



The Most Creative Teachers in the South

We hunted in colleges throughout the region to find influential educators admired by their students and colleagues, whose classrooms serve as forums for social change, whose homes become their classrooms, and, in some cases, whose assignments become homes.

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Andrew Beck Grace, University of Alabama



"I'm kind of a jerk," says Andrew Beck Grace, director of Documenting Justice, a year-long documentary filmmaking class affiliated with the Center for Ethics and Social Responsibility. "I think my students mostly like me but they'll tell you that I don't pull any punches."

Grace's perilous course is geared towards non-film majors, which, as he believes, permits a fresher approach to film. Students spend the first semester learning photographic composition and formulating pitches. In the second, they take matters into their own hands filming, interviewing, and editing—seemingly mortifying realities they've likely never encountered in a traditional academic environment. "It's totally unfair what I ask

students to do," Grace says. "It's unfair in a kind of conventional way but when you look at it, it all balances out. For the work to be good, you can't expect the students to do less than they're doing."

Recent alumna Carly Palmour worked on *A Certain Kind*, a film featuring the three physicians serving Wilcox County, Alabama, and its nearly 12,000 residents. She recalls one of Professor Grace's more provocative teaching methods: "He would record himself watching [our films] and you'd see every emotion on his face. I hated it at the time, but my film would have sucked if he hadn't done that. We got to see the sheer disappointment or excitement over what we'd done, and that really helped guide us."

Professor Grace pushes his students hard to get outside. "Figuring out how to think about the world from a different perspective is something that you can't really understand," he says, "until you're out in the world talking to people with lives that are totally different than yours."

Beth Glazier-McDonald, Centre College



At one time, Beth Glazier-McDonald considered becoming a rabbi. She decided against it, in part, because it required the pretentious task of making a sermon each week. "But then, what am I doing as a teacher?" she asks. On the 1,200-student campus of Centre College, where she teaches "Biblical History and Ideas," and a course she founded, "Biblical Hebrew," Professor Glazier-McDonald is a willfully lecture-based instructor in a time of low-key seminar-style pedagogy. "Those of us who are good lecturers are sometimes put on the defensive with all these active-teaching methods," she says.

Teaching a Bible-as-literature course in Danville, Kentucky presents a formidable challenge. Glazier-McDonald's predominantly Christian student body often wrestles with the concept of exegetical dialogues in a class that "touches a ground of being—feelings and experiences—that many students are loath to give up." However, her vigorous oratory enhances the atmosphere: "I know that students so appreciate a faculty member who shows their passion for the subject, because that encourages the students to be passionate as well." Typically, Glazier-McDonald interprets the text from the original Hebrew, a procedure popular enough to have established a following—"Biblical Hebrew" now serves as a foreign language course at Centre. "People often think that questioning the text, and questioning the deity, is anathema. So I say, 'Let's go to the text, let's see what it says about faith, about belief.'" She encourages students to form their own new relationship to what they're reading: "I do hope they'll move away from their comfort zone just a little bit...and let the text speak to them."

Roy Jones, Clemson University



"Dealing with undisciplined, often angry, often resentful young black males is not the easiest thing in the world if you have no personal commitment to it," says Dr. Roy Jones, the first full-time director of Call Me MISTER (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models). Jones argues the necessity of such role models in the classroom, being the result of similar mentorship himself—in 1960s Massachusetts, Jones had little intention of attending college until a group of black educators introduced him to newly founded scholarships, an opportunity with which he was entirely unfamiliar.

Of the 20,000 teachers in South Carolina's elementary schools, fewer than one percent are African-American men, though the state's population is one-third black. The ambition of Call Me MISTER is to reconcile the disparity by increasing the number of educators for and from this population.

Professor Jones prepares his students—many who come from broken homes or low-performance schools—for both state-mandated tests and classroom leadership. At first, the program encountered obstacles. As Jones says, "Everyone supported the idea, but, unlike times when teaching and preaching were the only professions African Americans could pursue, it was not going to be easy to get a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old black male to come out of high school wanting to be a third-grade teacher."

