



**Academy of Excellence in Teaching and Learning
University of Maryland**

2016 Student Essay Contest

Have you had learning experiences at the University of Maryland that were memorable and meaningful, as well as challenging, inspirational, and creative? If so, we would like to hear from you about them. In an essay of no more than 1,000 words sharing the learning experience that you had.

1st place award

Vikash Sahu

All professors are vast stores of knowledge, but few will make an effort to teach you something that they themselves do not know. Fewer still are considerate enough to tell you that their class shouldn't be your entire life and speak to you as an equal. An even smaller percentage care, genuinely care, about you as a person.

The best learning experience I've had in my time in this University has not been a single class, nor an epiphanic book -- funnily enough, my best learning experience has been the perspectives on learning I've gained, made possible by a professor who achieves all of the above, and much more: Dr. Michelle Hugue.

In the Fall of 2014, starting my junior year only marginally less naive than I was as a freshman, Dr. Hugue's class on Computer Architecture was an electric shock administered to the kiddie pool of comfort I enjoyed reclining in. Concepts, terms, names, current events, future exam questions, career counseling, and life advice -- all were administered pell-mell with the pace of an Olympic sprinter who'd just downed a Red Bull. I was utterly overwhelmed with the quantity of and speed with which information was presented to me. I barely managed to get some meager notes down on paper, and those notes that I did take made little sense to me outside of class.

So I stopped writing, and started listening, for what felt like the first time in my academic career. And I found, to my surprise, my retention growing as my discomfort waned. I was understanding more, able to digest what was being thrown at me quickly enough to ask relevant questions. But I feared, as all students at some point do, looking stupid in front of my peers. I'd raise my hand, timidly at first, more confidently later, spurred on by Dr. Hugue's encouragement ("Hey, at least you say something back to me when I talk!").

I began answering others' questions on our class discussion forum, often exposing my own ignorance, which I grew to accept with the same alacrity online as I did in lecture. I threw pretense and reputation to the wind, which Dr. Hugue herself embodies, forever gaining perspectives on learning of the utmost significance -- a beautiful, encouraged kind of learning happens in an environment free of pretense, and that one should never apologize or be faulted for their ignorance. It is by accepting that we do not know that we break down a significant barrier that obstructs learning.

This continued into my second course with Dr. Hugue, on the subject of Data Structures. Tasked with writing a large, semester-long software project, I found myself struggling, spending many sleepless nights pummeling away at my keyboard at a snail's pace. I fell into the familiar feeling of discomfort that Dr. Hugue was so good at delivering. Even after the class and the project were over, I felt unconfident in my programming abilities, in my knowledge of the material. I hadn't raced across the finish line, I had dragged my unwilling body across by force. I had relapsed -- thinking myself less than capable, fearing my own shortcomings, afraid to ask questions and instead sentenced myself to a slow, laborious, gritty workflow.

Later, I asked Dr. Hugue if I could be a grader for her notoriously long exams, which require a miniature army to grade. She responded by making me a teaching assistant for both courses -- Architecture and Data Structures. She had noticed my struggles and efforts, not just in Computer Architecture, when I ended the semester confidently, but in Data Structures as well, when I felt just the opposite. Through Dr. Hugue's action, I recognized the value of the experiences she had put me through: being an expert isn't about being perfect, nor is it necessarily about recalling perfectly all of the information you've learned before. Learning is about having the right attitude, asking the right questions, and having the proper perspective in order to grow in response to the challenges that you face. It's a never-ending process that transcends the boundaries of a classroom.

As a teaching assistant for Dr. Hugue, still an undergrad, my 'students' were my peers, and I spoke to them accordingly. I recognized when they were fishing for answers, just as I used to do, and I responded in a manner designed to make them arrive at the answer themselves. I was appropriately smart-alecky when warranted, and encouraging in much the same way. This experience as a teaching assistant has fundamentally changed the way I approach difficult situations, pertinent to but not exclusively limited to classes. I have developed a better sense for asking the right questions, for approaching hard problems in the right manner -- with excitement and curiosity.

I've learned from Dr. Hugue by sitting in her class, I've learned from her in our 5-minute conversations in hallways and between lectures, I've learned from her by working under her, I've learned from her indirectly by speaking to other people who she's influenced. Her reach as an educator, and someone who has touched the lives of many, is plainly obvious. She's certainly touched mine, and what I've learned from her has made me a better student, teacher, and person. I recognize that I will be learning for the rest of my life, and the perspectives that I've learned from her are ones that I won't soon forget.