include a community voice. Then I had to go back and redesign that in the future. And that was research of an institution.

So all those things, I think, have unintended consequences and learning from their mistakes was something that I would have preferred someone told me up front. But again, hands off learning or mentoring really didn't get me to that point until further down. But that's something that when working with people in communities I think learning from mistakes is not something that should be part of how you design your mentoring students early on.

There should be an intervention from a mentor that says, wait, you might make a mistake here, consider this, consider that. And not allowing the course to just run itself and run the mistake, and then having to come back. I would say I've stepped away from a little bit from that.

ERIN HAGAR: It sounds like the stakes are too high for that kind of mistake based learning, as important as that can be. So one of the things your center does is to place students who are coming to Costa Rica from all over the world into practical experiential learning opportunities in global health, which I would imagine involves engaging with local organizations, communities community organizations. What kinds of things are involved in designing this type of education and what do you think classroom teachers can take from it to improve their classroom based instruction?

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: The components of what that looks like are very similar if you're doing a field course or if you're doing a more practicum based experience. And because we work with mostly health professions, these practical based or practicum based experience a lot of times do require community interface.

So because of that, you're going to want to include the community perspectives in the design process of that experience, of that learning experience. And when I talk about community perspective, I also am including being able to map appropriately their assets, and their challenges.

And this is one of the approaches that we take which is we go beyond just identifying challenges and then filling the gap. Which is what a lot of institutions do. They're identifying a challenge and they try to fill that gap. We go beyond that approach and look at the assets that the community has in order to be able to include them in the learning process. Because that is one of the key learning outcomes is being able to transfer that ability to students in order to have them identify what assets are.

Allowing that to happen including community perspectives. But also including what the student desires to learn, what they want to learn, and what they're able to do also. A lot of the times we get requests from universities that want their students to do xyz. And when we go back and interview the students, we noticed that they don't have abilities to do xyz.

And this goes back a little bit to my previous comment on your question, which was related to learning from mistakes. There are certain things that are acceptable to learn from mistakes, but there are certain things that aren't. Especially when you're spending communities times and resources in that learning process.

You have to be very careful that the actual end product of the learning process, if it's a practicum-based experience, that that end product can be utilized. And it's not something that is faulty, and then when applied or when used is going to lead to a detriment to the health of the community. So you can't allow those things.

So meeting the students at where their capacities are is incredibly important. Working with communities and not allowing them to just build their skills because the stakes are high as you were saying. On the other hand of that equation is the health of the community. So those are things to consider when you're working with communities for sure.

So how do we transfer some of these experiences or some of the things we do in these more experiential basic learning experiences into the classroom? I would say one of the most important things that we try to do with our students, whether it's a field course or practicum based experience, is have a continuous process of reflection and a praxis. What I mean by that is we constantly open up the opportunities for them to have dialogue amongst themselves about what's going on, what they're learning, what their challenges are, but also with the mentors, with the preceptors.

By opening up all those spaces, we also can monitor how the student is advancing, where are areas that need to be strengthened, and how can we then move forward in the learning process. Because these are not short. These are usually four, six, eight week processes. And reflection can happen anywhere. Reflection can happen in a classroom based setting or in an experiential based setting. And it's as important in both.

And again, having students do that taking the time and opening up the necessary spaces in your classroom, be it abroad or locally, is incredibly important for the learning process to be successful. I would say that with one thing classroom based educators can do easily. Be it via forum, via a chat, via a conversation, a group breakout etc. So a lot of opportunities can arise from it.

ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. That's wonderful advice and when you think about the context of health professions education where there's the clinic experience, and then there's also the classroom experience. You really have to be intentional, it seems, about building opportunities for reflection in there to really help students cement that knowledge, that experience, to track their progress. But it sounds like being intentional about that reflective process is very important for faculty to consider.

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: Indeed. And I would encourage educators that are out there looking at incorporating reflection to actually look at different frameworks of reflection. It's not just about asking, oh, how did you feel? There's much more to the how you frame the question, how you get to that how do you feel question, or what did you learn question. Before that there's a process that needs to be planned. It can be flexible, but there needs to be planning. And as you said, you need to be intentional about your reflections.

And I do think that a lot of the times I've seen people say, oh, I do reflection. It's mostly superficial and it requires preparation on both sides. And so it's not as easy as it sounds. It takes time to master, I think, for the student and for the educator. So it's a process in which an

initial reflection from a student might be actually superficial, and then you can actually take that as an opportunity to do a formative assessment for the student in that initial reflection.

Be very transparent. What are you looking for? I'm looking beyond just what did you experience, I'm looking trying you tell me why do you think you experienced it that way. Why do you think you saw that in that particular way? Why do you think this is wrong and why do you think this is right?

Because you said, oh, they were doing this quote unquote "weird" or "different" thing. Where do you think that different perspective comes from? So being very transparent about those processes with learner is incredibly important because then they get into that groove on how you want them to be thinking about reflection and how reflection should happen.

ERIN HAGAR: Yeah, this sounds like a very interesting opportunity to explore more in the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning ways to structure reflection, facilitate it, provide feedback on it, that seems something that's very important. I work a lot with folks who are doing service learning and as part of their traditional class experience and the everything about the growth and knowledge gained from service learning really comes down to reflection. So it's so true that structuring it well is really important.

Going back to your biography a little bit. You, either as a student or an educator, you've experienced educational systems in Costa Rica, Scotland, the Netherlands, the US, there may be more. And I'm just wondering what you have learned about education or yourself as an educator through this experience, through seeing these different approaches to education.

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: Well as a learner I think I stopped seeing big names in university titles and it's not about the level of expertise that the educator, or the facilitator, or the professor has. It's how good of an educator are they. So I think I've been able to kind of dissociate as a learner from big names and appreciate more teaching styles and ways of learning.

By that I mean, we have the classic example about the extra successful, super published professor who is basically a very vertical, top down educator. And the experience might be very bland to students. And then you have people at smaller universities that are incredibly dynamic and have support from a great educator support system such as centers for teaching that there are spread out throughout different universities and university systems. So I would say as a learner I've learned to step away from the big names and the flashiness of those big names and look more for the quality of the learning experience.

As an educator, I try to follow that also. And try to make my classroom as dynamic as possible. And as we were saying earlier, it's horizontal or the other term that sometimes we use is democratic. And trying to involve student perspectives. I would say stay away from big names if what you're looking is try to find quality, sometimes you'll find quality in big names of course, but those things don't always match.

And then the other thing I've learned as a student and as a learner is that actually small classrooms are really, really unique. There's a balance there on how small is small, and how big is big. And it's going to depend on group dynamics, peer to peer learning, the level of those students.

But once you get that fine tuning right and you manage to create the necessary breakout groups and have different perspectives involved from the different students in the classroom, I would say a smaller classroom is preferred from a large classroom. Which is in dissonance with a lot

of the higher education models, which is how do we get more students into a classroom and not less students into a classroom.

I do actually push back a lot on that when someone asks me, well I'm going to send the group of 25 students to your center. And I usually say, well, no. We usually have a policy of if it's a lower level, a class will allow something like 15, 16 students. If it's a higher level, like a grad student, will actually want smaller classroom sizes because the farther you go in your education process you're probably going to have more to share, more to say, more to actually learn from each other. So we do want that to be a key component.

And if you have 25 people speaking in a two hour period, you're not going to get anywhere. Instead if you have half that amount with the limited time that you have, and this is one of the most important things that we have, is we have limited time with students. They go do other things, you want to keep them forever, but they go do other things. So in that limited time it's important to get their perspectives. So small is good.