An incredible amount of dedication is required for everyone involved: "We remind them that Call Me MISTER is not a program, it is a lifestyle," Jones says.

The program saw its first class of Misters in 2004 and now claims seventy-five graduates. At present, 160 Misters are enrolled. Upon their graduation, Call Me MISTER will double the amount of black male teachers in South Carolina's classrooms.

Michael Steer, North Carolina State University



Dr. Michael Steer used his expertise in electrical engineering to develop a method of detecting the cell-phone triggers used to detonate roadside bombs. He worked tirelessly, eighty hours a week for four years without a day off; he even worked on Christmas. For his contribution, he received the U.S. Army Commander's Award for Public Service. "9/11 affected people tremendously," Steer says. "Everybody wanted to do something to make a difference and that certainly drove me. I knew where my skills were the strongest. I knew how circuits and radio waves interacted. And I believed there must be something I could do. And I just kept working." Despite the long hours alone, his preference for group-oriented work led him to eventually enlist the help of graduate students. As

Steer claims, "Any one person cannot design much by themselves."

Trends in web-broadcasting confirm his belief that distance or web-based courses will soon become the norm; education is becoming mobile. Dr. Steer even instructs on-duty soldiers in Iraq through online courses, and makes himself available to answer questions sent to his phone, seven days a week. He calls this "on-demand learning."

Byron Mouton, Tulane University of Louisiana



In 2006, Timothy Holmes purchased a home in the Upper Tremé neighborhood of New Orleans, a location that held a painful significance—it was four blocks away from where his mother lived, and was eventually murdered, two years prior. He purchased the home through the Neighborhood Housing Services nonprofit, who have an invaluable partnership with the URBANbuild project currently helmed by Professor of Practice Byron Mouton.

Professor Mouton's colleagues at Tulane established URBANbuild as a means of offering homes to a social stratum that might not be able to afford them through traditional means. The program took on a whole new significance after Katrina. "It was

originally about teaching young men and women how to build and design houses," says Mouton, "but soon became about both educating students and enabling them to help resurrect a city in ruins."

Undergraduate students design and plan the houses in Mouton's studio class in the fall semester, and build the homes in the spring. Each project is managed by student teams, who operate like private practices, working six or seven days a week, full time, constructing the homes themselves, doing any and all work that doesn't require a special license.

It seems the residents of the completed homes are thrilled with the final products. Holmes not only owns the first URBANbuild project, he's become a participant in the organization: he frequently visits Mouton's new sites and helps out with construction on occasion. He subscribes to Mouton's assertion that "quality people need to take a chance on these neighborhoods in order for them to become healthy, vibrant communities. These houses are a modest first step."

David Haskell, Sewanee: The University of the South



"By slowing down and paying attention to things we really understand them," says biology professor David Haskell. "Rather than zipping through a huge volume of material in a sort of superficial, touristic way."

As opposed to abstract lecturing and the weekly digestion of dozens of textbook pages, Professor Haskell conducts biology courses structured around on-site or hands-on lessons. In his ornithology course, he distributes bird carcasses that he's collected around campus. Each student is given a different bird, ranging from owls to hummingbirds, and becomes responsible for cleaning and rebuilding the skeleton. "It's like a little term paper of bone,"

Haskell says. "If they're good, they're coherent both in the details and in the presentation, like a good term paper would be."

Haskell often invites his classes to the small farm where he and his wife raise goats and rabbits. "I'm no paragon of green virtue; I just try to live responsibly in the world," Haskell says. "I think for a lot of students it's fashionable to eat local food, but when they come out to my house it's the first time they've stepped into a garden that's producing food. There's a sort of shift in their perspective, to actually see what you can do with a small amount of land, and take responsibility for what you're killing."

Throughout his sixteen years at Sewanee, Haskell has mentored students who championed sustainability efforts on campus, establishing recycling and composting programs. Beyond

mentoring, Haskell does a significant amount of the dirty work himself, gathering the recycling at locations around Sewanee when students are away for the summer.

