00:03 Jean: You are listening to the CeTEAL Community Podcast. Today I have Mary Fischer she is a learning specialist in the office of accessibility and disability services at Coastal Carolina University. Welcome Mary! Mary: Thank you so much for having me well.
00:20 Jean: Mary why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself.
00:27 Sure, um I’m a Southern California native. Um, new to Coastal Carolina, I've been here about six months now and my background is in English and in higher education administration. In terms of just students that I've worked with and universities where I've been I got my degrees from the University of Southern California which is where I started my career working with students with learning disabilities. Jean: Oh the other... "laughter" Mary: the West Coast USC. I have to get used to that now that I'm in South Carolina. "Laughter" Jean: I don't think it's the one. Mary: Exactly. And I've just primarily worked with students who are traditionally underrepresented at the college level so a lot of first-generation college students, women and minority students in the STEM fields, and then students who are on academic probation or working through a suspension recovery program. Jean: Glad that you're here. Mary: Thank you very much.
01:09 Jean: In our January/February news issue or the CeTEAL news, um which is on our website by the way, you wrote an article titled "Strategies for Promoting Student Learning". And I found this a fascinating read and there's a lot of good information in here for faculty to incorporate into their teaching. So I found it fascinating the first piece when they talked uh about a survey or research that was done about a discrepancy between students and professor expectations. Could you tell us a little bit about that? Mary: Yes, I found that very interesting too because I feel as though I see a lot of this in my day to day anecdotally and it was very neat to actually see that come out in the research. The...let's see, UCLA higher education Research Institute does a survey I believe it's every other year but it may actually be as often as every year where they'll survey incoming freshman students at a variety of institutions all over the country to understand what their experience has been like in high school from an academic perspective how much time they've really spent studying how they've prepared what kind of grades they got and um how prepared they're feeling going into college. And what they found is that the majority of students did very well, they got at least B's, over 90% of them were at least hitting a 3.0 and in high school they were only studying an average of about five hours a week to achieve those B's. Jean: Hmm Mary: So that surprised me "laughter" Jean: Yeah, five hours a week, hmm Mary: Yes and most of them, the majority of them actually felt that they were more prepared than their peers going into the college situation, so that really gave me a great snapshot of the
mindset of our incoming students and how they're feeling about those skills "laughter"
Jean: Yes which should be um very interesting for faculty to understand them Mary: Yes "laughter" Jean: Because the other
Mary: Yes that the students should have the skills that they need to be successful at the college level. So I think what I'm seeing
is a gap and expectations of um skill development
Jean: So there's a big discrepancy Mary: Yes, yes we see a
discrepancy. Jean: So you also address in this article something about students
entering college with incorrect assumptions about what it means to learn.
Can you expand on that a little bit? Mary: Absolutely. I think that what we're
seeing and what the research is showing is that students are equating studying with memorization as opposed to with learning. And so learning is really in a
lot of a lot of times as being taken out of the equation completely and it's the
idea of doing that rote memorization and if I can do that it means I understand
the material and I'll be successful as opposed to really delving in deep
being a lot more active and storing that information correctly so that they can
retrieve it on an exam. Jean: But sometimes they just study to just take those tests
and then that information is gone. Mary: Absolutely, right. Jean: Where our goal is
for them is to retain it long term and actually apply it in other contexts.
Mary: Absolutely, especially in your major courses Jean: Yes. Mary: 'Cause hopefully those are building on
one another, yup. Jean: Sort of start thinking like a chemist or thinking like a
writer; you know what is it we need to do to get them to that point?
Mary: Absolutely yeah so I think it gets really down to the purpose of college
courses and how they're preparing the student and ultimately what the goal is
for that student to be able to apply those skills and that information in
either a professional setting academic setting etc it's very much a building
block as opposed to just kind of a one-and-done okay I learned what I
needed to I'm time to move on to the next set of information. Jean: All right so one
of the other things you talk about in here is how can instructors help to
facilitate academic self-awareness and to encourage students to approach their
studies more deliberately and intentionally. And you gave some ideas to
consider, so if you could talk about these things and you know ways you see
that and I might ask you a couple other questions.