Those two things, I would say, is added to the other things I've said in the past I think are useful to consider. And again, sometimes institutional structures work against us in that way.

ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. But what I hear in your comments there is being very mindful about the form and the function of the educational experience and making sure that those are in alignment. Because your approach is so democratic, is so horizontal, then you need to be mindful of how many bodies are in that space, who can take advantage of that. I think if you were coming at it maybe from a different mindset, those same considerations may not bubble up to the top of the concerns. So it really seems as though your mindset, your approach both to health care and education with such a social justice, equity lens really informs everything about the decisions you make as an educator.

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: Indeed. Indeed. I mean that's spot on. Thanks for summarizing it that way.

ERIN HAGAR: It's impressive, and it's inspiring. This is such a great opportunity for our audience just to hear new approaches and new ways of coming at this educational experience that may be very aligned with how they approach health care, but may not they may not translate that necessarily to the classroom. So it's exciting to hear.

What about your teaching, how has your teaching changed over time? If you could go back and talk to past Carlos and tell him something from future Carlos, what might you go back and say to yourself as an educator?

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: I think a lot of things I would say like, get a different haircut and stuff like that. But I would say, similar to what I was saying earlier, I would say let go a little bit. I remember my first teaching role, I was incredibly nervous to appear as the content expert. So I had to spend all this time trying to prove students that I was the content expert. And I did have a lot of imposter-- not a little, a lot of imposter syndrome as I was actually quite young when I got my first teaching role.

I did know I wanted to go into teaching early on in my career, but I didn't actually get into teaching. After I graduated of course, I could have done some opportunities as a TA or as a learner of educators in my University. But again, as a med student, you rarely have the opportunity to have spare time to do more learning than what you're already trying to memorize. Because that's what you do in med school, you try to memorize a lot of things.

And so because I've had this imposter syndrome I really really, really, really spent a lot of time thinking more about what I was supposed to teach and not how am I supposed to teach. So I would say I would go back and say, let go a little bit. Allow the students to talk amongst themselves. You don't have to prove to them you are the expert. You're already in front of a classroom and they have a lot of valuable experiences to share with you so allow that to happen.

I would say I would also do a little bit less heavy on the reading for them. I would ground them and say, three readings for tomorrow, and then three more big readings for the next day. But by doing that, I was actually not allowing them to soak up the experience. So instead of three long readings, now I would do one reading and then some maybe some journal reflecting. And that's your job in the afternoon is one reading and then a little bit reflecting on a journal. Because if you have them do three big readings, then they won't be able to think about anything else than trying to read.

So I would say again, go back Carlos, let go a little bit. Let go of the power that you think you have in the classroom and democratize a little bit more a horizontal lines a, little bit more your classroom.

ERIN HAGAR: That's great. It takes a lot of confidence, and also vulnerability, to come to that place I think. Because you have to be confident that, like you said, you're not an impostor, you're there for a reason. And you don't have to prove anything. The number of readings does not equate to the amount of knowledge that can be instilled necessarily. It's a matter of facilitation and drawing that out of the students. It's not just about shoving it in, it's about drawing it out it sounds like.

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: Indeed. Indeed. That's the way I like to see it right now.

ERIN HAGAR: Is there's something, Carlos, that's on the horizon in global education a new approach, a new philosophy a new strategy new technology, really anything that you're seeing coming in the future that you think can move the needle. To go back to our show's title. Something that can really move the needle in global education that we should know about?

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: Yes, that's a good question actually. What excites me is that there's this emerging movement of recognizing interconnection in everything. And I work a lot in a planetary health education, which combines environmental health, global health, political sciences, economy, among others, and trying to understand how what we're doing to the environment, what we're doing to our natural system is actually coming back to hurt us and in detriment to our health. So we try to understand those connections between health and the environment, but also try to create and imagine solutions for these challenges ahead of us.

I think the COVID pandemic has really hit the nail on the head when we say interconnection. Not just interconnection with nature, but interconnection with everything. Global systems, economic systems, pharmaceuticals, science, travel, etc. Trade. It just comes to really demonstrate how interconnected our world is.

And in the recognition of that interconnection, and putting the interconnection at the core of a learning process, be it whatever you're doing. You suddenly start recognizing that then there's other things, other moral imperative, other ethical frameworks, other ways of learning that you should be incorporating in the learning process.

For example, we're using this word this framework that we're borrowing from the ecological sciences, which is interconnection within nature. So it's about recognizing your place in nature,

your interconnections with different beings, species, trees, water, both live and non live objects of this earth. And how the recognition that you're part of that, when you are able to design a learning process in which a person is able to strengthen that interconnection, their behavior, their attitudes, their values are likely going to be different.

So what happens after that is you have maybe a businessperson who suddenly isn't thinking of damaging the environment and the bottom line. What you have is an engineer that might be doing things and finding solutions for global challenges. What you have is a doctor or a nurse who is not dissociated from what's happening in their community and their local environment, but they're actually very aware of it. So that the concept of interconnection within nature can actually take us a long way.

And I remember having a conversation with a brilliant Italian who works in future studies, and she's a futurologist. I would of summarize it like that. And I asked her about this education process that she was creating and she told me the first thing in any learning process is you have to care about what you're learning and you have to care on why you're learning. You can't just go into a learning process without caring. And I think that's important. And we've left that out of the higher education system. We've left that caring component.

And she used another expression that I won't use in this case because it includes a swear word, but she said, first you've gotta, fill in the blank. So that caring component. That caring component is incredibly important. And as institutions we've forgotten that that is incredibly important.

And then comes the next question then is how do we design learning processes that actually then lead students to care? Not just sympathy, and going beyond empathy is compassion. Is that ability to act, is that, not just the ability, but the desire to actually change things. So thinking about that, those big questions, really excite me on how we might move the needle forward as your show is called. And how we might redesign how institutions do things transversely. Starting with care, I think, is incredibly important.

ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. And I honestly believe. I don't think this will be a heavy lift on the part of the students because I've been doing a lot of reading about how on the student side they are desperate to care. They are desperate to see the relevance of why am I taking this particular class in this semester of my university, and how does it connect, and even if I don't know what I want to do with my life what is the why behind this? And I don't think that that will fall on deaf ears.

When we figure out a way to communicate that caring to our students, I think they will be very, very hungry for that. And be very receptive to that philosophy because they are also looking to make meaning.

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: I completely agree. I completely agree. I mean I feel that this a lot has been actually pushed by students. So I'm really excited to actually work with very good student communities that are wanting to see more of this in higher education.

ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. It's so exciting. What a fascinating conversation. I could do this all day. Carlos, Thank you, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk with us about these big ideas.

CARLOS FAERRON GUZMÁN: It's my pleasure. It's been really good to be able to throw these ideas out there.

Moving the Needle Episode 3 Transcript

[00:00:00.09] ERIN HAGAR: Welcome to Moving the Needle, casual conversations about ways, big and small, to impact student learning, brought to you by the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. I'm Erin HAGAR. Let's move the needle.

[00:00:18.75] Welcome, everyone. And thanks for joining us today. We're very excited about this episode. In a show about teaching and learning, we want to be very intentional about giving space to student voices as well as faculty voices. Students, of course, are equal partners in this process, and they have very important insights to share with us as you'll hear today.

