



# Center for Excellence in TEACHING AND LEARNING

Spring 2021

Volume 1 | Issue 3



## A Message From Our Director

Greetings Virginia Tech faculty and staff, and welcome to the spring edition of our quarterly newsletter. As we are nearing the midpoint of the semester, we wanted to highlight and feature some of the exciting things that have happened already and what is to come. Despite challenges and unprecedented demands of this time, instructors have demonstrated a strong commitment to students and the university as a whole. It has been a pleasure for all of us at CETL to work with this community of instructors, and we are looking forward to ending this school year on a high note.

A feature on teaching large classes will start this newsletter off. The Director of the Academy for Experiential Learning, Vicki Pitstick, shares some updates from the Academy for Experiential Learning. A recap on the 13th Annual Conference on Higher Education Pedagogy will also be featured in this edition. This year's conference was different than normal with it being entirely virtual; however, we are so happy with the way it turned out. I, along with the CETL staff, would like to thank our speakers, presenters, and all attendees for making this past conference one we will never forget! Our faculty spotlight features Trudy Becker, a senior instructor of history in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences. We hope that you enjoy this edition of our newsletter and that you have a wonderful rest of the spring semester.

**Kim Filer** | CETL Director, Associate Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning

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## Highlight: Large Class Community of Practice

Large classes can be intimidating, but they can also become a unique and powerful learning environment through course design and engagement. Providing support for the university's large class instructors is central to CETL's goal of promoting teaching excellence in every setting. This quarter, we are highlighting the Large Class Community of Practice as one of the many resources available for faculty who are designing and teaching large classes.

The Large Class Community of Practice was launched to support faculty as they faced new settings and challenges in the fall of 2020. Each week, the community met to address concerns, demonstrate strategies for "teaching large," and share passions for student learning in a large class setting.

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Mark Pierson of the Department of Mechanical Engineering highlighted the benefits of having constructive input from colleagues during community meetings. "I really appreciated the support and camaraderie of the Large Classes Community of Practice group," Pierson said. "It was very helpful in learning some of the technical and practical aspects around Canvas, Zoom, and other online tools for implementing exams, assessments, class discussions, and use of proctoring tools such as Lockdown Browser for large synchronous online classes."

Jeannine Eddleton of the Department of Chemistry expressed the importance of connection when navigating the fulfilling and challenging moments in teaching large courses during a pandemic. "It's such a wonderful opportunity to connect with fellow faculty that are similarly invigorated, enthusiastic, frustrated, weary, seeking support and solace," Eddleton said. "The presence of CETL and TLOS personnel mean that there are issues of all kinds that receive immediate response. I have wondered about the navigation of our return to the classroom, and have concerns with handling the expectations of simultaneously delivering instruction remotely and live. It is through the Large Class Community of Practice that I am able to express my concern, put it on the radar of the experts involved, and contribute to the overall effort of maintaining instructional quality in the presence of a multitude of other stakeholders."

When asked about her experience, Nicolin Girmes-Grieco of the Department of Human Nutrition, Foods, and Exercise captured the mission of the Large Class Community of Practice. "Week after week this group has been a source of support and affirmation as we have navigated these challenging times together. We have benefitted from IT experts and other presenters who have freely shared their knowledge, insight, skillset, and experiences, thereby allowing us to expand and hone our professional 'toolbox' as we teach our large classes synchronously, asynchronously, in-person and online concurrently, and in other innovative variations of modalities. Much of what I have learned I will continue to utilize, adapt, and refine in my large classes, even once we are 'on the other side' of this pandemic."

## Excellence in Teaching Awards

Each month, the center recognizes a faculty member for effective, engaged, and dynamic teaching approaches and achievements.



*Our January award winner, Mantu Hudait, brings experiential excellence to the Bradley Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering. [Read the full story.](#)*



*Our February award winner, Aaron Geller, focuses on student relationships in the Department of Chemistry. [Read the full story.](#)*



**Vicki Pitstick**  
Director, Academy for  
Experiential Learning

## Update: Academy for Experiential Learning

Programs and workshops that are part of the Academy for Experiential Learning are up and running. The Experiential Learning Certificate Program had an overwhelming response with 88 applicants. Forty faculty and staff were selected to participate this spring, and the others will be offered a spot in the fall. Participants are diving into experiential learning theory, pedagogy, design, and implementation as well as building community with one another.

