

## Helping Teachers to Teach – Ideas from West Point

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### Introduction

Every summer the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York loses nearly one-fourth of its faculty. While this turnover is intentional (returning our junior military officers to the Army), with such a high and constant turnover rate, we have had to figure out how to effectively teach teachers to teach in order to maintain the high quality education we provide for our cadets. Many of West Point's efforts can be successfully adopted at other universities and colleges who face the challenge of providing pedagogical instruction for graduate teaching assistants, new PhDs and adjunct instructors.

College instructors fall into three distinct groups based on their relationship with the university: (1) new hires who have not yet arrived on campus, (2) new arrivals, and (3) continuing faculty. Each group has different needs that the institution can help meet.

This paper discusses some of the programs, activities, and events that have been used successfully at the United States Military Academy to meet the needs of these faculty groups. It is written with the intent to provide other educational institutions the opportunity to pick and choose among them and then adapt applicable ideas to the local circumstances on their own campuses.

### Prior to Arriving

As at other institutions, newly hired Military Academy faculty show up on our doorstep with a wide variety of backgrounds and experience. Unlike most other institutions, each year West Point brings in a large number of military officers and recruits civilian faculty members as well. Civilian faculty members range in academic rank from new instructors to distinguished visiting full professors, and the teaching experience they bring with them varies as widely. Some civilian faculty members are changing universities, and some are newly minted PhDs. The majority of new faculty members who arrive each year are active duty military officers. Most of them have little to no prior teaching experience.

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Three important actions occur before each new faculty member arrives:

- A faculty sponsor is assigned.
- The new hire receives a date to begin work.
- First semester teaching assignments are made.

Shortly after new faculty members are hired, their academic department selects an arrival sponsor for them. Sponsors are assigned to new civilian and military faculty members. It is the sponsor's job to help make the new faculty member's move as trouble-free as possible. Sponsors typically send housing, school, and benefits information to the incoming faculty members. Although the quality of service provided by sponsors tends to vary, this system generally works extremely well. The practice of assigning sponsors, while common practice in most military organizations, is usually a pleasant surprise to incoming civilian faculty members. In the military, sponsors usually address only the practical aspects of moving from one post to another, but in adapting this process to West Point, we have discovered that sponsors also frequently take on the additional role of an instructional mentor. He or she is the initial source for detailed information about teaching at West Point.

Sponsors coordinate with newly hired faculty members to ensure that they will be able to arrive on campus prior to the beginning of the new instructor training (which will be discussed in the following section). In a typical year, nearly all new faculty members arrive at West Point during June and July.

The first semester teaching assignments for new faculty are almost always announced before a new faculty member arrives on campus. Often new instructors will receive textbooks and course materials prior to their arrival, as well. While no one assumes that new instructors will arrive fully prepared to begin teaching, new faculty members usually report that it helps to reduce the anxiety involved with teaching at a new institution.

### **New Arrivals**

Teaching can be a wonderful profession filled with numerous emotional rewards. Every teacher brings a unique set of skills to the lectern, but some teachers arrive with more ability than others. As Richard Felder, from North Carolina State University, wrote a few years ago:

Teaching—like medicine, auto mechanics, professional basketball, and chemical engineering—is a craft. There are distinct skills associated with its practice, which people are not born knowing. Some people are naturals (in education, the so-called “born teachers”) and seem to develop the skills by intuition; most are not, however, and need years of training before they can function at a professional level. Doctors, mechanics, basketball players, engineers, and teachers at the K-12 level routinely get such training—but not college professors, most of whom get

their PhD's, join a faculty, and set off to teach their first course without so much as five seconds on how one does that.<sup>1</sup>

To limit the unavoidable disruptions caused by large numbers of new faculty, most academic departments at the Military Academy schedule their new faculty members to arrive during the same two-week period during the summer. This allows department administrative personnel to concentrate on in-processing requirements and results in economy-of-scale time savings.

Several important activities occur to new faculty members during the first one to two months after they arrive on campus, but most of those activities occur in the context of a multi-week teaching workshop. Each academic department hosts its own teaching workshop. They range from five weeks in the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science to three weeks in the Department of Foreign Languages. These extended teaching workshops provide an important transition and initiation for new faculty members.