[00:00:37.77] This episode features three graduate students from different programs within the University of Maryland, Baltimore. Aishwarya Iyer, who also goes by Aishu, is a third year MD PhD student conducting her thesis work in the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. She did her undergraduate work at UMBC, where she was also a Division I tennis player. Here at UMB, she is involved in student government and serves on the university's Sustainability Committee.

[00:01:08.13] Our second guest, Chris Goodis, is a second year PhD student in the pharmaceutical sciences department, where he's studying small molecule therapeutics for a variety of cancers. Chris did his undergraduate work in his home state of Michigan. Here, he serves as the USGA representative of the Queer Student Alliance, helping different LGBTQIA+ groups on campus come together and grow an environment of exclusivity.

[00:01:35.79] And Jeff Lee is studying to become a physician assistant here at the university. He's in his first year of PA school, where he serves as president of the class of 2022. A College Park grad, Jeff took some time off to pursue his passion for music, which he still enjoys before being called back into the world of health care. Jeff Chris and Aishu, welcome to Moving the Needle.

[00:01:58.59] JEFF LEE: Thanks so much for having us.

[00:02:01.41] ERIN HAGAR: Really, what we'd like to start with is exploring the teaching strategies and approaches-- you're each in different kinds of programs, balancing research and didactic learning and clinical learning. And we'd really love to just get a sense of what teaching strategies you've noticed since you've been in graduate school that really work for you, that resonate with you. What have you learned about yourself as a learner in your graduate studies? Aishu, why don't we start with you?

[00:02:31.74] AISHWARYA IYER: So in terms of strategies, I really appreciate that I think faculty know that different students learn differently. And one thing I really appreciated in med school is that all the lectures were recorded. And so professors speak at different paces and at different rates.

[00:02:50.64] And with recordings, you can speed up or slow down a lecture, and you can watch it multiple times. And there's just-- it really helps because that's not something that I had in undergrad. And that's something I'm noticing now in graduate school that like a lot of-- because it's online, a lot of the professors are recording their lectures. And I don't know if that was something that happened pre-COVID, but it's really helpful in studying for exams, and I hope that's something that they take forward.

[00:03:17.80] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. Yeah, thanks for sharing that. Having that flexibility to receive the information at a pace that works for you, and so you're not missing something just because you might have literally missed hearing it while you were thinking about some-- thinking about what you had just heard. That's great. Jeff, how about you? What are some teaching and learning strategies that you've learned through your undergraduate or your time in PA school, strategies that faculty employ that really work for you?

[00:03:47.06] JEFF LEE: Yeah, so one thing that I really appreciate the faculty does is there's so-- they're like 100% behind you, so like, the ratio of faculty to students, it's almost a one to one in essence, because they're just-- you can reach out to them, like, any hour of the time-- any hour of the day. Professor Newman, one of my professors, she-- I know she works, like, 24/7.

[00:04:10.67] And anytime I email her, she can instantly email me back with a question, any questions I have. And she just answers right away. And any students who are struggling any way, they do-- they'll set up meetings. And so it's very personal. And so-- I mean, pretty much, it's like no student left behind kind of thing, where yeah. So they just make sure that they give you all the resources possible to succeed.

[00:04:38.64] ERIN HAGAR: Oh, that's wonderful. There's a growing field of research in education around the social, emotional side of learning. And it sounds like feeling supported and knowing that your faculty really have your back and are on your team rooting for you really makes a big difference for you. That's great. Chris, how about you? What are some teaching and learning strategies that you notice? You have a little bit less of the clinical focus, but more in the research side and the academic side. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

[00:05:11.06] CHRIS GOODIS: The way I would explain this is like, if you remember back in undergrad, when they would give you those post-class surveys or those course evaluations, and you fill them out. And then let's say your freshman year, you fill out a bunch of surveys. And then senior year, you talk to the freshmen. You're like, oh, did they change this, this, or that?

[00:05:30.17] And they're like, no, they just-- everything's completely the same as it was four years ago. I find that in graduate school, the, like, inertia, let's say, is a lot less. So for example, last year when I was taking the courses that now a new first year is taking, it was completely different. Even though they kept the same structure of like exam, exam, exam through online, now they're doing less exams, more like essay questions, more like collaborative stuff.

[00:06:02.37] And I would just say on the research side, definitely, 100%, you need an advisor that's like behind you and want you to succeed because-- and you just need-- that's kind of the onus on the student somewhat, where you need to find someone who's on your wavelength, basically. I need someone who's in the lab all the time or is open to questions and always help me with reactions. So that's why I joined the lab I'm in now, Dr. Fletcher's lab because he's always in lab, will always answer my questions, and will always talk about chemistry with me.

[00:06:35.47] ERIN HAGAR: So this has obviously been a very unprecedented year with COVID impacting everything in our society. But academics are certainly at the top of the list. I was

wondering if you could share your experiences about how COVID has impacted your studies and tell us a little bit about how your faculty have adapted and what you think of those adaptations. Aishu, do you want to talk to us about that?

[00:07:01.72] AISHWARYA IYER: Sure, so studying-wise, nothing actually really changed because I was in my second year of medical school when COVID hit and because during medical school, I think Chris pointed this out, like you're just studying full time. And so that's what I was just doing I was just-- instead of studying at the library or at the Campus Center, I was just studying at home.

[00:07:24.33] And I was actually very, very impressed on how quickly our school was able to adapt with our Office of Medical Education And our Office of Student Affairs had great communication between the students. I know they were meeting constantly. I remember that week, we had an exam.

[00:07:43.50] And within a matter of a day or two, it was quickly transitioned to like, we take it at home with the honor code. Classes were immediately transitioned virtually on Zoom. We had our tech department on call every single day if any technical difficulties happened.

[00:08:01.77] However, our clinical experiences, seeing standardized patients, seeing actual patients, were canceled, rightfully so, due to safety issues. And then we also-- after second year medical school, you have your first USMLE licensing board exam. And it was postponed by a few months because they canceled 50% of students exams because of space. You want a reduced capacity of those centers by 50%.

[00:08:32.04] And so that was postponed by a few months. So my research rotation after was postponed by a few months. So it was a little disheartening because I felt like I was a little bit behind. But then I had to remember, this is-- COVID is a huge issue. It's a huge health care issue. And things will work out, and safety is of the utmost importance. So you got to-- you got to live and learn and adapt.

[00:08:57.25] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah, absolutely. But it sounds like your faculty were able to do that in a way that, other than the logistics and the timing of things. But as far as keeping up with the program, it sounds like you were able to do that.

[00:09:11.19] AISHWARYA IYER: Yeah, no, they were-- I was just so very impressed because I think they did a better job than I think a lot of the other schools were handling it at the time. And the faculty put together a COVID course to help us as future physicians learn more about what's happening, whether it's the emergency responses or COVID on the basic science level and the virus and everything like that. So I thought that was pretty amazing.

[00:09:41.95] ERIN HAGAR: That is amazing because there isn't a deep pool of knowledge yet about COVID to pull from. So that adaptability, not just in terms of creating a new course and creating new content, but content that is still evolving and changing what we know about it every single day. But what dedication that shows on the part of your faculty to do that for you guys.

[00:10:04.63] Chris, how about you? On the research-- with the research curriculum, how did COVID impact what you were doing? And how did your faculty adapt?

[00:10:13.86] CHRIS GOODIS: I give a lot of kudos to my department, the PSE department. Because of how grad school and PhDs are structured, at least in our department, you need to pass a defense after you're kind of in the middle of your second year, start of your third year. And then you needed to defend your thesis, obviously, to get your PhD.

