

Aprile Garner

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Personal Story

Ms. Garner knows details about her students' lives outside of class—she cares about the whole student. She gets to know her students by arriving to class early and trying to stay after class ends, as she finds students are more comfortable talking to her before or after class than coming to her during office hours. This approach becomes evident before her College Algebra class begins, when Ms. Garner approaches a young woman, who is also a parent, sitting in the front row, to ask how she is doing. Ms. Garner acknowledges how difficult it must be for the student to balance her many responsibilities as a parent and student, and asks questions about her time commitments. She also tries to get to know her students outside of class by attending their activities on

campus, like the softball players' games and the engineering students' cardboard boat races. She likes that National Park College (NPC) has a high percentage of non-traditional students. She finds returning adult students "more focused, determined." Perhaps because she was once one of those returning students who took "a circuitous route" to a degree, she works hard at "convincing them that they can be successful" too.

Ms. Garner dreamed of being an astronaut in high school. She entered college as a physics major because she was interested in alternative energy forms in space, like developing solar panels for the Space Station. However, along the way she got "sidetracked" when she met her husband, got married, and had three kids. After a six-year break, she returned to college looking for a major that "was more family centered" since she had young children at home. Ms. Garner changed her major to math education and "grew to love it." She has been an educator since 1985 and has been teaching full time at NPC for four years.

In teaching mathematics, Ms. Garner tries to make sure students understand the underlying concepts and processes behind the mathematical skill they are practicing. For example, as she works through the factoring outline with students in College Algebra, she asks "what do we do here?" and they shout out answers and ideas. She probes students' answers to get at "why" they think that is the next step to make sure they understand the underlying concept. Her goal in teaching is to have students walk away understanding that mathematics is "not just a lot of unrelated rules," but has a cohesive structure that comes from nature.

Additional things she does to support students' learning include constant encouragement and resources. A few years ago, she realized her students were having "more difficulty keeping up with notetaking." So, she developed her "advance organizers," which offers an outline of the class notes they can fill in. As she works with students, moving through the outline, she offers constant encouragement and motivation. When students give a wrong answer, she often tells them that their "intuition" is right and guides them to the step they missed. Students have picked up on this collaborative atmosphere and also offer suggestions and advice to their peers.

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Ms. Garner also enjoys “collaborating with the other instructors” at NPC, and likes that they “all kind of have a different way of doing things” in the classroom. This specific College Algebra course is new to her, as she took it over last minute from a faculty member on leave. She used his lesson plans, and while she noted that they were different from her own approach and style, she is learning new things about teaching from her colleague. She noted how this faculty member created “excellent videos online for these review skills” and she planned on asking “him for permission” to use those videos in her courses in the future.

Policy-Related Overview

Ms. Garner’s College Algebra course is part of the co-requisite model, where students are simultaneously enrolled in the developmental math requirement and the college-level course to earn college credit. In this specific course, she meets with students for 50 minutes every day of the week, which includes the college-level course credit hours and the additional two hours of review to cover the extra credits of the co-requisite course. Before each new algebra topic is introduced, Ms. Garner covers the developmental skills that are needed for the next College Algebra objective that students may not have mastered yet—called the “just in time review.” Ms. Garner has found this method of covering the basic skills needed for an advanced skill to work so well that she has started to incorporate it into her non co-requisite algebra classes as well.

The success rates of the co-requisite model “have been on par with the regular College Algebra success rates so far. And in some instances, even better than certain classes I’ve had with the regular College Algebra.” NPC saw about “300 more students” get college credit for College Algebra in 2019 than they did in 2018. However, she still hopes to work with the department to improve placement of students. She hopes to develop a system where faculty can recommend the student move to a different course “in the first couple of weeks if we see that a student is really not placed correctly.”

Over her many years of teaching, Ms. Garner has seen many reforms and initiatives come and go, but notes the co-requisite model is something that seems to really work. The “direct path” to earning college credits sooner helps students cut down on the number of semesters, and thus expense, to earning a degree. She finds this is “invaluable” for students, especially returning adult students like herself, who may need to “make up maybe for some lost ground along the way.” She says for “the non-traditional like I was, the students who are low income,” the co-requisite model is “golden.”

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