

2018 Professional Development Grant Report

College English Association Conference

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## **B. Restatement of Creative Work / Professional Enhancement Activity**

In April 2018, I attended the College English Association (CEA) Conference in St. Petersburg, FL, where I presented research about designing “big concept” courses in literary studies in order to help transform students’ daily lives through our teaching. The Association’s website is as follows:

<http://www.cea-web.org/>

## **C. Brief Review of Creative Work / Professional Enhancement Activity**

The CEA is an important peer-reviewed national conference in the discipline of English. At the conference meeting, I presented a paper on a Pedagogy Panel; the paper was entitled “Big Concept Courses in Literary Studies: Transforming Students’ Daily Lives Through Course Topics.” The abstract is below:

In the United States, the study of literature in higher education has done a poor job fighting for its continued place. We in the discipline understand the value of what we do, especially how the study of literature helps increase empathy, helps us understand relationships, and helps us understand our own minds. Yet we have not translated this value well in how we intentionally design and market our courses and our discipline. As an inroad to help remedy this, over the past few years I’ve turned to focusing my literature courses on topics that will help students in their daily lives. Based on national surveys by the National Alliance on Mental Illness and PEW Research Center, students today show increasing levels of anxiety and depression, marked difficulty navigating romantic relationships, and increased negative self-talk centered on body image. These things affect all aspects of their lives, including their abilities to finish degrees. As such, my talk will explain ways to design courses on “big concepts” that help give students skills to navigate the challenges of twenty-first-century life through the study of

literature. I will explain, for example, my course on “Happiness in Literature,” where we examine the dominant psychological theories of happiness alongside works of literature that center on the quest for happiness; as well as my course on “Modern Love and the Mind,” where we take the theories of healthy relationships used to train marriage and family therapists and use those to assess the health of the relationships in iconic love novels. I will also cover how to design a general education literature course with this “big concept” design in mind. By thinking of our courses around the “big concept” technique of how we can help students have healthier lives through our course designs, we not only have the potential to help students in their daily lives through our teaching, we begin to open up a pathway to better explain how the study of literature is not only needed, but vital for humanity.

#### **D. Summary of Outcomes / Experiences**

My panel was comprised of senior literature faculty at campuses across the country. After presenting our research, I had a line out the door of faculty asking me for copies of my syllabi. Since the conference, I have been in touch with two department heads at other institutions who have redesigned their department curriculum based on the model I outlined in my presentation. My conference talk won “Best in Session” at CEA; as such, the editors of *The CEA Critic* requested that I submit my paper for publication in their journal. I was also asked to give this same talk at the ATU Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning this fall. That talk is scheduled for November 26. Additionally, I am giving another conference talk on how to interweave the concepts of happiness into pedagogy at the South Central Modern Language Association this October.

#### **E. Conclusions and Recommendations**

My teaching and my research are interwoven at all levels. What I present at conferences is the result of my discussions in the classrooms with my students, which is the result of my reading and thinking months before I enter the classroom. My work in preparation for this conference presentation---teaching students how to live happily and effectively through and alongside the content of a college course---then grew into a college-wide project I am undertaking with Dean Jeff Woods in my role as Director of Operations for the College of Arts & Humanities. This project, called “Keeping the Joy,” seeks to help faculty achieve work-life balance while keeping the joy in their classrooms. I will continue this work in practical ways on the ATU campus as we seek to help our students and our faculty to be effective in reaching their goals and to balance the demands on their lives in healthy ways.

I am extremely grateful for the Professional Development Grant to allow me the opportunity to continue my research.

Copies to:       Dr. Carl Brucker, Department Head, English & World Languages  
                      Dr. Jeffrey Woods, Dean, Arts & Humanities  
                      Dr. Phillip Bridgmon, Vice President, Academic Affairs

## **F. Appendix**

Copies of my paper are available upon request.