[00:10:32.73] And I had a friend who had his PhD defense, his thesis defense scheduled for March, mid-March, when everything was shut down. And he still had everything set up for online because our department had a good grasp on Webex. And he was able to get his PhD and leave his apartment, get a job, move, all within the first few weeks of lockdown, like end of March.

[00:10:59.61] So it was really like-- I didn't really recognize that until Aisha was talking about it. But like the responsiveness of the faculty and kind of the focus of like, we have a dedication of the students to keep them on schedule and not just eh, your defense, your PhD's kind of up in the air. So because of that-- my defense is coming up as a second year-- so I don't feel as stressed.

[00:11:29.37] There's already the stress of trying to defend, but there's no added stress because I'm not freaking out about, oh, is it actually going to happen on the date they say or the date I set? So it's a real-- it's a real accomplishment, I think, for a lot of faculty to keep everyone on track, not only in my department, but other schools as well.

[00:11:49.78] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah, absolutely. We talk a lot in education about this concept of cognitive load, kind of how much people can have on their minds at any given time. And the stress of COVID and the stress of every routine we have in our life being disrupted and also the stress of worrying whether your academic plans are on schedule, on track, going to be delayed because of this, it all adds to people's load.

[00:12:15.60] And the fact that your faculty recognized that and responded to it by doing everything they could to keep things on track as best they could, that's a real testament. So what is something you wish faculty understood a bit better about the student experience or the student side of the teaching and learning equation? If there was something that would help you as a learner for your faculty to do, what might that be?

[00:12:45.18] AISHWARYA IYER: We give our feedback very intentionally and with the hopes that they implement it. And so I find that in a lot of cases, they actually do. And it changes every year. They're making the curriculum better, they're making their course better, they're listening to our feedback.

[00:13:00.39] But then there are some cases where I'm not really sure if this is going to do anything and if the course is actually going to change, and they're going to take our feedback. And so I want faculty to know that when we give feedback, we're being very honest, and we're trying to do it so that students later on are given either more up-to-date material or just improved in the way that the lecture's being formatted or the way the classes run. And we hope that they take that very seriously.

[00:13:37.31] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. Yeah, no, that's really important. That feedback is such a two-way street. You know, it's such an important part of that teaching and learning process. And it's so important for all of us to remember that we're all growing and learning and changing and adapting to new teaching scenarios.

[00:13:56.22] So yeah, being willing to see that feedback and to consider it, yeah, that's really important. And it's great that you've seen that in action also. Chris, how about you? What are some things that might be helpful for faculty to know about the student side of things?

[00:14:13.54] CHRIS GOODIS: One thing that I noticed worked really well is actually the course manager role in classes. So you have students in their priorities, and you have faculty in their priorities. And it's not enough to just say, well, students are busy, so faculty should be more on

how students are engaging with their material because you also need to realize the faculty are also busy.

[00:14:34.13] So there needs to be sort of a role, and in this case, we have course managers, which essentially kind of join the priorities of both students and faculty in order that faculty have the resources, students are on time, and the software is working. And also the student's priority is that the faculty are on time, all the resources they need to learn are there, and that if they have any questions or any other needs that they kind of default to the course manager.

[00:15:06.02] ERIN HAGAR: No, that's absolutely true. I think there is so much to teaching and learning on both sides that recognizing that there is a role for support on all of that-- there's a-- my title is actually instructional designer. And we provide that support for faculty when they're transitioning to an online space because there's a lot of new things about teaching and learning in an online environment.

[00:15:31.07] But I think it just highlights the need that it's a lot for one person to do, while also managing their research agenda and their administrative responsibilities and all the things that they have going on. So there's room for support, definitely, in this space. Jeff, in the PA program, you're in your didactic year. So your classroom experience was really disrupted by COVID, like everybody's. But can you talk a little bit about what had to change in how your faculty adapted?

[00:16:06.10] JEFF LEE: Yes, so I was never pre-COVID for the program. So when I jumped in, it was already COVID. So I won't be able to speak to pre-COVID, but during COVID, I mean, it's definitely-- the dynamics is very different than I would like. So I mean, as with anybody, We need that in person, human interaction and being able to read body language.

[00:16:35.25] And like, on Zoom, you can't do that, first of all. It's so hard. I mean, sure, you see the person. But when you have like 40 people in a Zoom, you don't see everybody. And it's hard for the professors too. I mean, they can't read the room as well.

[00:16:52.85] And also, being in person, it's easier to interject and be like, oh, I have a question. And the professor's able to see that. On Zoom, I feel very stifled. And so it's like, I want to ask so many questions. I want to like, answer all these questions they're saying. But I'm like busy typing. And then I have to go over to Zoom and unmute myself.

[00:17:14.99] And just literally that two-second delay is enough to have such cognitive dissonance and kind of like that uncanny valley. I mean, that's not the definition of the uncanny valley, but like kind, of that thing. It's just so unnatural. So I mean, we're doing the best we can with it.

[00:17:33.97] I mean, it kind of is what it is. And that's how I've always viewed it. But I mean, the faculty, in terms of how they are adapting though, sometimes with medical, you need to be in person to do physical exams, to do any kind of physical skills. And so the first semester, the summer semester last year, it was purely virtual.

[00:17:56.17] And so we had to learn how to do a physical exam virtually, which was-- I mean, as you can imagine, that doesn't make much sense. And so we did it on teddy bears and on friends and family that were, like, close to us. And so that helped to have friends and family.

[00:18:15.55] But even with COVID, I mean, you're still scared. And doing a Teddy bear is not ideal. They don't have organs like we do. But then I did notice that as the faculty got more

leniency from UMB themselves. They were able to incorporate more in person. So the following semester, the fall semester, that one, we went in, like, once a week.

[00:18:41.02] And then this semester, the spring semester, we are going in twice a week. And so it seems like they are-- they're trying to push it as much as they can per COVID regulations. And it's definitely helped a lot now that we are in person and are able to practice on each other because that's-- ideally, that's how the program works is that you practice the physical exam on each other, like the students.

[00:19:04.63] And yeah, and so I mean, I think they are adapting as much as they can. And they're trying to give us as many resources. I mean, again, they reach out-- I mean, we can reach out to them any time outside of the class. And so they're doing their best. But I think it's just a learning curve for everybody.

[00:19:23.86] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. Chris or Aishu, do you have anything to add to that, anything you think might stick around?

[00:19:30.13] CHRIS GOODIS: What Jeff was talking about with kind of the literacy of online programs has just gone up exponentially. I don't think-- well, I don't know why any teacher would want to have physical office hours anymore. If I'm a professor and my office hours are at the end of the day, I'm just going to say, hey, hit me up on Webex from 4:00 to 5:00 while I'm home.

[00:19:55.90] Like, I think that's a real-- and it's a positive, but I think it's also looking in the future however many years until we get back to normalcy. I think it's-- and it still needs to be a balance. I would definitely still take in-person classes over only online if I had the choice, but it's always a good thing for people to be more literate with computers, I think.

[00:20:24.01] ERIN HAGAR: Aishu, what do you think?

[00:20:27.06] AISHWARYA IYER: Yeah, I think-- I definitely agree with both Chris and Jeff that a lot of the Zoom and online platforms are going to persist, especially with meetings. I'm curious with attendance and things like that, if someone is unable to make it to class, there will also via Zoom link that people can just join in so you might have like a hybrid. Some people in person, some people not able to make it can just be there virtually.