The book club on "The Purposeful Graduate" also began with 12 participants who are learning more about purpose exploration programs and purpose-driven education and spending some time thinking about how these ideas relate to the mission of Virginia Tech. Workshops this spring include "Why Experiential Learning is an Equity and Access Issue" and "The Role of Faculty Mentorship in Experiential Learning." Spots are still available for both workshops: [teaching.vt.edu/programs](https://teaching.vt.edu/programs).

The Academy also continues to work with the pilot departments that are moving toward incorporating bridge experiential learning into their curricula. This semester, departments will begin working with and testing the assessment instruments that have been developed and provide valuable feedback on how they can be improved.

The instruments were created with input from current departments that already embed bridge experiences into their curricula.

These efforts are part of the university's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) on experiential learning. Dr. Heather Bradford joined the staff of the Academy in January as a Project Management Specialist and is playing a key role in managing the QEP process.

A call for proposals is now available for the next cohort of Bridge Departments. Bridge Departments work with the Academy for Experiential Learning to implement an undergraduate experiential learning requirement as part of Virginia Tech's strategic plan.

For more details and to submit a proposal, visit, [teaching.vt.edu/experiential/pilotdepartments.html](https://teaching.vt.edu/experiential/pilotdepartments.html).

## Faculty Spotlight:

### *Q&A with Trudy Harrington Becker*

Dr. Trudy Harrington Becker of the Department of History spoke to us about her approach to teaching and learning in large courses.

#### **What strategies are most useful for you when teaching large classes?**

I find that my large classes work better when I forefront a few strategies. First, I try to always be available to them, whether in person, Zoom, or via email. In particular, I promise my students that I will always answer their emails myself, and I try to answer within 24 hours. Honestly, sometimes that gets tricky. I try to chat with students as much as I can, usually those sitting along the aisles because I teach in GLC 64 (so hard to reach students sitting deep in the interior!), and I stay after, sometimes in Au Bon Pain for easy chatting or office hours.

Secondly, I found that the more precise I am in my syllabus, my assignments, and even announcements, the happier we all are. I've learned the hard way that if you make a mistake, you'll get 50 emails immediately! Truthfully, the clarity is not just to avoid emails but also to be really candid about the value and purpose of an assignment, how it relates to class, and so on.



Lastly, I tell stories. When you've got a giant class, you need to find ways to keep their attention, and I've seen across the years that if I can connect a story—even a personal one—to what we are working on in class, they do tend to grasp it better. It's a risk to be personal in class, and to be so in a big class, but it's my attempt to see our course as a class. They may not know too many others in that auditorium but they will know me.

### How do large classes provide a unique learning experience?

Well, I want to recognize that “unique” can be defined as both good and bad, and I have to say that in some ways the whole large class setup is terrifying. There’s much that you have to rule out or adjust due to the sheer numbers in the class.

For example, my students have not written anything at any length since the class got to be over 120 students and I miss that. You have to look for other ways for students to put together what they’ve learned—that you can still manage to evaluate. Your regular, well-tested pedagogical activities often do not work well when scaled up. How do you do small groups in an auditorium when you have 50+ groups? This is hard for me since I have no graduate assistants. But it’s also made difficult because the classroom spaces for most big classes on campus are not designed to promote active learning. In my case, GLC auditorium does not lend itself to movement—those chairs are stuck solid in place.

What can you do then to promote learning? I can design good exams, good assignments. I can encourage students to work together in informal ways out of class, I can ask them to work in class together in brief, more formal yet ungraded ways. I can encourage them to become independent learners. I usually have hundreds of freshmen in my large class, and most are there to fulfill a Pathways requirement. Throughout the semester, in addition to guiding them through content and “facts,” I can offer them ways to learn.

One of the most successful methods I use is one I devised and call “Read, Write, Speak.” I encourage the students to Read everything, read their notes at the end of each week (debriefing of sorts), and reread before exams. Then, students should Write out everything and anything—organize the material in any way that makes sense to them, and then do it again and again in different ways (we know that the act of writing helps retention of material). Lastly, I ask the students to Speak the material out loud. Can they tell a friend all about a particular concept in depth? If they read, write, speak before an exam, they tend to perform much better. And, hopefully, this way to learn can be applied in other courses the students are taking.

