Where No One Stops Learning

SMC's Center for Teaching Excellence—"the Center"—is one of only a handful at community colleges in California. Funded by a federal grant for colleges that serve a large number of Latino students, the Center's focus is on supporting faculty who teach classes in basic skills, courses for transfer, and career technical education.

"You have to pour yourself into it, show that you care... and not just show it, you genuinely need to care," says SMC math professor John Quevedo, one of the Center’s faculty leaders.

There is a little rock that sits on Quevedo's desk with the words "Positive Mental-Math Attitude" painted on it, which serves as a conversation starter with students. Seventy percent of math students at SMC are at the basic skills level, and Quevedo understands that there are circumstances outside the classroom that can stand in the way of a student's success in the classroom.

Quevedo assigns more practice and review problems in class, so that his students can get a better idea of what an exam will look and feel like. He also devised a "question paper" to get students to engage and collaborate with each other. Quevedo and other faculty leaders—by helping organize the Center’s activities and bringing well-known experts to campus to help them address their challenges—are also living out what they tell their students to do: Collaborate.

"What the Center does is make sure that faculty have the support and safe space they need to talk about challenges they face," says Roberto Gonzalez, SMC Dean for Student Success Initiatives. "We’re focused on the art of teaching, and on how we can help faculty help our students."

ESL professor Keith Graziadei is another faculty leader at the Center. He works to help bridge the "technology gap" between students and faculty by training his colleagues to use new technology like GoogleDocs, WordPress, Twitter, and Prezi in their classroom.

"I’m always looking for new things to do... what can I do to make my teaching more effective?" says Graziadei. To supplement reading assignments, for example, he uses a tool called Camtasia to videotape mini-lectures for his students. Graziadei and Quevedo helped set up a "Tech Mentor" program for the Center, where faculty can turn to a colleague to help them learn how to use a new tech tool.

"One of the reasons I love teaching at SMC is seeing the depth of talent here," says Graziadei. "I really feel that the support students get here across the board is phenomenal."

Instructors who have participated in a Faculty Summer Institute have seen an increase in the number of students who complete and succeed in their classes, and the Center has also started a Faculty Winter Institute for instructors who teach Career Technical Education classes. The Center offers workshops and professional development activities throughout the semester, and future plans also include a physical space that will be a "pedagogical playground" where faculty can come together to discuss what they can do better.

"I think the Center and its activities to help teachers teach better are what set SMC apart from other community colleges. You feel like you're at a serious learning institution," says Edna Chavarry, Project Manager for the Center.

Visit www.smc.edu/center to discover all the ways the Center is promoting teaching excellence at SMC.

"Our faculty live up to the momentum that SMC runs with – it’s all about innovation."

– Edna Chavarry, Project Manager for the SMC Center for Teaching Excellence