[00:20:59.50] I'm really curious in terms of the clinical side. So I'm now in the graduate school, so I'm not really sure what's going on. But I'm curious if telehealth and a lot of the telemed virtual appointments are going to stay, especially with people who might not be able to make it to their doctor's appointments physically and if that's something that's going to be incorporated into medical education and preclinical and clinical years, in addition to in person because in my opinion, you can't really replace the in-person physician or any health care professional appointments because that's so important.

[00:21:42.85] You need to be able to do a physical exam because that's how you diagnose and treat patients. And you need to be able to have that human contact and talk to them because that human connection is so important in developing a rapport and a relationship with all your patients. So I'm really curious on that front, how telemed and telehealth are going to find a balance with the in-person, especially with that incorporation into education.

[00:22:07.05] ERIN HAGAR: Mm-hmm. Yeah, absolutely. I know that in clinical education, finding clinical sites and placements for students is always a challenge. And telehealth has

really opened that up. And it's also a medical skill. I think that will be affecting your lives going forward.

[00:22:27.07] So in that sense, it makes sense to add that tool to your clinical toolbox. But certainly, it sounds like on both the education side and the medical side, the human contact isn't going anywhere. I think COVID's really reminded us how important that is, how special that is. I'm wondering if any of you have had an opportunity to dip your toes into the field of education yourself, either-- I think Chris mentioned his experience as a TA, or any other kind of teaching, and if that's something that you might see for yourself on the horizon, being involved in medical education, health professions education. Is that something that interests you? Chris, do you want to start?

[00:23:09.03] CHRIS GOODIS: I can definitely see myself in 10 years, if I continue-- when I continue down this path, I can definitely see myself taking on interns or graduate interns and teaching them things about that. I'm more of like a mentor or a coach than I am a teacher. And the one thing that I guess I would say for people who are like-- who are like me is kind of like, I think first and foremost, and this thing also applies with the larger teaching format.

[00:23:42.03] I think respect is kind of the number one thing that you should try to come across-- come off as to your students, no matter what you're doing. Like for example, I have a master student that just joined the lab. And she has basically zero chemistry background. And I was explaining to her all these fundamental things. And I kind of had to stop myself and just say, OK, just to check, I'm not patronizing you, right?

[00:24:06.93] I want to make sure what I'm telling you is actual information and not like, I'm just talking to you like you're a dunce or something. So I think no matter what, that's my one piece of advice. Even though I don't plan on being a professor per se, like in a general sense, where I'm teaching 70-person lectures on the daily, I still think respect is the number one thing.

[00:24:28.99] ERIN HAGAR: Absolutely. And that mentorship is such an important part of anyone's formation. I don't think anyone gets to where we want to be in our career without that mentorship. So we need both. We need that faculty experience and the mentor. And you're right, that sense of respect and mutual respect and awareness of what someone's experience is and factoring that into how you engage with them is so important for any kind of faculty or mentor.

[00:25:00.94] CHRIS GOODIS: Right, just real quick, real quick before we move on, I just-- it's really funny because I'm talking about mentorship and grad school. It's like, when you talk to someone who doesn't have experience with grad school, and I tell them about my position, they get really-- like it gets all, like wow, you work with cancer and stuff like that. But it really is like an apprenticeship, like a trade.

[00:25:21.28] It's like, at a certain point with your profession, you can't just read a book. You need to go up to someone and ask to be mentored and looked after. So I think that's-- I think that's just kind of funny, after like 20, 21 years of reading books, studying, taking tests, it's like, all right, now you're basically an apprenticeship, like I'm in an apprenticeship right now.

[00:25:43.47] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. Yeah, that's great. Aishu, I saw you nodding your head about the idea of mentorship and apprenticeship and books-- books aren't going to do it forever.

[00:25:52.32] AISHWARYA IYER: Yeah, no, I can completely relate, especially with-- whether it's on the clinical side, where you're talking to patients, seeing patients, doing physical exams, it's all about experience. And you can't just read a book and know how to do that 100%. And on

the lab research side, it's all about experience and really immersing yourself in critical thinking and different lab techniques.

[00:26:15.99] You can't read a book and know how to do that. There's all these nitty gritty details that no one's going to write about. And your person mentoring you is going to be like, oh, don't do that, do this, or this is how you do this technique. So 100%, I agree with what you said, Chris.

[00:26:31.62] ERIN HAGAR: Do you see yourself in a mentorship role going forward or in a teaching role?

[00:26:37.00] AISHWARYA IYER: Yeah, so I actually TAed, did supplemental instruction, tutored a lot in college. And when I was a research assistant in my undergraduate lab, the way that it worked there is that a lot of the undergrad students were trained during their first summer in the lab. And then they would train any students coming in after.

[00:26:57.40] So like, you were trained by students who are already there, and then you're training the new students that come after. And I learned-- I learned that I learned so much, as redundant as that sounds-- I learned so much when students were asking me questions because I'd be like, I don't know the answer. OK, I'm going to look that up. And then we can learn together.

[00:27:15.88] So having the opportunity to do mentor and train new students made me a better researcher and also helps you with developing skills on how to be a mentor and something that you're always improving. I can't say that I'm a great mentor, I know everything there is to know about training people because the way you mentor one person isn't the same way that you mentor another person.

[00:27:43.69] I think Chris touched on that earlier too because there might be someone who has no background in, example, with the research side, no background coming in. And so you have to start at the basics and making sure you're catering to their experiences, as opposed to maybe someone with a lot of experience. And they might want you to be hands off. So you're going to be like, OK, just come to me when you have questions so I'm not stepping on your toes or making you feel like I'm patronizing you. You want to make sure you're respectful of their experiences.

[00:28:17.90] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. And in our other episodes of this podcast, we talked so much about knowing your students and really adapting your teaching style and your approach based on what you know about their backgrounds and their experience and their interests and to the extent that you can do that. And so it's fascinating to me that even with maybe not as much formal teaching experience, you are touching on exactly the same thing.

[00:28:41.86] Your instincts are exactly the same. So I think that bodes well for any kind of instruction or mentorship you're thinking about in the future. You can tell you already have that mindset. Jeff, how about you? Do you see yourself maybe being a preceptor later on or working with students in other ways as you become a PA and enter that clinical space?

[00:29:02.95] JEFF LEE: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I totally agree with what Chris and Aishu said. So, I mean, I don't think I would get into academia, but definitely some kind of a preceptor mentorship kind of thing because I used to teach music, like guitar and piano. And I did private lessons. I did that for like eight years, ish.

[00:29:21.64] And I mean, like I just know how rewarding it is to have somebody under your belt and you just guide them through. And every time they are able to succeed and the little baby steps that they take, it's just-- to me, it's nothing more rewarding. And I can imagine that it's the same thing for being a preceptor.

[00:29:41.02] ERIN HAGAR: Well, this has been such a great conversation. You know, I know as students, you are receiving health professions education. But as you think about your fields, your disciplines, and teaching and learning in those fields, is there anything that you see on the horizon that you think could really move the needle for students who are studying what you're studying now? Is there anything you're excited about in your field from the education side?

[00:30:06.97] CHRIS GOODIS: I would-- so I kind of have a thought. Let's see if I can string this along. But going off what Jeff said about, learning "is kind of cool now," quote, unquote, I think, yeah, with all the resources that people have, even at a young age-- I mean, I still think it's become more-- it's becoming more and more apparent, how much stuff, like, a 13-year-old can learn.