Mary: Absolutely. Um, so something that I'm seeing a lot of is students really lacking that
skill of being able to self monitor and self assess their learning, but that is
not automatically what students are doing as much as we would love for them
do that but they're not always catching on and really able to assess am
where I need to be with this information do I really understand these
concepts am I able to apply them. They're not necessarily asking those questions.
And so one of the things that I suggested was providing opportunities
very early on in the semester for low stakes assessment. Where it gives a
student an opportunity to pause and really think based on that grade based
on the feedback that they're provided am I where I need to be is my strategy
working or do I need to make some adjustments and most likely what
adjustments should I be making moving forward and if the assignment or you know assessment
however it looks as a test or some kind of written assignment,
if it's pretty low stakes it's not going to completely take the students grade
they're able to try some things out and make adjustments in time to really be
able to salvage that grade in the course. Jean: I really think that low stakes in the
beginning of any course you know will-be it online or a hybrid or face-to-face-is
a good thing to do with our students because give them that opportunity to
move that grade up in the beginning. Mary: Absolutely. Jean: And to also see your
expectations on a quiz, a test, an assignment-what is it you're looking for?
Because that again too is practice, students need practice Mary: Right Jean: and what it
is you want them to be able to do. So offering some type of
practice. And I know you're talking here about intentionally framing assignments.
Yes. Jean: So, you want to talk about that a little bit. Mary: Absolutely, and so with that it
isn't making any
clear change to the assignment at all. It's simply providing a frame for the student
to really understand what the purpose of the assignment is. If a student knows
where they're supposed to be going with this, what the objective is from the
professor's perspective they can then come up with an appropriate way for
meeting that expectation. And I find that that is incredibly helpful for a lot of
my students who have a learning disability or are on the autism spectrum.
Um, knowing clearly okay this is what the professor is hoping that I do they might
be able to come up with a really creative way of meeting that requirement
but knowing right off the bat they're not necessarily going to read through the
lines and see what that is. So a professor explaining this is why I'm
having you do this, this is what my learning outcomes are, whether it's
provided in the syllabus which is great but also maybe coming back to that in
the syllabus when we talked about this outcome this is how this assignment fits
into that and continuing to check in with students about that during the
semester I find to be very helpful. Jean: I can see that helpful even just from that
universal design standpoint Mary: Absolutely. Jean: We're reiterating what it is we said on that
syllabus and now let's actually talk about it so I think it's a good
idea maybe just to even have conversations about an assignment when
you give an assignment. Mary: Right. Jean: One of the things we like to talk about too is a
muddiest point what does it student still are kind of confused about and I
think when you do this this will help clarify where their concerns are what so... Mary: Absolutely, I
feel like it's helpful from the instructors perspective to be able
to perhaps make an adjustment or revisit something but also it is helpful for the
student they probably haven't even thought about what a muddiest point is or
that could even exist. And so getting them to reflect on that process
a little bit and go you know I actually I'm still not totally sure on this
provides another opportunity for them to then approach you and talk through that.
Jean: And I know when we talked a little earlier just a little bit about testing too. One of the things they can do, and Jen actually runs a great session on exam wrappers and you said you did attend that session.

Mary: I did, yeah. Jean: Uh, but I think exam wrappers and we don't want to give away everything "laughter" on our podcast, uh what did you find interesting about that? Mary: Um well I attended that session that is an area of research of mine I really am a big fan of exam wrappers. I think that after attending that it started making me think about other ways that I could incorporate reflection because in my current position I'm not doing as much teaching in the traditional classroom setting I'm doing a lot of one-on-one coaching. And so finding additional ways to incorporate reflection into my everyday practice but also trying to provide reflective moments for students so I actually have a lot of my students do writing assignments for me reflecting on their goals and how things are going in their classes in ways that aren't maybe looking always so traditional like a big essay they need to write because they won't do that for me it's not graded but just getting them thinking more about their strategies. So I have some core strategy worksheets where I ask them to think about what would be their keys to success in that class and we will revisit that over the course of the semester. About mid semester we reflect on how things are going and what adjustments they might want to make and at the end of the semester I feel it's especially important for students who perhaps are not performing at the level they want to or are experiencing some challenges with their learning taking a minute to really reflect on areas where they have grown. Because even if grades wise things aren't looking how they want them to I'm seeing a lot of growth in my students and those academic skills and I think providing a pause for them to actually reflect on that really helps for their esteem as well we're able to continue to build on that success in subsequent semesters.

