

# QEP Newsletter

*Transparent Instruction in General Education and Gateway Courses for Student Success*

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## Dr. Jacques Debrot “Sparks” Award

Associate Professor of English at Lincoln Memorial University, Dr. Jacques Debrot, was awarded second place for the 2021-2022 Quality Enhancement Plan Outstanding Teaching Award and received \$750. Dr. Debrot earned his PhD in English from Harvard University and has worked at LMU since 2004. Dr. Debrot was nominated for his SparkNotes assignment in his ENGL-240 class. His nominator noted “his syllabus and assignments connect the purpose of the assignments with the students’ lives and concisely describes the associated skills without being overly verbose”. One of the review committee members commented that the assignment was “very educational and thought provoking”.



**Dr. Jacques Debrot, English Professor**

Faculty, staff, and students can nominate instructors for awards. Nominations are reviewed by a committee and scored on a number of factors. Dr. Debrot was asked a series of questions related to the process of creating transparent materials for the classroom. Below are the questions along with Dr. Debrot’s responses and his advice for others:

**Q1:** *What steps did you take to modify your assignments to align with the Transparent Instruction format?*

**A** Like almost all instructors of General Education literature classes, I used to assign my students a thesis-driven research paper at the end of the semester. Every college student’s written one. They choose a topic, spend a few weeks learning more about it, and then submit a well-researched analytical paper. At least that’s the goal. I still believe it’s a valuable exercise. But the Transparent Instruction format gave me permission to think about modifying the standard model for writing research papers. Instead of requiring my students to develop a thesis, I had them create a study guide following an outline I modified from the SparkNotes website. The assignment still included a strong research component, but I found that the process of assembling a study guide readily lent itself to the kind of critical thinking and source evaluation skills I wanted students to acquire. On one level the assignment was easier to explain to students and easier for me to grade in an objective and fair way. Transparency was the catalyst. It

turned out, too, that in a larger sense a study guide is also all about making something relatively opaque (in this case a literary text) ultimately more transparent.

Q2: *What differences are you seeing in the student homework submissions that you are receiving now as opposed to before using the transparent Purpose/Task/Criteria (PTC) format?*

A My students have a clearer idea about what I expect from them. And, I admit, so do I.

Q3 *What was the biggest challenge in this process?*

A Well, I'm still modifying my assignments. It's difficult to be clear about abstract things. Stories—which are what I teach in my General Education classes—can be thought of as machines, in a sense. They have distinct parts with identifiable functions and tasks, and so on. It's fun, but also challenging, to attempt to make stories less mysterious and more transparent to students without seeming to just explain their magic away.

Q4: *What advice or words of wisdom would you give to new faculty that are beginning to incorporate transparency into their assignments?*

A Transparent instruction requires a lot of work at the front end to make things easier at the back end. The pay-off's significant enough, I think, to consider incorporating it into all your classes.

Congratulations to Dr. Debrot on your faculty teaching award. LMU faculty that teach courses within the general education program and gateway classes include two transparent assignments into each of their classes. For more information about transparent instruction, contact Dr. Molly Duggan at [Molly.Duggan@LMU.net](mailto:Molly.Duggan@LMU.net).

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## Madison McClelland Joins QEP Steering Committee

Faculty, staff, and students serve on the QEP Steering Committee to help plan and execute our transparent instruction initiatives. We are excited that sophomore Madison McClelland will be joining the committee during the spring 2023 semester. McClelland is a Criminal Justice major from Middlesboro, Kentucky. She is a transfer student and plans to go to Law School to become a lawyer. She will provide a valuable and unique student voice since she has experience as a student at two other institutions – Midway University and Southeast Community College.



**Madison McClelland**

McClelland stays busy as the assistant soccer coach at her high school alma mater, Middlesboro High School. In addition, McClelland works as a server at the Cracker Barrel restaurant in Middlesboro. In her free time, McClelland enjoys spending time with her 8-year old brother Jackson, going for walks with her dog Molly, and spending time with her family and friends. Welcome to our QEP Steering Committee Madison McClelland – we look forward to working with you!

## 2021-22 Student Focus Groups

Each semester we conduct a focus group composed of undergraduate students and a second focus group of faculty. In order for students to qualify, they must be enrolled in one or more of the QEP classes.

During the 2021-22 school year, 12 students participated in the focus groups. The fall session was a little over an hour in length while the spring session was just under an hour. Both sessions were conducted over Zoom. The focus of the groups is an examination of the syllabus as well as a transparent assignment. Responses were coded for themes as well as if the comments were positive or negative. The fall 2021 student responses were found to be 83 percent positive while the spring 2022 student responses were 82 percent positive.