The names and agendas for these department-sponsored teaching workshops vary. The information shared, though, is generally the same and falls into four broad categories:

- Academy information
- Department information
- Program information
- Teaching information

The Academy information provided each summer includes details about a wide variety of topics relevant to new instructors, such as the organization of the Military Academy, the history of West Point, cadet life (including cadet terminology and slang, cadet military organizations and insignia, cadet clubs, and the cadet academic program), academy teaching resources, and other general Academy resources. New arrivals typically receive several days of instruction and tours. New faculty and staff are given the opportunity to visit and participate in selected cadet summer training activities. All new faculty are also given the opportunity to meet the senior Academy leadership through a series of receptions and meetings.

Each summer, the Military Academy sponsors a new arrival orientation fair. Most of the organizations on campus – including the medical clinics, library, museum, clubs, religious denominations, sports teams, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, local schools, etc. – staff booths in a large ballroom so that new arrivals can quickly gather information about any organization on campus that may interest them or their family members.

During the summer teaching workshops, academic departments typically share information about department organization and policies. Departments provide new employees with computers, email and network accounts, and other discipline-specific tools and technology. Departments also provide new civilian faculty members with information about the military, in general, and

the Army, specifically. Civilian faculty members also learn military rank insignia, basic Army command structure, and how the Military Academy is different from other universities.

Teaching programs typically discuss the courses offered in their program, standard teaching loads, job appraisals, vacation policies, additional duties (outside of teaching), scheduled meetings, and other related topics.

The Academy, department, and teaching program information is extremely useful, but the majority of time during the summer teaching workshops is spent on developing and practicing teaching skills. New faculty members learn how to prepare lesson plans, write course objectives, create a course syllabus, write exams and other assessment instruments, and how to teach effectively. All new instructors are required to prepare lessons plans for the course they will be teaching that fall. In most cases, experienced instructors present a few sample lessons to the new instructors to model techniques of instruction, and then the new instructors are provided opportunities to teach. These new instructor lessons are typically critiqued, both by the other new instructors and by the more experienced senior faculty members who attend. In many departments during the summer, new instructors prepare most of the 40 lessons they will teach that fall. A sample daily schedule for a department summer teaching workshop is shown at Table 1.

<b>Time</b>	<b>Topic</b>
8:30–9:30 am	Department Organization
9:30–10:00 am	Computer Science Program Overview
10:00–10:30 am	Automated Grade Reporting System
10:30–10:45 am	Break
10:45–11:15 am	Guidelines for Counseling Students
11:15 am–12:00 pm	Writing Meaningful Examinations
12:00–1:00 pm	Lunch
1:00–2:00 pm	Lesson Presentation and Critique
3:00–4:30 pm	Visit the Center for Teaching Excellence
6:00–7:30 pm	Dinner at the West Point Club (Optional)

Table 1. Sample Daily Faculty Development Workshop Schedule

Holding extended summer teaching workshops has several advantages. New faculty members:

- Know what is expected of them as a faculty member
- Have a better understanding of how the Academy is organized
- Understand what teaching resources are available for them both inside and outside of their department
- Have already taught lessons from the course they will soon be teaching

- Have met and often become friends with other new and continuing faculty members
- Have formed a support group for mutual assistance during the academic year
- Have received help and attention when they most needed it

The summer teaching workshops are a rite of passage for all Academy faculty members. By being concerned with the “little things” as well as “the big things” – such as how to teach – new faculty members are quickly welcomed into the Academy.

### **Continuing Faculty**

Teaching is a developmental process. Even if every department at the Academy could host an outstanding summer teaching workshop, there is only so much that can be accomplished during such a concentrated experience. There are also limits regarding what a new instructor can effectively prepare before actually teaching a class of students.

During their teaching assignment at West Point, faculty members have a wide range of resources that they can call upon to support them in their teaching responsibilities – both within their departments and through the Academy’s Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE).

The Center for Teaching Excellence is a consolidated Academy teaching resource that was created to support all of the academic departments at the Academy. The Center is staffed by two full-time employees – regular faculty members who focus on teaching as a sub-specialty—as well as an instructional technologist who is currently assigned to the Center.

Teaching is recognized as our most important mission at the Military Academy, and there is a celebration and recognition of teachers through teaching and learning conferences as well as a significant award for outstanding teaching projects.