[00:30:30.86] So what I'm excited about in 20-ish years is I'm excited to kind of look back at students who are currently in the same position I'm at, and I'm excited just to see how much they know off the bat and kind of like, I'm excited to see how faculty kind of factor that in. And I sort of see education becoming less and less textbook, quiz, textbook, exam. And I'm seeing it more evolve into, you can kind of carve your own path.

[00:31:05.33] I'm very individualistic, so I hope that's the outcome. But I just don't see if your students are on average here, and your material is kind of here, it's no longer going to-- it's not going to cut it anymore. I think faculty are going to have to evolve with students, evolve with technology, evolve with the common, quote, unquote, "knowledge that's out there." So that's what I'm really excited for. I know there's a concept called the-- I think that's the Flynn principle-- the generations go on, they become smarter. But I think technology is just a huge catalyst for that. So I'm excited for more individualized learning in the future.

[00:31:47.73] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah, so less people coming from this shared formation and more people carving out-- like you said, carving out those niches for themselves and really taking those forward. That's so interesting. Yeah, anybody else--

[00:32:01.32] CHRIS GOODIS: Right, and even-- sorry to jump in, but what I also like about the advent of YouTube and all these other things for either free or cheap, like it's no longer-- I don't think necessarily you have to put your kid through the top private school, high school to get the best education anymore. I just don't.

[00:32:17.91] I don't think-- I think the financial barrier is lowering and lowering, and I only-- you know, we can talk-- this is not really a politics podcast, but I think more people learning is, in general, better. So yeah, I rest my case.

[00:32:31.75] ERIN HAGAR: That's great. Anyone else have any thoughts about kind of what's on the horizon?

[00:32:36.90] JEFF LEE: Yeah, to go with what Chris said, so it's very interesting to see the new school versus an old school way of teaching. And I've seen that with just my program. I mean, we have some younger professors, some older professors who've been in the game for quite a long time. And the old school way is very, like, read this textbook. You have to know everything in this textbook, and we're going to test you on that. And that's just how they kind of teach it.

[00:33:02.97] And then the new school is more like, yeah, we use textbooks, and we're basing everything on textbooks. But like, here are all these videos online that you can also watch to supplement. So I mean, all the other younger professors will give us a lot of videos, like Khan Academy is a really good resource. Osmosis is really good for medical. I mean, that's saved my life.

[00:33:28.29] And I do still read the books, but there's just infinite amount of knowledge in there that you will never be able to fully remember and/or grasp, besides getting the big picture. So these videos definitely-- they help to just kind of consolidate all the information to something that's a little bit more digestible. And then also, to go off what Chris about like, you don't need the top education to do whatever.

[00:33:57.99] I mean, you can say that for-- I think Bill Gates, a lot of billionaires, they didn't even go to undergrad. And they don't have the best education. And so yeah, today, in today's world, you can-- talk about if you measure success in terms of how lucrative your career is, there are people who are YouTube stars who make six figures, and they just-- they're living their life.

[00:34:27.75] And I'm kind of jealous of that. But I'm in medicine because I love it, so it's not all too bad. But there's definitely-- you can do trade schools. I've heard about-- like in terms of technology, if you want to make a lot of money pretty quick, you can go to these-- it's like these bootcamps for programming or some kind of software programming. And it's like a six-month program, and then people come out making six figures. So it's definitely changed the way we think of a career, conventional.

[00:35:00.99] ERIN HAGAR: Kind of like what Chris was saying with a more equalized approach to getting on those different pathways. Yeah. Aishu, what do you think? What do you see on the horizon?

[00:35:10.89] AISHWARYA IYER: Yeah, so I really think that the conventional way of teaching with lecturing to students is kind of evolving, as Chris said, to more individualized learning. I think that more faculty teachers and professors are open to the idea of this flipped classroom, engaging students, this discussion. And that's really great because it's helping students who may not thrive under just having someone lecture at them and into having this engaging discussion where you can be more open to asking questions in a more comfortable environment and being able to learn from your peers in addition to your professors. And so I think with that evolvement, I think it's really exciting because now we're allowing for more engaging discussion and allowing for all types of students to thrive, not just the ones who work well with just this lecture style of teaching.

[00:36:10.23] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah, yeah, it is a big shift for faculty to transition from a lecture-based approach to these more active learning strategies. But just like in medicine, we have to catch up a little bit sometimes to the literature. And I think that's happening now in education. We know that learning improves the more students are engaged in it and the more that they do. But it takes a while sometimes for those practices to trickle down into practice. But I'm glad that you're seeing that because that makes me really excited about what's on the horizon for all of our students.

[00:36:45.57] Well, I cannot thank you enough for sharing your time and your insights with us today. This has been so interesting. And it's just been such a great opportunity to get to know you and to hear a little bit about the student life here at UMB, both the pre-COVID and during COVID. And we'll look forward to talking to you post-COVID and seeing-- checking in, seeing

how things are going for you. But thank you so much for taking the time. And we really, really appreciate hearing from you today.

[00:37:13.37] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:37:14.22] Thank you for joining us today on Moving the Needle. Visit us at umaryland.edu/fctl to hear additional episodes, leave us feedback, or suggest future topics. We'd love to hear from you.

MTN Ep 4 Transcript

Episode 4 Where Leading and Learning Intersect

[00:00:00.06] ERIN HAGAR: Welcome to Moving the Needle, casual conversations about ways big and small to impact student learning, brought to you by the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Maryland Baltimore. I'm Erin Hagar. Let's move the needle.

[00:00:18.83] Hi, everyone, and welcome to this episode of Moving the Needle. I'm excited to introduce our guest, Dr. Roger Ward. Dr. Ward is interim provost, executive vice president, and dean of the graduate school here at the University of Maryland Baltimore. He's overseen campus initiatives related to compliance and transparency, risk management, and accreditation. He is currently co-chairing the university's strategic planning efforts.

[00:00:43.58] But despite this full plate, Dr. Ward always makes time to teach. In today's episode, we talk about some universal principles of good teaching, how leadership and teaching overlap and intersect, how to recognize and reward good teaching at a Research I institution, and the similarities between creating a syllabus and a strategic plan. Dr. Ward, welcome.

[00:01:05.18] ROGER WARD: My pleasure.

[00:01:07.00] ERIN HAGAR: One thing that strikes me about your bio and your history is that you have been an avid consumer of education in so many disciplines and in so many different contexts. You've studied at community colleges, four-year institutions, law school twice. You've studied online and in person in many different disciplines. And I was wondering, given your experience as a student in all of these settings, have you learned any universal truths or patterns about teaching and learning that have stayed with you now that you are a leader in higher ed?

[00:01:48.93] ROGER WARD: Sure. I think one of the things that-- and I have been in many educational settings, and regardless of the setting, I think one thing that is clear to me that can be described as a universal truth is that good teaching is good teaching. And good teaching happens at every level. And for me, based on my experiences, I think preparation is the key.

[00:02:25.01] For the teacher, the faculty member, of course, knowledge of the material and the content is very, very important, which is why you're in front of a classroom to begin with. But preparation is key. Good pedagogy is key. Structuring the course in a very effective way is key.

[00:02:52.63] I also believe what is also very important is expectations, setting expectations for your students, and believing in their ability to be good learners, are not teaching down to individuals as students. And I think I saw that most in the community college context, where the

really good teachers came in, and you could tell they believed that everybody in that classroom was there to learn. They set those expectations. And they didn't teach down to anybody in the classroom.