### What have been your most memorable experiences teaching large classes?

I think in the past year many of us teaching really big classes would probably say our most memorable experiences have been associated with technology failures. For some (human) reason, we always seem to remember the worst when we teach.

But to think more happily about teaching, I’d say that what made teaching a large class online work—what made it meaningful this year—was the Chat feature in Zoom. In fact, I will miss it when we go back to the classroom. I learned early on not to leave the Chat feature open to everybody for the entire class period (hundreds of comments! Mostly positive ones, including cheering for the GOAT who put most of our readings on a Google class site). Instead, most of the time I had all chats directed to me, and when the student agreed, I shared comments with the class as a whole. Two things were at work here: 1) students who were generally reserved—especially in a big class—were offering really good comments, and 2) students were sharing personal stories and reactions with me, which absolutely delighted me. For instance, I would be displaying a particular piece of Roman architecture, and students would chat with me about having visited there, or having studied it in an architecture class, or how it looked like a federal building, etc. And these were spontaneous comments, often very authentic ones. Most of the meaningful moments in class this past semester were driven by comments in the Chat. I will need to find ways to replicate this in a non-Zoom class.

### What has it been like to participate in the Large Class Community of Practice?

It’s been terrific to learn from so many enthusiastic colleagues who value teaching. In the fall semester, I missed only one or two Fridays because I wrote it into my schedule as a necessary part of my week. On the whole, our weekly meetings did two things for me: 1) they provided time to learn new skills from a variety of professionals and practitioners, and those were always helpful; and 2) equally helpful were the days of just checking in with each other and offering and receiving support, through both real-time answers to specific teaching questions and general emotional support. The community aspect of the group was especially true; I felt as if I were part of a welcoming, dedicated space.



## Upcoming Events

**Mar. 31** - The Role of Faculty Mentorship in Experiential Learning - 2:00-4 pm  
<https://profdev.tlos.vt.edu/browse/teachingandlearning/courses/cetl48-033021>

**Apr. 6** - Spring Break Day

**Apr. 9** - Experiential Learning Spotlight Session: The On-campus Internship Program - 10:00-11:30 am  
<https://profdev.tlos.vt.edu/browse/teachingandlearning/courses/cetl51-040921>

**Apr. 26** - Spring Break Day

## May Course Design Clinic

**When:** May 17, 9 a.m. - 4 p.m. (noon - 1:30 p.m. break)

**Where:** Zoom

**Additional session date and times:**

- May 18: 3-4:30 p.m., May 19: 3-4:30 p.m., May 20: 2-4:30 p.m.

**Registration link:**

<https://profdev.tlos.vt.edu/browse/teachingandlearning/courses/cetl11-051721>

# CHEP 2021

The Who, What, Where, Why and How of CHEP 2021

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## WHO

# 452

### ATTENDED THE CONFERENCE?

Total participants attended	<b>452</b>
Number of VT participants	<b>164</b>
Colleges and universities represented	<b>117</b>

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## WHAT

### IS CHEP?

CHEP stands for Conference of Higher Education Pedagogy. It showcases the best pedagogical practice and research in higher education today. Sessions address disciplinary and interdisciplinary instructional strategies, outcomes, and research.

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## WHERE

### DID IT TAKE PLACE?

CHEP was held virtually this year. People attended from the comfort of their own home in:

**30** different states  
**& 5** different countries

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## WHY

### IS CHEP IMPORTANT?

Participants learn and engage in conversation, practice, and research-based workshops, poster sessions presented by qualified individuals and with colleagues from across the country and beyond.

**80** concurrent sessions **74** poster sessions **2** keynote speakers

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## HOW

### DID THE CONFERENCE GO?

**87%** said they would attend again

"Keeping it simple was the BEST! It was the smoothest online conference I have been to in the last 11 months."

"This was amazing since it was all online. I was skeptical I wouldn't feel engaged, but the hosts for the rooms and the presenters all were very engaging. Zoom was very smooth, great communication - WHAT AN AMAZING conference! My first one to attend too."

<https://chep.teaching.vt.edu>

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