The Center for Teaching Excellence sponsors a wide variety of teaching-related activities each year. Here are a few of the Academy-wide programs that CTE sponsored during the recent academic year:

- Brown bag lunches
- Master Teacher program
- Teaching conference
- Monthly teaching-oriented newsletters
- Technology seminars
- Annual teaching award program

- Advanced technology classroom
- Course-end feedback

Brown bag lunches are held frequently throughout the year. They provide the opportunity for faculty members to gather in an informal setting and discuss teaching techniques, philosophies, and ideas. Faculty members from various departments volunteer to lead the discussion during the brown bag lunches. Recent Brown Bag presentation topics include Inspiring Low and High Performing Students to Achieve in the Classroom, Laptops and Learning, Classroom Interaction Patterns, and What to Do When Students Just Do Not Get It.

The Master Teacher Program is a two-year teaching development program. Its' central purpose is to develop that "pedagogical content knowledge" that Lee Shulman has identified as crucial to college-level instruction.<sup>3</sup> Faculty members who voluntarily enroll in this program meet in monthly seminars to discuss assigned topics from undergraduate student development through course design, testing, and grading. In order to earn a completion certificate, faculty members conduct a classroom research project that culminates in a publishable paper and develop a teaching statement that includes a personal philosophy of teaching. Currently, approximately 80% of the new instructors volunteer for this program.

The Center for Teaching Excellence sponsors the TALENT (Teaching and Learning Effectively using New Technologies) Conference in alternating years. This one-day event features numerous one-hour discussion presentations on a wide variety of teaching topics in the morning and a reduced number of in-depth hands-on workshops in the afternoon. The minimal registration fee (approximately \$20) is designed to make this event affordable to faculty members at the Military Academy as well as from surrounding areas.

A monthly teaching newsletter is published each month and sent to all faculty members at the Military Academy. Each issue highlights either issues important to college teachers or techniques of instruction that are relevant to Academy faculty members. Some recent articles have addressed "Why Cadets Do not Take Notes," "Effective Teaching in a Diverse Classroom," and "Teachers as Learners."

In order to promote the effective integration of technology for instruction, the CTE promotes TALENT seminars at which faculty members demonstrate specific applications they have developed for teaching. In these presentations, we ask presenters to provide evidence of the effectiveness of these techniques. In this way, we try to ensure that faculty members do not "reinvent the wheel" by sharing faculty work with technology. Our seminars also serve as a first forum for many of our instructors who present their work at national conferences.

The Apgar Teaching Award is an annual presentation that recognizes innovation in course design and instruction. Every faculty member is eligible for this award which is for a teaching project that has been assessed and demonstrates effectiveness in improving student learning. The CTE Advisory Committee (with representatives from every academic department) selects the recipient each year. Examples of awardees in recent years includes the creator of a Lego robot project for

a mandatory general education course taken by over 1,000 students each year, the authors of an information assurance exercise in which students at each of the military service academies seek to protect their computer network against infiltrators from the National Security Agency, and the developer of an innovative seminar on terrorism.



Figure 1. A New Faculty Member Teaching in the ATCL.

The Center for Teaching Excellence also maintains an advanced technology classroom/laboratory (ATCL). This classroom, a gift of the West Point Class of 1954, provides an excellent evaluation environment for instructors to test the introduction of new classroom technologies. It was from instructors' experience with various technologies in this classroom that the decision was made to equip all Academy classrooms with computer projection and VCR capabilities. Similarly, faculty members worked with laptops in the ATCL for three years in anticipation of the Academy's move to portable computing. Hence, many departments already knew how they would use laptop computers in the classroom before they actually arrived with students. A sample lesson presentation in the ATCL is shown in Figure 1.

West Point has never had student evaluation of instruction. However, we know the importance and value of the student perspective on instruction and have developed an innovative process that is managed by the CTE. Initially this was in a traditional paper/pencil format, but student responses were always confidential to the instructor. Ours is a formative, not evaluative process. About six years ago, we moved to a web-based system (originally a cadet design project) which now allows us to ask questions at various levels, but we have retained instructor confidentiality. That is, a department head or course director can ask questions and get responses, but they receive only aggregate information—for example, what cadets taking American history think of the textbook. Only the assigned instructors receive individual student responses, and the American history instructor who asks cadets how he can improve his instruction will be the only person who sees those comments. Feedback from students has been documented as an important way to develop pedagogical content knowledge.<sup>2</sup> In this way, we believe we have avoided the negative aspects of student evaluation of instruction and preserved the value of student feedback on instruction for faculty development.