Jean: I love reflection, I just had a session not too long ago on teaching students to reflect. I think we make the assumption that students know how to reflect and one of the things is we have to teach them that. And in my session I have this great little meme that comes up with a Tyrannosaurus Rex on it that says 'if thinking about thinking is metacognition, then what is thinking about metacognition? "Laughter" And I just thought I love that meme, I think it's just a great meme because it's a dinosaur thinking about this. We really need to incorporate that into our courses I think allowing or teaching students how to do reflection. And we can do that in little pieces throughout the day. So do you have any recommendations on things like that and maybe a classroom for faculty? Mary: Um, I think any opportunity for students to reflect on their goals, because I think that really is that touchstone that you keep returning to as a student, um and you feel especially that's helpful in major courses naturally that should be a you know natural extension, but in general education courses as well I find it's just as important thinking about what am i hoping to accomplish in this class and continuing to touch base about that. So helping a student or
providing an opportunity for them to at least create one goal for the course and
really challenging them to think about okay great what is your action plan for
getting there? Um, I think is a really useful tool very basic that can be a five
minute written reflection or perhaps something that the student submits to you
over email, doesn’t need to be anything very extensive. But sometimes the student
hasn’t considered maybe what their goal is for that class and we see that with a
lot of our students really focusing on maybe external factors for why that
they’re here I think that that's a very useful exercise to get a student
thinking about that. Jean: In your article you talked about using your syllabus to
communicate your expectations and one of the things you pointed out is giving
guide lights to students for how much time they should be spending each week
course. I know for me teaching an online course I tell my students a
minimum six hours when in reality they should probably be spending maybe eight
to ten hours. Mary: Right. Jean: And then I get the surveys back at the end of the year that
says how long did they actually spend which was four hours, usually pretty
honest about that, but I think that's a good point and-and you know here what
are you-what's your thinking behind that? Mary: Yeah my thinking behind that is I think
helping to close that expectation gap. When we talked about students maybe
for all of their courses total um and still receiving those B's you know rightfully
so they're thinking well this has worked for me before it's probably gonna work
for me now and being able to provide clear cut expectations of just to be
prepared this is what really my expectations are of you about how long
this should take. I think at the beginning of the semester is helpful. I
find it also especially important to revisit that conversation after that
first assessment because now a student may be more willing to listen after
they've maybe not preformed at the level that they wanted to and I
think there maybe primed for actually reflecting on that process then and
saying let's be honest about this you know how long did you prepare for
this test and what specifically did you do to prepare, because we see a lot of
students um focusing not only on doing a little too-too less "laughter" too little work for it but
also how they're preparing or is maybe not a very productive strategy for
actually learning the material so that's a great use of potential using an exam
wrapper there to kind of get them thinking a little bit about what really
should I change cuz ultimately those adjustments a lot of it's gonna be the
amount of time they're spending and then what they're spending that time doing. It
may not be obvious to them until they've actually received that perhaps negative
score back or some feedback from the instructor oh I might need to change my
approach. Jean: Now I like that piece for them to be able to reflect because then they
can see well maybe they're not spending their time on the right things too. Mary: Right,
exactly, exactly. And I've noticed when a student comes in after under-performing a
lot of times I'll ask them you know what questions did you get incorrect, why do
you think you've got those incorrect, is there a pattern and they you know I
talked about this in the article they stare at me blankly like I have you know
three heads, what are you talking about "laughter" you know the test is over and I would have focused on this it's time to move on. And well I do appreciate the ability to compartmentalize and not be you know feeling so downtrodden about it I feel that it's important for us to really think about well what happened and why did it happen, what was surprising about this? Because even though the material might be different on that next round really you know the approach needs to be adjusted and so having to um facilitate those conversations at a very compassionate way can sometimes be hard but I feel like it's important to really challenge the student to think about how would they you know what their approach was. A lot of them when I ask how they'll study they can't really answer that perhaps they reread notes is usually what I hear the majority and that's as we know not a very active approach to really learning material and much less storing it to be able to retrieve it on the test when you need it