"We're trying to help move society forward so we don't bequeath as much of a mess to the next generation as we inherited from the last," Haskell said. "What I really hope is that the students will leave here with this amazing joy of connecting with the natural world and will be more responsible and live more enriched lives."

Marshall Duke, Emory University



Professor Marshall Duke's classes always start off sweet. This approach is based on an old Talmudic practice, where teachers begin their lessons by putting something sweet on their students' tongues. "I bring in cookies or lollipops to tend to the basic needs we all have. The notion is that learning is a sweet thing."

Duke has taught psychology at Emory University for the last forty-one years. Two decades ago, he began offering interdisciplinary courses, a method that was particularly groundbreaking, and has since increased in popularity. "It's more than a trend, it's a movement," he explains. "The disciplines are artificially separated. We are in different buildings but we don't have to be in different places intellectually." These classes focus on concepts like "Personality in Theater, Art, Music, Literature, and Dance" or "A Novel Approach to the Study of Human Behavior: The Psychology of Fiction." This past spring he hosted a course called "Fictional People in Literature and Real Life" with his colleague, Professor Walter Reed of Emory's Department of English, with whom he's been planning and trading ideas for ten years. "It is challenging to co-teach. We meet for an hour before the class starts and an hour after class is over."

Professor Duke's teaching involves Socratic-style dialogues—he asks maddeningly hard questions like "Is there a relationship between creativity and personality?" "Socrates had it right," Duke says. "Asking questions is much more important than providing answers. It's more important for people to live with confusion and come up with ideas on their own than to have answers presented to them. I give puzzles and won't provide answers for weeks." In this vein, he once showed his students a YouTube video of Salvador Dalí tearing himself out of an egg with a knife and throwing fake blood. He asked his students if they thought Dalí was crazy. Duke says simply, "It's a question, you know. Is it art or insanity?"

Frank X Walker, University of Kentucky



"People have a monolithic stereotype of Appalachia that is more of a caricature," says Professor Frank X Walker. "They think of Boss Hogg or *The Beverly Hillbillies*, when, in fact, there are vibrant black cultures in the likes of Birmingham and Pittsburgh (which are both technically in Appalachia), and great figures like Carter G. Woodson, creator of Black History Month, and playwright August Wilson. Somehow this is left out of the definition." A native of Kentucky, Professor Walker's poetry and teaching practice is fueled by this common misidentification of racial diversity in Appalachia. In fact, he coined a term to correct this conception: "Affrilachia," which in 1996 was added to *Webster's Dictionary*.

Walker adopted the totemic initial "X" in college, following the influence of leaders like Malcolm X whose quest to discover their pre-slavery heritage led them to remain "nameless."

In the days before the 2008 election, an effigy of then-candidate Obama was lynched on campus, and later, in March of 2011, a sign was posted, reading: HOW DO YOU SPELL NIGGER? O-B-A-M-A. Walker came upon a student rally held in reaction to these events and found a majority of his pupils directing the conversation, applying lessons they learned in an academic setting to a real-world situation. Despite how upsettingly symbolic the precipitous events were, upon recognizing his students' involvement in the discussions, Professor Walker says it was "a signature moment in which I could only sit back and smile."

David Baker, Austin College



Your typical liberal-arts student might approach mandatory science classes with a sense of dread, but physics Professor David Baker of Austin College is trying to change that. "One of my goals is for science to be cool and exciting for everyone, whether you're going to pursue a career in science or a career in something else," Baker says.

He remembers observing one mandatory lab class as a novice professor and detecting how indifferent the students were. "They were just going through the motions. In my mind, they weren't really doing science. It wasn't important to them," he says.

To fight that malaise, he takes a decidedly student-centric approach to his classes. In one, titled "The Day After Tomorrow," Baker shows the eponymous 2004 disaster movie and asks students to write a list of questions about the climate phenomena depicted. Baker then structures the entire class around these queries. Though this strategy requires him to rapidly assemble a curriculum after the beginning of the semester, he considers it worthwhile: "The key is for them to have ownership of their learning."

