Distinguished Teaching Award for Post-Baccalaureate Instruction: Professor Wendy Clark

Dr. Wendy Clark is a Clinical Associate Professor in the School of Dentistry. A member of the Department of Prosthodontics, Dr. Clark’s expertise is in restorative dentistry. Thus, she is an expert in creating crowns, bridges, implants and dentures to overcome the loss of functional teeth. Modern approaches are trending towards “digital dentistry,” in which computer-aided design, or CAD, is used to quickly generate accurate and less expensive restorations.

Before Dr. Clark’s arrival at UNC, many dental students (by their own admission) were fearful about their school's requirement to use CAD to create custom dentures for patients. They found the process confusing, difficult to follow, and were uncertain about whether they were doing it correctly. Dr. Clark completely flipped this around. She created multiple different types of explanatory media, from detailed powerpoints, to graphic modules, to handouts, to short YouTube training videos, in order to reach students who learn in different ways. She also created a positive, supportive atmosphere of “You can do it!” Now the CAD denture course is one of the students’ favorites, and they feel empowered and excited to practice this necessary skill both in the classroom and in the community.

That transformation, noted by literally dozens of independent nominators, is but one important example of why she is so deserving of the Distinguished Teaching Award for Post-Baccalaureate Instruction. Dr. Clark is widely acclaimed among her students for her clear and innovative teaching, her helpful real-world experience, and her kindness and positivity to all. Dr. Clark is also a collaborative teacher who thinks outside the box. She has reached out across campus, both challenging and empowering her students to work in the BeAM Makerspace. There, they design their own projects using software to create and form, using 3D printing, small tools that are useful in real life for practicing dentists. She also encourages her students to use their new skills to quickly generate custom, inexpensive dentures for patients who are unable to afford the conventional versions. Her students can proudly say they have truly changed the lives of many patients for the better, by applying the skills they have learned under Dr. Clark’s tutelage.

Dr. Clark earned her bachelor's degree in music from the University of Georgia, her doctoral degree in dentistry from the Marquette University School of Dentistry, and her master’s degree in prosthodontics from the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Dentistry. After seven years of private clinical practice in Atlanta, she joined UNC in 2017, where she has distinguished herself in local classrooms and across the nation, winning multiple campus teaching awards and becoming designated a Leader in Continuing Education, by DentistryToday, nearly every year. She is an outstanding role model for the Distinguished Teaching Award for Post-Baccalaureate Instruction.

Distinguished Teaching Award for Post-Baccalaureate Instruction: Professor Susan Coppola

A consistent thread stitches together Sue Coppola’s teaching as a faculty member in the Department of Health Sciences, Division of Occupational Science & Therapy. Dr. Coppola’s
philosophy of teaching, colleagues, program alumni, current students, and supervisors all describe her as someone who values inter-professional collaboration and centering the needs of learners and the clients they serve.

Dr. Coppola differentiates learning experiences to reach all learners in occupational therapy courses. She approaches both the theoretical and clinical preparation of future therapists in multifaceted ways that help them see themselves as dynamic, capable therapists operating from an ethic of care and justice for those needing their skilled services.

Dr. Coppola accomplishes this through interdisciplinary learning that includes the arts, storytelling and a global reach. Her impact is understated, as she is described as a “quiet rockstar” and “connector.” She connects people to people, clients to therapeutic care, people to subject, and people to purpose. In these ways, she is described as a dynamic instructor who literally practices what she preaches in her individualized care for the students she teaches. Students say they benefit from Dr. Coppola’s teaching because they are active participants in learning. One student said she “puts us in charge of our learning,” while others describe grounded practices that center students in each class, such as when Dr. Coppola opens every class with mindfulness moments before diving into content. Dr. Coppola is adept at incorporating the arts in her teaching for a much higher purpose that includes teaching how the arts can support client recovery.

Dr. Coppola holds a Bachelor of Science in Education from Syracuse University, a Master of Science in Occupational Therapy from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a Post-Professional Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree from Boston University, where she studied the “Development of a Humanities-Informed Occupational Therapy Course on Aging.” Dr. Coppola explains that the principles of justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion guide her teaching, projects, and collaborations, while she also commits to further her own learning. Her students and colleagues attest that she lives these principles in her teaching practices and service to others.