so it's not going to be second the long-term memory by any stretch just by continuing to revisit it and not really thinking critically on it. Jean: So I think that's a good point for all faculty to kind of take that into practice them with that first big assessment and the students that don't do well you know just reviewing that with them using exam wrappers or using some type of reflective piece so I thank you for um putting that in there. Mary: Oh yes oh and something I just wanted to add to that to is I feel like those conversations and reflections are so helpful for me to better understand from the students perspective what does it mean for them to study? What does that entail? And when a student says I studied a lot what that actually means I find that a lot of times even my expectations or maybe although I do this a lot, um I'm sometimes surprised by what those answers are so taking the time to gather that information from the student I think helps them think about it but also helps me think about how I might want to tailor my message slightly differently if it does feel like it's falling on deaf ears how I would approach that... Jean: Oh wow Mary: ...and you know and reframe. Jean: So is there anything you care to share with us "laughter" for some of the ways or things that kind of shock you? Mary: Goodness, well I think um I think what is usually the most shocking is-is what it-well it's not shocking anymore cuz I feel like I hear it most of the time but it is the I studied for so long and I find out when I probe a little bit more there's a couple hours before or they didn't really study or you know whatever um so I think that sometimes a big roadblock is breaking down those defenses a little bit and being able to have an honest conversation about it um because I think my students will sometimes expect that I will, I don't know if they come in and haven't performed well or didn't follow up with what they said that they would do. So that's always interesting I find even for students who it doesn't really seem like they care about it they're kind of coming in with a little bit of an attitude a lot of the time really I feel like what surprised me is that sometimes it's coming from a place of hurt or a place of pride and trying to you know be compassionate and
those conversations and recognizing that this does not feel good to have this conversation... Jean: Sure Mary: ...um that even if the student is acting as though this isn't impacting them sometimes it really is and so working with them on creating a safe space where we can really delve into it is good. But at this point honestly um I've worked with students with every GPA imaginable, there really isn't anything I haven't seen. So I remember my first time seeing a 0.0 GPA was very shocking at this point "laughter" that I didn't think that was possible initially when I first got into probation work I thought oh my goodness I didn't even know this was possible and the truth is is that a lot of students are coming in under-prepared and maybe don't have the support that they need, I think it's easy to make assumptions about a student not putting in the time. I think maybe that's the most surprising thing for me is that there's usually a little more to the story and I have found students who have found out later been single parents been working three jobs trying to you know manage things and so sometimes it ends up being a little bit more of a personal conversation about managing priorities and how to be successful in all aspects of their life. I feel like those that personal really impacts the academic. So I would say not so much in this job lately but my first time kind of really working with students who were definitely low socioeconomic status, first-generation that was definitely a very surprising um moment when I started seeing what does that look like in terms of GPA after that first or second semester. Jean: Well I'm glad you were there to help them and I'm glad you're here at Coastal now to help us. Mary: I'm very happy to be here "laughter". Jean: Any final words you want to leave us with? Mary: Oh goodness I'm always terrible at ending "laughter". Um, you know I guess let's see... Jean: Well how can faculty reach out to you? Mary: Right. Jean: Is that...are you available to talk to faculty? Mary: Oh, always, absolutely um and that's been a really fun part of my job over the last couple of months as I've gotten more comfortable in my role and what that's entailed I feel that I've been able to do more faculty outreach and um meeting with more professors about interesting classroom situations and thinking about how we can make things more accessible. I know that you've been speaking with another faculty member who works with the role-playing games I'm actually meeting with another professor who does the role-playing and talking about ways to make that accessible for students with a learning disability, because that can sometimes present some interesting challenges. So yes, I am always open to talking with faculty about ways um to accommodate students or if you just have questions um about maybe how to handle any student situations that tends to be my area of expertise so please come in and talk with me about that we're always open to do that. Jean: Well Mary I thank you for spending time with me today and welcome to Coastal! Mary: Thank you so much! Jean: You have been listening to the CeTEAL community podcast. Tune in again next time. We look forward to having you hear us. The views expressed on this podcast do not represent the views or
20:00 opinions of CeTEAL or Coastal Carolina University.