

Teaching Statement

Ashley E Nickels

I began teaching, as an adjunct instructor, in January 2008. The first class I ever taught was entitled, "Introduction to a Liberal Education." The class was designed for first-year college students, pairing discussions about the value of a liberal education with strategies for academic success. By the end of the semester, I was hooked; I loved teaching, lecturing, facilitating discussions, and watching students grow over the course of a semester. Since then, I have taught in many classrooms: as an instructor, teaching assistant, and guest lecturer; in different disciplines, including women and gender studies, public policy and administration, urban studies, and political science; and in different formats, including traditional, online, and blended.

My approach to teaching is informed by my identity as a scholar-activist. While this identity most certainly informs my research, it also informs how and why I teach. I believe in giving students the skills, knowledge, and passion to be activists in their own right. It is my hope that through course reading, class dialogue, critical thinking, and application, students walk away from my class as "agents of social change." When teaching courses such as volunteer management, urban organizations, or public administration, I challenge students to pair theory with praxis through applied, high impact learning opportunities. For example, in my volunteer management class, students are required to volunteer with a community agency of their choice. Prior to students venturing out into the community, however, we read and discuss "To Hell with Good Intentions" by Ivan Illich and evaluate the benefits and pitfalls of volunteer service. We discuss power and privilege and the various strategies for addressing community needs. Students then use this knowledge to examine their volunteer service, evaluating how their service impacted the organization and the community more broadly.

I am an energetic and accessible instructor. I believe that students learn the most when they are engaged and respected. I encourage students to meet with me outside of class, either in person or via Skype. I solicit course feedback and suggestions for content (topics, etc) from students early in the semester, typically in weeks 4 or 5, through an anonymous online survey. I then integrate their suggestions into the course materials. As a result of my enthusiasm for teaching and genuine interest in student learning, I have received high marks on students' evaluations of my courses. In my experience, when an instructor models excitement for course material, students are also more engaged in classroom discussions and assignments.

I am upfront with my students about course expectations. Each semester, I include a short "teaching philosophy" statement at the top of my syllabus, which reads:

I believe that all students are capable of success in the classroom; however, I recognize that students engage with, and learn from, materials in different ways. In my courses, I aim to provide a variety of different formats for presenting material, as well as gauging student learning. I believe in challenging students with rigorous course-work, while providing the resources and mentoring to help them succeed.

My interest in pedagogy extends beyond the classroom. I have written about my pedagogical philosophy and experiences in the *Journal of Public Affairs Education* (JPAE), the flagship journal for NASPAA. I served as the guest editor for a special symposium on community development pedagogy that will be published by JPAE in May 2015 and I was recently invited to serve on the Board of Editors for the journal. I am also co-editor of an interdisciplinary book, currently under review with Routledge Press, on feminist pedagogy and activism, with Jennifer L. Martin and Martina Sharp-Grier.

As an interdisciplinary instructor, whose research and teaching interests sit at the intersection of politics, policy, and community, I want my students to view their classes not as silos, but as part of a complex, interconnected whole. I seek to help students develop critical thinking, writing, and research skills that are applicable in a variety of settings. I aim to be a resource for students to broaden their intellectual and professional interests and to contribute to their development as productive members of their communities. My interest, commitment, and passion for teaching is evidenced in the following selection of quotes from former students.

Select student comments from courses taught at Rutgers University –Camden and Grand Valley State University (2008- 2014):

“Professor Nickels, has an excellent balance, of challenging us students and guiding us through the material, as well. She is the best political science teacher at Rutgers! Ms. Nickels initiates critical thinking and responds very quickly to my questions. Ashley Nickels cares about her students, and wants us to do well. I am enrolled in her spring 2015 online course.”

“Liked the course material and the organization of the class. The Professor was enthusiastic about her topic.”

“Professor Nickels has helped me become more confident not only about the material, but about myself! She has encouraged me not only as a female but as a Rutgers student, to understand things that I was not previously able to comprehend due to a lack of confidence! I was always afraid in the past to make a comment or answer any questions, because I was afraid I was not correct. I do not feel this way in Empirical Political Theory. Again, this class is a great

balance of critical thinking, challenging material. Ashley Nickels presents multiple styles of learning because she does realize everyone learns differently.”

“A. Nickels was very effective at engaging the students. I enjoyed how she used current events to connect the topics. Also, she was able to use the city of Camden to relate to a lot of the material.”

“Ashley has encouraged an interest for, and [provided] methods of critical analysis for organizational movements where I had previously been mostly ignorant on the subject.”

“She gives you a chance and she encourages you to go forward and do better.”

“Very knowledgeable about the subject, always gives good feedback, and uses examples that are relatable.”

“Has high energy and teaches well.”

“Ashley is extremely personable. I respect her highly because she shows students respect. She offers a versatile schedule for her class, which keeps it interesting. She gives very detailed rubrics, which helps me to know exactly what she is grading on. I also like that she brings in guest speakers because this class requires a lot of practical application.”

“The instructor lectured well and was very creative on how to approach grading and class work.”