FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

Dr Helen Saar
Associate Professor of Finance
Dr. Saar, who has been teaching at Dixie State University (DSU) for five years, found herself in front of a classroom full of students feeling uninspired by the same lecture she had repeated in the previous class section and the class section before that. As a result, Dr. Saar began to frivolously research various teaching strategies that she could implement within her courses to improve not only the student’s experience but also her own. One resource she quotes as immensely helpful was Dixie State University’s Center for Teaching and Learning – Faculty Learning Community, where participants from across campus discussed the book Teaching Naked: Moving Technology Out of Your College Classroom by José Antonio Bowen. From there, Dr. Saar made it a personal challenge to make at least one improvement to the teaching methodology of each class every semester. This continued improvement mentality has taken her quite far from what her classes were originally like the first time she stepped in front of DSU students.

Implementing a flipped classroom model was not entirely free of work and it did not happen overnight. Dr. Saar quotes that it did require, and often still requires, many hours of preparation. However, it has allowed her to facilitate a classroom environment that ensures active student participation and a deeper understanding of the, at times, immensely complex concepts she is teaching. One example of an active learning teaching strategy that Dr. Saar has found helpful for students is allowing them to complete problems on the board in front of classmates. Often, the standard teaching strategy is a teacher-centered approach – the professor completes a problem on the board, while students watch contently following along, hoping they will remember how to do it for the exam. Dr. Saar noticed that this approach was not effective and frequently left students behind in confusion.

Now, she completes one to two practice problems as an initial introduction to the lesson and then opens the front of the classroom to students while encouraging everyone to participate and solve the problems. By doing this, Dr. Saar is able to observe the students level of understanding and provide additional assistance to the students who may have been left behind before. With her back facing the class, there was no plausible way for Dr. Saar to know how students were reacting to the information they were receiving. When she allowed students the opportunity to practice in front of their classmates, she also opened up the opportunity for herself to walk around, interact, and help those who may be struggling. Although students may be initially shy to engage in this activity, by the end of the semester, it becomes a friendly competition of who can get to the board the fastest. As a side effect, there is also greater interaction between students in the class, which often leads to study groups outside of the classroom.
Another important aspect of Dr. Saar’s courses is providing students with real-world knowledge through case studies, visiting lectures, and direct hands-on experience. For example, in the Capstone Finance course, titled Portfolio Practicum, students get to apply the whole investment portfolio management process by managing actual investment portfolios of stocks and mutual funds. During the course, students also have the opportunity to interact with top finance industry executives. For example, last Spring, Robert Gardiner, Chairman of Grandeur Peak Global funds, visited Dr. Saar’s class to talk about the investments research process at the firm, as well as his own career.

Dr. Saar also encourages students to get involved in extracurricular activities as they often allow students further opportunity to apply theory to the real world. Dr. Saar is the advisor of the DSU Finance Club which is a good start for such activities. In Spring 2016, she took two teams of DSU finance students to Colorado to compete at the 1st Rocky Mountain Investment Challenge. One of the teams (pictured below) came back with 3rd place. Last year was the first time DSU finance students competed at a globally known and recognized CFA Research Challenge (CFA stands for Certified Financial Analyst). Currently, Dr. Saar is in the process of putting together a team for this years CFA Research Challenge.

**What are students saying?**

1. What are the benefits of flipped vs. traditional?
2. What is it like in the classroom?
3. What should students keep in mind when taking a flipped classroom model?
4. Overall experience, additional comments, feedback?

“Dr. Saar runs a “flipped” classroom in the sense that she encourages students to present solutions to problems that she has provided in front of the class. She provides formulas, problems, and works through simulations in class to give basic groundwork of subjects. As students gain confidence in a subject they are able write on the board for extra participation points, working through the details of broad subjects individually.

It encourages all learning styles, as you do not have to get up in front of the class if you are a more passive learner but are still able to work through problems with your peers. It is not only beneficial for student involvement in learning but for Dr. Saar to see where students may need extra practice in a subject as well. This helps students “control” their own learning in the sense that you get out what you put into the class. Students should keep in mind that they will learn the material better if they continue learning outside of the classroom with problems that Dr. Saar provides, and come next class or to her office hours with extra questions.

I personally enjoy the flipped classroom style because it brings out my competitive side as an athlete. I like to see how quickly I can get problems done in class so I can get to the board for participation points before my classmates. If I am unable to beat them to the board, I know what I have to work on for next time and can learn from what my fellow students have to offer.”

– Tara Wright – DSU Senior, Finance Major
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– Arista Honey – DSU Senior, Finance Major

What is new this semester?

As a part of her try-something-new-every-semester challenge, Dr. Saar is implementing something different this Fall that extends far beyond the parameters of the classroom – she is giving the traditional course syllabus a major upgrade. It became apparent that students weren’t taking the time to view their
syllabus and digest the needed information regarding the course. Dr. Saar’s solution: integrate interesting elements of design with the needed details and information of the traditional class syllabus. By working in conjunction with DSU Web Design Professor, Rachel Ramsay, Dr. Saar created the following syllabus for her Managerial Finance course: FIN 3150 Syllabus. The student response has been positive. Although it is still early in the semester, Dr. Saar believes it has already encouraged a classroom culture of greater awareness, both in regards to the necessary course items and needed policy information.