Outstanding Faculty Awards: SCHEV Talk
March 4, 2025
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The night before I taught my first class, I had a nightmare.

In my real life at the time, I was a graduate student at the University of Virginia, getting a doctorate in English literature, and my initial teaching assignment was a standard issue composition course. In the dream, I arrived in the classroom, clutching my books, to find a circle of skeptical students sitting around a large conference table. The clichéd bad-dream elements were all in place—I'd forgotten to dress properly, I hadn't prepared, I'd brought the wrong books. But the true terror came from a student who eyed me with a blend of boredom and indifference, her perfect hair falling in a shiny curtain across her face. Leaning forward, she fixed me with a glare and asked a question that reverberates through my teaching to this day:

"What makes you think," she said, "that just because YOU care about this stuff, we should?" And with a flip of her hair, she and the rest of the students swirled away, as if on her command.

The dream, and the question, have stayed with me: What makes us think that because we care about our fields, our students should?

We work to answer versions of this question all the time. For research grants, journals, publishers, editors, and administrators, we are constantly called on to say why our particular work matters—why is it important to, say, trace the intersections of philosophy and leadership ethics, or to address the mental health impacts of combat on military members and their families, or to study how the natural history of sharks might transform our understanding of marine life? In our teaching, we address the question on our syllabi and for curriculum committees, and we address it on that first day of class—and really, every day of class. And while making all these

explanations can feel like a burden, we are essentially trying to ask—and answer—broader questions: What is meaningful? Why should we care? And what—or whom—shall we care for?

In some disciplines, I expect the answers to these questions are often more concrete, or at least easier to assess: Students need to have this body of knowledge to, say, pass the MCATS or to treat a patient or to run a lab or to evaluate this data. They need these statistical methods to consult meaningfully about a business. But I doubt many of us got to this room because we were only committed to conveying a body of knowledge. Students may *come* to our classes because they need the information or because it fulfills some requirement, but it's hopefully not why they stay.

Over in the humanities, where I live and teach, you might have heard that there's some anxiety around what we do—or some skepticism. "What are you going to do with THAT?" is a question our majors hear a lot. And while not typically asked with any expectation of an answer—the question presupposes the answer "nothing"—it actually IS a good question. And since I've been asked here today to comment on what teaching means to me, I'll attempt a brief answer, as it brings me back to the original question: what makes me think that, just because I care about literature, my students should?

The simple answer is, they shouldn't care about this material just because I do. So on the first day of class, I talk about how the material might matter to them, and what's the point of reading these works, beyond, say, needing the class for graduation. We talk first about the abilities and skills they'll develop: the ability to close read and analyze, the ability to speak clearly and engage in discussion, the ability to deliver a powerful presentation to a half-engaged audience, the ability to write and revise (yes, even in the age of Generative AI and Large Language

Models, because writing is not a skill but a thinking process, and Generative AI is NOT like the calculator, but that's a whole other talk). I discuss with them how the ability to close read something—whether it's a poem or a micrograph or a data set—is essential to any field and any job. Knowing how to analyze how parts make up a whole, and how the whole is made of parts, and the relations among them—these are the epitome of transferable skills.

And why literature? Well, in brief, I remind them that we can only live the one life, and literature, fueled by some of the greatest imaginative powers ever to walk the planet, shows us lives we will not live, builds paths to empathy and understanding powerful enough to show up on brain scans. Literature may grant us both the shock of recognition: I've been there; I've felt that—and of difference: I've never thought that; I've never experienced that. Literature gives us a model of how form and content might work together in stunning symbiotic relation. It can show us how to recognize beauty. It can offer consolation. Literature gives us stories and teaches how to read them. And make no mistake, we are surrounded and saturated by stories every day—in media, in conversations, in politics, in marketing, and we need to learn how to analyze them, for not all of them are true, and some of them are dangerous. Literature reminds us that to be human is to dwell in uncertainty and half-knowing, teaching us how to live in difficult terrain without reaching for easy and often harmful certainties.

The author Anton Chekhov said that the writer's task is not to answer the question but to put the question, and the same might be said for teaching and learning. As most of us found in grad school, the more you discover, the more you understand the vastness of all you don't know. Our disciplines teach us—and we teach our students—how to sit with complexities and to live with puzzles, to stay with questions that have no easy answers, to accept nuance and ambiguity—all these are essential to survival.

On the best days, these are the questions and considerations that sustain me. I love teaching. But I'd be remiss if I ended without acknowledging that what we do is difficult, no matter the discipline. The academic life can be grueling, and we often put everything on the line in doing this work.

Such difficulties make these awards, and ceremonies such as this, all the more important, and all the more meaningful. The monetary award is welcome—truly (my award paid some bills and also funds an account for my students who cannot afford the books, as I couldn't in college). But clearly, we are not here or in this profession for the money. Recognition matters. Honoring the importance of teaching matters. So, to all the amazing professors receiving awards today, you are doing serious, life-changing work, and we celebrate and thank you for your passion and your ability to keep inspiring students—because we know that if *you* care about this stuff, we should.