Students responded to a series of questions regarding their syllabi – faculty contact information, course objectives, mission statements, purpose, tasks, and criteria. Additionally they are asked questions regarding assignment policies, attendance policies, and then asked to compare their QEP course with another course. The following are some of the key points from student focus groups:

- Overall, students seemed to appreciate the thoroughness of faculty contact information available in the syllabi and described them as “very, very organized” and “very laid out”.
- Most students recall the mission statement in the syllabus and believe that departmental and/or school mission statements were also included.
- Some students mentioned that the purpose of the class was not included but the purpose of the assignments was included.
- Most students recalled reading about the attendance policy as well as assignment policies as it relates to weekly discussions, late work, participation, and make-up assignments.
- When comparing these classes with others, the students said that they were pretty comparable and similar. One student stated “they all do a good job of going into detail of what’s expected”.
- All 12 students identified that the purpose was included with their assignments and they understood why they were doing the assignment.
- They agreed that they understood how the assignment would help them “down the road” in their career path. All 12 students found the tasks were explained by their instructors and they knew what was expected of them. Two students commented that it was laid out so well that “it is pretty self-explanatory”.
- When discussing criteria, one student mentioned that their professor posted so much information in their Blackboard page with examples that “there’s really no doubt what he expects from us”.
- When comparing their general education/gateway class with their other classes, there was a mixed response. Some students thought they were easier while others found their major classes to be easier to understand. One student said that they cannot compare because all of their classes are general education classes.

Overall, the scores from the two student focus groups yielded 83 percent positive or perceived improvement scores. The target goal is 80 percent. We continue to hear feedback that students like having clear expectations.

# 2021-22 Faculty Focus Groups

During the 2021-22 school year, 12 faculty participated in faculty focus groups split over two sessions. Each semester we conduct a focus group composed of faculty and a second focus group of students. Faculty are randomly chosen if they are teaching one of the qualifying classes during that semester.

When comparing the faculty groups to the student groups, the faculty are a little more long-winded. The faculty fall 2021 session was an hour and 40 minutes in length and the spring 2022 session was an hour and 21 minutes. The faculty comments were much more detailed than student focus groups and posted a higher rate of positive comments with a final tally of 97 percent positive statements. Both sessions were conducted over Zoom with an examination of both the syllabus and transparent assignments. The fall 2021 faculty responses were found to be 98 percent positive while the spring 2022 faculty responses were 96 percent positive.

The first half of the sessions focused on the syllabus while the second half focused on assignments. The following are some of the key points from faculty focus groups:

- When asked about contact information, most faculty stated that they follow the syllabus template and include all of the components included in that document.
- The general consensus is that all faculty cut and paste the course descriptions right out of the catalog for their syllabi.
- All faculty agreed that they review the learning objectives with their students in class.
- All faculty said they have the LMU mission statement in their syllabi and some also include school and program mission statements.
- Some faculty stated that they do not include criteria in their syllabi, but they do include it in the transparent assignments.
- All faculty discussed how their assignments were meant to develop their students' concepts, knowledge, and skills in their classes and beyond university life. They all stated that they connect assignments to the great world.
- All faculty stated that they reviewed tasks in class and/or through Blackboard to provide more details and explain procedures. One person stated that they use the Blackboard Announcement Feature to convey assignments and send emails to students.
- Faculty discussed the annotated examples and screenshots of instructions to help students understand what is expected of them for the assignment and the grading criteria.
- When comparing QEP syllabi to other classes, one faculty member stated that they believe students "get more clarity from the QEP syllabus because it's spelled out very clearly what they have to do."
- Another faculty member stated that the QEP transparency forced them to think about what they really wanted from their students with the assignments.
- In a closing statement, one person said "I have been teaching at LMU now for about 5 years and I think that the process made both my teaching and the syllabi better."
- Another person in a closing comment stated that they thought it was "refreshing" to hear what other faculty are doing in their classes and appreciated getting new ideas to incorporate into their own materials and lessons.

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## PURPOSE ~ TASKS ~ CRITERIA

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### Important 2023 Dates

Feb. 13	Lincoln Day/Founders Day
Feb. 27 – Mar. 3	Midterms
Mar. 20 – 24	Spring Break
April 7	Good Friday – No Classes – Offices Closed
April 17-29	End-of-Semester Student Surveys Available
May 1-5	Final Exams
May 6	Commencement

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### October 2022 “By The Numbers” Correction

The October 2022 newsletter incorrectly posted the average score from spring 2022 surveys at the end of the semester as 4.348. The actual score was 4.148.

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### By The Numbers . . .

1,443	Number of student surveys returned at the end of fall 2022 – an increase of 231 surveys compared to the end of spring 2022.
3.962	Average score from student surveys at the end of fall 2022 – based on a 5-point rubric – a decrease from the beginning of the semester which was 4.183.
92	ETS percentile for fall 2022 test takers – seeking rolling average of 60 <sup>th</sup> national percentile or higher by year five.
2	Number of transparent assignments that should be included in each general education and gateway course to reflect transparent instruction.

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Thank you for reading the QEP newsletter. The QEP Office is located in 118 Grant Lee. If there is something you would like added to future newsletters, please email [Molly.Duggan@LMU.net](mailto:Molly.Duggan@LMU.net).