Baker also asks students to design and execute their own experiments, a move that he believes increases their level of investment. These student-created experiments can range from taking the National Weather Service to task for accuracy; exploring whether a human mouth, kitchen sponge, or dog's mouth hosts the most germs (hint: clean your kitchen!); and charting the patterns candy lovers adopt for eating their favorite-colored M&Ms. These experiments, conducted throughout the semester, are later compiled into individual student portfolios.

Professor Baker's semester evaluations often contain feedback like, "After starting this portfolio, I realized that it is fun to try to figure out things myself...it feels like I am following the ways of great scientists"—each one a little breakthrough in the name of science.

Kathleen Condray, University of Arkansas



Professor Kathleen Condray's driving desire is to educate through a practical, discipline-spanning application of the German language. "I'm a little worried that education in this country is having a pigeonhole effect. We tend to think, 'I'm a German major, I'm only going to study German.' Or, 'I'm a chemistry major, so I'm only going to study chemistry.' If you're looking just at your field, what are you missing?"

Condray descends from a first-generation German mother, who was discouraged from speaking her native tongue while growing up in Arkansas during World War II. Condray had little impetus to explore the language herself, until an attempt at majoring in biology brought her failing grades in Honors Calculus. "I switched my major and never looked back," she says. "I tell my students not to panic when they are failing a class and not to try to plan their lives out too much, since, you never know."

Professor Condray's lessons incorporate discussions of pop culture, social media, and even cooking—one conversational German class tried their hand at homemade ice cream: "We made one of those Girl Scout recipes where you put it in a bag and shake. I gave them the directions all in German. So they had to figure out what I was talking about or they ended up with icy, salty milk." Because Germany and Austria head global efforts in researching renewable energy

sources, she also encourages students to study abroad, even if language acquisition is their secondary goal, "Law students can learn about international sustainability laws in the EU," Condray says. "And, of course, I've got a couple who want to work at BMW or Porsche."

Using her sense of humor and pop-culture touchstones, Professor Condray strives to entertain her classes, endearing them to the German language—even the larger classes with students she regrets she has less access to: "If you're not willing to make a fool of yourself in a classroom, you're not a good teacher."

Greg Miller, Millsaps College



One of the most significant aims for Professor Greg Miller's students is learning "to be advocates for people who are relatively voiceless." Over the past ten years, the increasing population of Sudanese refugees in the Jackson, Mississippi area stimulated Miller to establish a service-learning course, where his Millsaps students work alongside the refugees, not only helping acclimate them to life stateside, but helping document the biographies of people from a nation of conflict.

Initially, Miller arranged for his students to teach English to the refugee community, and, eventually, the students increased their involvement by helping the refugees pen autobiographical essays about their plights. The

stories were compiled in a pamphlet that they sold to aid the Sudanese who had begun attending college. Miller also published a chapbook, *Mississippi Sudan*, and used the profits to provide immunizations to South Sudan.

The student projects now incorporate more than just writing—as Miller explains, "All of these media have a significant effect. People take it personally when they understand what a human being goes through in war." One of his students conducted a video interview with Mangok Mayen, the President of the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement in America.

Miller also hopes that his program finds ways to celebrate his students for their own talents. "I try to talk to them and see what moves them and what they are best at and move them in ways that will deepen that path," he says. This mindset proves fruitful: One of his former students, Emily Tuberville, received a Fulbright scholarship to teach in Bangladesh. Another, Kenny Townsend, became a Rhodes Scholar and put together Alliance Africa, a nonprofit organization geared towards funding sustainable development in African communities.

The Sudanese students have benefitted, as well. A former student, Bul Mabil, is currently working with at-risk children for the Mississippi Department of Health. He recently returned to Jackson after helping build houses in post-Katrina New Orleans, and is pursuing a master's in public administration.