[00:03:42.18] The not-so-effective faculty members came in and, I would argue, presumed that perhaps some of the students in the classroom weren't prepared to be there and, again with that mindset, taught down to the students. So I think good teaching is good teaching, preparation is the key, and believing in your students' ability to learn are important.

[00:04:15.21] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah, absolutely. Do you think there's anything inherently different between a community college and, let's say, a Research I institution with respect to, let's say, the faculty's ability to or the time that they have to prepare? I'm thinking about all the pressures that faculty at Research I institutions have to maintain their research agenda and to publish. Do you feel like there's anything that leaders in Research I institutions can do to support faculty in their efforts to learn new pedagogies, to learn new techniques, to prepare to engage with students in the way you describe?

[00:04:58.04] ROGER WARD: Sure. I think you touched on it. It's definitely different teaching at a community college and teaching at an R1 institution. Not only did I start my own educational journey at a community college as a student, I started my higher education career as a professional at the same community college, in fact.

[00:05:25.94] And so I got to understand what it took to become a tenured faculty member at a community college. And a lot of it, emphasis was on teaching. There was an emphasis, as well, on scholarship, but nowhere near the level in terms of expectation as you would expect at an R1 institution. So at a community college, teaching is what is valued in the appointment, promotion, and tenure process.

[00:06:03.19] When you get to an R1 institution, as should be expected, of course, teaching is important, but so is research and scholarship, and so is service. And then, if you are an R1 institution like ours, you may also have clinical responsibilities. And so those are additional pressures on the faculty member to perform in all those areas if they are to advance their career as faculty members.

[00:06:38.28] So the pressures at an R1 are definitely, I would suggest, more intense and much higher than it would be for a faculty member at a community college, say. And so with those realities, I think it's important for people like myself, provosts, deans, presidents, in terms of supporting teaching at an R1 institution is to make sure that we value teaching first and foremost in the appointment, promotion, and tenure process, as much as we value research. And I think sometimes we don't do that enough.

[00:07:25.07] We certainly celebrate our faculty members, as we should, when they receive big awards and grants, especially the prestigious ones, R1s and so on. We celebrate that. We celebrate our researchers for their discoveries that lead to major advances in science and that can be translated to vaccines, for example, and so on. So we should absolutely value and celebrate those things.

[00:07:58.22] But I think because we are so focused on celebrating those things, sometimes we neglect to also celebrate teaching and valuing it in the appointment, promotion, and tenure process. And I think we have to be committed, or more committed, to doing that.

[00:08:19.23] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. I think one of the ways, Dr. Ward, that you communicate a value of teaching is that even with all your responsibilities here on campus, you still do teach, or

have taught within the last couple of years. Do you want to tell us a little bit about the courses you teach and your approach to pedagogy in teaching?

[00:08:38.55] ROGER WARD: Sure. I've been teaching now consistently-- and by consistently, I mean every semester-- for the past 15 years. So that started before I came to UMB. When I was in New York, at the New School, I started teaching at the New School. And I also taught at DeVry, master's-level courses in the MBA program, courses on ethics and organizational integrity. I've taught courses in legal issues in higher education online, for the most part.

[00:09:20.44] And that's my preference for teaching. So I prefer to teach in the online environment or the hybrid environment, and I prefer to teach adult learners. And that's just me, because I was an adult learner when I started college, so I'm passionate about the education of the adult learner. So that's where I gravitate.

[00:09:46.13] And so I've taught at Stony Brook University. I continue to teach there. I'm teaching a course right now at Stony Brook, Legal Issues in Higher Education.

[00:09:59.86] I've taught Student Development Issues in Higher Education. I've taught cybersecurity courses at the University of Maryland Global Campus focused on data security and privacy issues, and how do you manage those at the enterprise level from the point of view of an organization? I'm teaching a course now in the School of Law, Law and Leadership.

[00:10:29.40] And so I've been teaching consistently for the last 15 years. And I think-- and my colleagues know this-- I believe in order to be an effective academic administrator, you have to understand the student experience, but you also have to understand the faculty experience. I grew up in student affairs, as I like to say, so I have a good understanding of what it takes to support the student learning experience and the co-curricular experience. And I have consistently taught so that I stay engaged and have a good appreciation for what it's like to be an educator in the academy.

[00:11:16.11] ERIN HAGAR: That's 15 years with all your responsibilities as an administrator, too. I think you must be one of those humans who don't need to sleep.

[00:11:25.61] ROGER WARD: I absolutely need to sleep more.

[00:11:28.53] ERIN HAGAR: More sleep for all. That'll be our mantra. Could you give us an example, Dr. Ward, of perhaps something that you gleaned from a teaching experience that later informed a policy or a philosophy that you brought into your leadership role? Did you see something, with your experience as a faculty member, that made you say, you know, we need to make some adjustments, because this can't work this way? Or something that a student brought to you as part of the class that made you rethink the student affairs side of your work?

[00:12:06.79] ROGER WARD: So, this is going to sound pretty straightforward and simple. The answer to the question is yes. But having a course syllabus that is very detailed, laid out with the assignments, the readings that are due week to week, a clear description of those assignments with due dates, clear student learning outcomes for the course. The students understand what they're expected to walk away learning from the course. And making it a requirement that every course-- every faculty member should be able to provide every student in his or her course with a detailed, well-developed syllabus.

[00:13:01.64] And as simple as that sounds, that does not happen universally across academic institutions in the United States. And so that's certainly something I've learned from my own experiences. I think that has gotten better over time, as accreditors themselves have come to

realize the value in making sure that we have these syllabuses that are well developed and that are informative and clear if we are to facilitate student learning success. So I think, as a very simple example, that that's one example.

[00:13:50.12] And then I think the other thing I would say, flowing from that-- I mentioned student learning outcomes. Clearly well crafted student learning outcomes and working with the faculty on teaching them and demonstrating to them and helping them write good learning outcomes. I think more and more faculty members are recognizing the importance of student learning outcomes, but writing them in a way that then you could build out the assignments and everything else from that takes time and faculty development.

[00:14:38.91] ERIN HAGAR: Yeah. When we at the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning work with faculty, whether they're teaching online for the first time or coming to us with some other kind of pedagogical innovation question, I find that sometimes they're surprised that that's where we start our questions, that it's not, let's talk about the tool, or let's talk about the buttons we can click and the effects we can have with that, but really tell us where you want these students to end up. What's the finish line? So we can help you get there in an effective way.

[00:15:11.31] And sometimes you see that light bulb go off with faculty. They know it, but maybe they haven't articulated it in a particular way. But as soon as they do, I say everything else is downhill after that. Once you can articulate these in a way-- it's like writing a good research question. The rest of it just flows after that, but it can take a little back and forth.

[00:15:33.54] ROGER WARD: Yeah, I talk about it in terms of reverse engineering, reverse engineering your course, where you start with the end in mind and then you build backwards from there. And I think then that leads to an effective course.

[00:15:50.20] ERIN HAGAR: Absolutely. Absolutely. And we've talked a lot on this podcast with other guests about having a good recognition of where your students are coming from, what educational background do they have with this material before they even start, so that you can fill in any gaps that you need to along the way. I think sometimes when faculty teach individual courses, seeing it as part of a broader curriculum can be a really important conversation to have, recognizing sort of where this course fits among all the others.

[00:16:23.10] ROGER WARD: Absolutely.

