

VIGNETTE

Saying “Yes”

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Years before I applied to lead the new creativity and innovation district living-learning community (LLC), Virginia Tech’s fourth residential college, several aspects of the university’s culture and infrastructure supported my intrinsic motivation to teach well and understand student learning. Not only did the decision to lead the community represent a return to a culture and environment that affected me in a tremendously positive way in my own education, but also the design and goals of the program aligned with my personal interests to better serve students and their learning—and practice my own work with a greater emphasis on compassion, flexibility, and creativity.

My journey to LLC leadership began my first semester as an assistant professor. Through a well-staffed, comprehensive course design workshop, I gained confidence and learned strategies to be creative and take chances in my early classes. Then, formal and informal encounters with colleagues in the university’s School of Education nudged me to collect and analyze data on a radical assignment I created to promote intrinsic motivation. Publishing this work moved me further down a path of greater curiosity about students’ lives and learning.

My efforts were recognized by the university’s communications team, and they wrote stories about my work with students that drew the interest and support of others, including deans, assistant vice presidents, institute directors, and teachers. This recognition boosted my confidence and nudged me further. I learned that although it can be easy to think that you either have the desire to engage students, or that you do not, this skill can be cultivated through practice, time, and support.

From these early experiences, I was given new opportunities to participate in education grant proposals and campus-wide general education reform. These opportunities allowed me to gather with diverse, committed faculty from across campus for sustained, engaging discussions about what

matters to students. I was also invigorated by the university’s investments in SCALE-UP classrooms (student-centered active learning environment with upside-down pedagogies), which gave my colleagues and me new tools to engage students spatially and otherwise.

My experiences grew out of a university culture that nurtures interdisciplinarity, increases path crossing, and facilitates creative collisions. A culture of professional mentorship helped channel these collisions toward meaningful outcomes. In this spirit, an early and wise mentor of mine contradicted the advice new faculty commonly receive, saying, “You need to learn how to say ‘yes!’”

The decision to say “yes” to being the faculty principal for an LLC is among the most exciting decisions I have made in my academic career. I want to practice communicating more widely and with greater empathy in my life and career, and the foundational and cherished memories of my liberal arts education, and the faculty who engaged me in and out of the classroom, compel me. Also, my wife and I have young children and feel that this rare experience will be radiant for them. In fact, I have observed this through warm engagements with other residential college families. In the end, we signed up because we thought we’d have an adventure—one like no other.