For an overview of the CTE's activities, visit the Center's webpage at <http://www.dean.usma.edu/cte>.

The thirteen individual academic departments also play a key role in helping continuing faculty improve their teaching skills. It is within each department where the greatest opportunity for development exists because faculty members teach the same general population of students, use the same basic technology, and share many of the same challenges. Faculty within a department see each other daily, often work together on joint projects, may share similar research interests and efforts, and are often friends. Some of the many actions that academic departments have taken to support and improve teaching are:

- **Mentor programs.** Each academic department at the Military Academy takes a different approach to mentoring junior faculty members, but every department does something. It is difficult to overstate the importance of having good faculty mentors. Departments that teach required general education courses with large student populations generally assign new faculty to teach one of those courses during their first semester on the faculty. This provides several benefits to new teachers. Each instructor works directly with the course director who is an experienced teacher. With several new instructors teaching the same course, it is often easier for them to identify and resolve challenges and difficulties that naturally arise for someone who is new to the teaching profession. New instructors also have many other teachers who can provide constructive criticism and ideas regarding quizzes, exams, labs, and lesson plans. Some Academy departments formally assign senior faculty members to mentor junior faculty members. Other departments let the process occur informally. Senior faculty members work with new and junior faculty members to help them quickly learn department written (and, more importantly, unwritten) guidelines and policies. It is important for new and junior faculty members to know there are members of the senior faculty they can ask questions and with whom they can speak freely.
- **Classroom visits.** All classrooms at West Point are considered “open for visitors.” Faculty members can visit classrooms, as desired. A Visitors Desk is kept open for this purpose in each classroom. The open classroom policy allows senior faculty members to visit courses taught by junior instructors. These visits are usually announced in advance to help reduce junior faculty anxiety. At the same time, it also provides the opportunity for junior faculty to observe and learn from watching senior faculty members teach. Several departments have developed a peer visiting program in which instructors who are teaching the same course (multi-section core courses) visit colleagues. Whether the visits are by senior members of the department or peers, faculty members typically report that the discussion that results from these experiences is invaluable. By making teaching less of a private and more of a public activity, we develop an understanding of the improvement of instruction as our common mission. This policy allows new and junior faculty members to watch seasoned instructors teach. Senior faculty members usually schedule visits to the classrooms of new and junior faculty members – instead of simply “dropping in” unannounced.
- **Annual appraisal interviews.** Every instructor at West Point receives a written annual performance appraisal. Raters are encouraged to meet several times during the year with the instructors they evaluate. Those meetings provide an excellent opportunity for raters



to provide feedback, constructive criticism, and ideas. The communication is not just one-way, though. Many excellent suggestions for policy changes had their birth during an evaluation counseling session. These counseling sessions, when handled correctly, provide a good opportunity for two-way discussion and learning.

- **Teaching awards.** Many departments sponsor one or more teaching awards within their department. Some of the award programs are specifically designed to recognize new instructors. The awards are usually presented annually. Some departments encourage student input; others do not. The evaluation process for the teaching awards encourages classroom visits and discussion among faculty members on various teaching-related topics.
- **Faculty professional development sessions.** Every academic department at West Point also holds a series of faculty professional development seminars each semester. Many of these one-hour seminars address innovation in the classroom, new classroom technologies, and other teaching-related topics. Attendance requirements vary from department to department. Some departments make attendance mandatory. In other departments attendance is voluntary. The remaining departments set a minimum number of mandatory attendances and make the remaining sessions optional.

## Conclusion

Teachers and teaching programs can always improve. This paper has discussed a variety of activities, ideas, and suggestions that can be successfully adapted and then adopted at most colleges and universities. Sponsors, mentors, campus service fairs, extended teaching workshops, brown bag luncheons, teaching award programs, a centralized center for teaching excellence, faculty professional development sessions, teaching awards, annual appraisal interviews, and classroom visits can be used individually or in various combinations to provide an enhanced environment for teachers to evaluate and improve their teaching. All of these activities can contribute to producing better teachers and creating an improved educational environment for students.

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