[00:16:25.26] ERIN HAGAR: The university is in the process of updating its strategic plan. And you and your colleagues are tasked with leading that ambitious effort. And I was wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about how you see the role of teaching manifesting itself in that strategic plan. What kind of preliminary conversations are happening around that, if you're at liberty to say? Just kind of what can we look forward to at University of Maryland Baltimore in the next few years with respect to teaching, do you think?

[00:17:00.36] ROGER WARD: So there are a few things I could say about that, and they are preliminary, especially as it relates to the strategic planning process. In our current strategic plan, which expires in June, by which time hopefully we would have adopted our strategic plan for the next five years, there's a theme on student success. I would imagine that in the next strategic plan, the one we're working on now, there'll be a similar theme.

[00:17:28.98] And when we talk about student success, of course, it's students success in and out of the classroom. And so I think teaching will obviously be something that we'll be focusing on, especially in terms of thinking how we teach based on what we would have learned from the past year having to pivot to teaching, for the most part, in the online environment. And we're

already hearing from students and faculty, by the way, that even as things get better with the pandemic, and even as we return to whatever the new normal is, let's not lose some of the valuable skills we have developed, expertise we have developed, having to teach online for this past year. And let's take that into what the future of teaching looks like at UMB.

[00:18:28.57] So I think we'll continue to invest in our Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning. I think we'll continue to deepen our understanding of what it means to teach with technology and what it means from the student's perspective to learn in that environment. President Jarrell has talked openly-- one of his top priorities as president is recognizing teaching excellence. So we've been talking about an academy for educators where, going back to what we were talking about earlier, recognizing and celebrating teaching at UMB as much as we recognize and celebrate research. So I would expect those themes and those strategies to feature pretty prominently in the next strategic plan.

[00:19:22.54] ERIN HAGAR: That's wonderful. I think one of the great values of going through this process of strategic planning is that it feels like it creates a campus vocabulary, or a kind of a shared language, that everyone can use as we're all feeling our way in this new environment, this new normal. But to have that as a touchstone of where we're trying to go I think could be really-- will be really helpful.

[00:19:48.34] ROGER WARD: I absolutely agree. And it's interesting, because just yesterday we had our third steering committee meeting, and one of the things we did talk about-- we weren't talking about teaching, per se, we were talking about core values. One of the conversations we had was around definitions and making sure that there's a shared understanding in terms of what these terms mean. And one of the ways we get to that shared understanding is through the strategic planning process, as we come up with these terms, attaching clear definition to them. So I think the same thing is true having to do with the language around teaching and learning and making sure that there is shared understanding of what the terms mean.

[00:20:35.87] ERIN HAGAR: Absolutely. As you were speaking, I was going back to what you were saying about the syllabus. And it makes me think that the strategic planning process is very similar to-- it's the leadership working in collaboration to sort of craft the, quote unquote, "syllabus" for the campus, for where we're going, just the way the syllabus is a roadmap for the students. I feel like a lot of that same kind of thinking backward design, as you called it, reverse engineering-- where do we want to be, and how are we going to get there, and what's the language and the values that we're going to use to get there? It seems like you're doing those exact same things, just on a more broad level.

[00:21:16.55] ROGER WARD: I think that's a great thought, Erin. It's exactly the same concept. Where do we want to be in five years? And so we set these big, bold, ambitious goals for ourselves.

[00:21:31.04] And then we say, all right, this is where we want to be, and then we ask ourselves, what it's going to take for us to get there? And we start to imagine what those things are and begin to put those things in place. So, yep, that is exactly right.

[00:21:46.18] ERIN HAGAR: As you look on the horizon, say in the next five, 10, 15 years, you know, with all your experience in higher ed and having seen trends develop over years throughout your career, is there anything on the horizon that you think is particularly exciting, that might, as we say in our podcast, move the needle with respect to higher education?

[00:22:12.76] ROGER WARD: Yup, absolutely. And again, this comes out, actually, of the research space, which is one of the wonderful things about being at a Research I institution. I think just as we're beginning to see artificial intelligence used more prominently and effectively in research and in clinical care and what have you, I think we're going to begin to see a lot more use of AI in teaching.

[00:22:42.49] And I think that's on the horizon and will be quite interesting. I would like for us, UMB, to be a trailblazer in that regard. So that's something we should be thinking about and maybe something that we could advance under our next strategic plan.

[00:23:02.93] I think also on the horizon-- it's here, actually, but I think on the horizon more institutions will begin to be focused on it-- I think it's the extension of the learning continuum, where there's this 60-year lifelong learning continuum. Traditionally, in higher education we are focused on those traditional learners, 18 to 22 years old. I think it's safe to say that the learning demographic, the student demographic, has shifted for several years. We talked about is shifting or will soon shift, but it has shifted.

[00:23:43.56] And so now, as a public state university, I think we have a responsibility to educate learners all along that continuum. And so we have, for the last several years, and I think that will only continue to grow, been focused on these various student demographics. And so it's not the traditional students that come into our traditional professional degree programs. We've started, as you know, launching professional master's degrees for people who are already in the workforce, certificate programs, and thinking about other ways in which to offer other forms of micro-credentials. That I think that is, again, here in some measure, but in terms of the horizon, will just continue to become more prominent.

[00:24:46.11] And along with that, because these are adult learners, again, many of whom are already in the workforce, I think what's on the horizon-- even for institutions like us, and I'm talking for institutions like us in particular-- a closer partnership with industry in terms of educating their workforce and keeping their workforce educated. We're in a knowledge economy now. Things change very quickly, and people will always need to upskill and up-educate, if I could use that word.

[00:25:23.64] And I think we can't, because of the type of institution we are, say that's not the educational market space we're in. I think the state will have expectations of us, and do, in helping to educate the workforce in that way. And I think, of course, the workforce itself will have those expectations of us, and we should have those expectations of ourselves as well and be prepared, again, to work closely with industry to help educate the workforce and to help educate students who leave here and are better prepared for the workforce of the future. So those are some of the things that, particularly as an R1 institution, I think will feature prominently for us on the horizon.

[00:26:18.19] ERIN HAGAR: That relationship between industry and higher ed it seems like could really be a mutually informing relationship, so that we know what's on the horizon with the workforce and can properly prepare, but you know, conversation as opposed to a top-down approach.

[00:26:37.39] ROGER WARD: Absolutely.

[00:26:39.04] ERIN HAGAR: Well, all of those things that you mentioned-- the introduction of artificial intelligence, and preparing for a diverse student body with respect to age and all the demographics, and this industry partnership-- is enough to keep any administrator busy for a long time, much less with having a strategic plan to draft and all the other responsibilities that

you have. So we cannot thank you enough for generously spending your afternoon chatting with us about these topics, and we're really excited to share these thoughts with our listening community. So thank you so much for your time.

[00:27:21.10] ROGER WARD: It's my pleasure being here, Erin. Thank you for affording me the opportunity. And I would be remiss if I didn't say that the only way I could find the time to come sit with you is because I have so many very capable people doing all the work on our collective behalf. So I think the university as it relates to teaching and learning is supported by an extraordinary team, so we are fortunate in that regard.

[00:27:51.70] ERIN HAGAR: I could not agree more. And thank you for all your efforts to bring that team together. And we really look forward to having you back for another conversation sometime soon. We hope you'll join us again.

[00:28:03.13] ROGER WARD: I look forward to it.

[00:28:06.08] ERIN HAGAR: Thank you for joining us today on Moving the Needle. Visit us at umaryland.edu/fctl to hear additional episodes, leave us feedback, or suggest future topics. We'd love to hear from you.