Miller feels that it's become a relationship of mutual exchange. "They are so perseverant," he says of the Sudanese. "It's good for my students to work with them.... The issue has come to life here."

Sarah Hardy, Hampden-Sydney College



Sarah Hardy has the rare privilege of being the female professor of a course titled "American Masculinity" at the all-male institution of Hampden-Sydney College. A native South Carolinian, she originally sought to teach young Southern women the confidence to cultivate both intelligence and looks, in hopes of dismantling one Southern trope—but ended up dealing with quite another.

Quick to admit she's obviously not the authority on the topic in a room full of freshmen and sophomore lads, Hardy often opens the first day of the rhetoric course by saying, "You all are the experts, not me." Instead, Hardy considers herself a guide—and uses her female perspective for the secondary purpose of furnishing an objective voice in the discussions of preconceived notions about traditional masculinity.

The course examines American leaders in particular, and analyzes how their conceptions of masculinity informed their public actions. One of the more probing assignments comes when Hardy has the students reverse-engineer a projection of masculinity, or all-male establishment, such as the Boy Scouts, Freemasons, YMCA, or fraternities. In this way, her approach to teaching gender involves a historical examination of how masculinity has changed. Hardy feels viewing the subject through a historical context is less threatening to her young male students than analyzing what might be most difficult—themselves. Still, Professor Hardy loves "complicating the picture" and taking a typical student of hers, a Southern white male, and challenging his worldview. "Hampden-Sydney should be an authoritative voice in gender/masculinity studies because of its culture; its students should be more expert than anyone," she says. "It's a cool type of laboratory. Masculinity should be an important part of the conversation at a single-sex college, just as race might be at a traditionally black college, or religion at an institution such as BYU."

Andrew Freear, Auburn University



After a rigorous application process and working ten- and twelve-hour days, six days a week for nine straight months, Charles Spires graduated from Auburn's low-income development architecture program, the Rural Studio, earlier this summer. He worked under the tutelage of Andrew Freear, who has helmed the program since the death of Samuel Mockbee, one of its best-known founders, in 2001. Spires helped design a large-scale Boy Scout meeting facility for Lions Park in Greensboro, Alabama. Spires, like most students in the Rural Studio, ended up involved in the community he was there to assist. "We actually became Cub Scout leaders," he says. "They didn't have enough."

As a participant, Spires relocated to Newbern, Alabama, where students start by examining the program's more-than-150 previous projects. "They can really critique and look at the fruits of our past endeavors," Freear says. "Some we did well. Some we fucked up." Freear then presents the students with new projects, all requested by area administrators, ranging from individual houses to farmers' markets and forty-acre parks. "We initially just try to understand the needs of the local community and infrastructure," says Freear. After the first month, the students break into groups, claim projects, and begin making proposals. "I'm there as a kind of psychiatrist, confidante, mother, father, psychoanalyst, friend, drinking buddy. I'm the person who they can bounce things off," he says.

But Spires believes it's more involved than that: "Over time we stopped seeing him as an educator; he became a team member, almost in our group. What I respect most about him is that we became part of Andrew's life. If you needed Andrew Sunday morning at ten am, he would be there—he'd drop whatever he was doing. He's a fifth team member for everyone. Andrew has that same investment in however many projects are going on at a time."

"You sleep it, you eat it, you drink it, you dream it. It's very intense," Freear says. "I like that level of focus."

On average, students spend eighteen months completing their projects. Though they officially finish after nine months, most remain an additional ten to twelve, in hopes of seeing their projects to the end. "I'm always blown away by the maturity they show. I think I was in my mid-thirties before I had the kind of confidence they have," Freear says.

Unfortunately, just as with any community development program, completion is not guaranteed. Spires's project in Lions Park is one that hangs in the balance: "It's not finished, and I don't think it's going to be built because of budget issues," he says. "Architecture has a very human side and there's a lot of social responsibility to the people you work with. Professionally, I'd like to do something more community outreach-driven, I just wish there were more outlets for that to happen."