**Distinguished Teaching Award for Post-Baccalaureate Instruction: Professor Jo Ellen Rodgers**

Dr. Jo Ellen Rodgers is a professor in the Division of Pharmacotherapy and Experimental Therapeutics in the Eshelman School of Pharmacy. In her twenty years at UNC, Dr. Rodgers has been responsible for teaching the extremely challenging area of cardiovascular pharmacotherapy to thousands of North Carolina students. She is an internationally recognized expert in the treatment of heart failure and the sub-genre of cardio-oncology.

Dr. Rodgers is a creative teacher who uses a combination of pre-class, in-class and post-class assignments as well as the flipped classroom model to devote more in-class time to introducing advanced concepts though case-based applications. She brings real-world clinical case examples so that students can deeply connect with and apply concepts. She has a gift for explaining complex topics in a way that students can understand. Her students’ success and well-being is important to her, and she spends “countless hours meeting one-on-one with students who might
be struggling” as part of her student-centric and student-holistic approach. Students know she genuinely cares about them and wants to make sure that they are not only professionally skilled but also satisfied and happy in their careers. Dr. Rodgers incorporates her passion for diversity into the classroom by ensuring that all students are respected and valued. She highlights disparities in healthcare and leads DEI sessions for faculty, staff and students.

In addition to her classroom teaching, Dr. Rodgers has an active clinical practice that includes the inpatient heart failure service at UNC Hospitals and an outpatient cardio-oncology clinic. This enhances her teaching as she brings “real world” cases into the classroom. Her students rave about her ability to connect real-world clinical practice with classroom activities via active learning and her ability to create a vibrant community in the classroom. She was described by colleagues and students as an inspirational scholar, scientist, and top-tier clinician who has a passion for educating and remaining a continuous learner. One student shared: “She was everyone’s first pharmacy role model. Everyone was impressed with her clinical knowledge, not only her skill but her decision-making and communication. Everyone just wants to be her and looks up to her so much.”

Dr. Rodgers is also instrumental in curriculum development and is a thought leader in recent curriculum changes in the School of Pharmacy. She prioritizes integrating contemporary topics (e.g., social determinants of health) so future health professionals are prepared to succeed. Finally, her colleagues praised her availability to junior faculty members.

Above and beyond being an excellent teacher in the classroom, the clinic, and the medical center, Dr. Rodgers is a lifelong champion and continuous inspiration for her students. One said, “I have learned so much from Dr. Rodgers and appreciate her beyond what I can put into words.” Another said that she is “the archetype of what it means to be a good clinician and professor.” Her colleague said, “Dr. Jo Ellen Rodgers is one of the most gifted teachers I have had the pleasure of working with over my more than forty years associated with the University . . . She possesses a rare talent as an educator; the ability and skill to incorporate her clinical and scholarship experiences effectively and impactfully into the teaching of our students.”

Dr. Jo Ellen Rodgers is clearly deserving of the 2023 Distinguished Teaching Award for Post-Baccalaureate Instruction.

**Distinguished Teaching Award for Post-Baccalaureate Instruction: Professor Matthew Springer**

Living a life with passion contributes to that individual’s life happiness and may even contribute to longevity. When that passion is centered on teaching students and helping them grow into the best versions of themselves, everyone benefits exponentially. That student-focused passion brought to life is what makes Matthew Springer, the Robena and Walter E. Hussman, Jr. Distinguished Professor of Education Reform, such a worthy recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award for Post-Baccalaureate Instruction. His students say he demonstrates that passion and commitment “24-7, year in, year out.”

Part of Professor Springer’s impact might be his personality, which students describe as outgoing, funny, down-to-earth, approachable, caring, and accepting. These qualities then play out in a well-articulated philosophy of teaching built upon three pillars. First, Professor Springer
recognizes the importance of building relationships with and among the students, what he refers to as building community. Thus, in his graduate classes, he begins the semester with a brief ice breaker exercise called “Why Am I Here?” in which each student and instructor explain their path to the present, including obstacles, failures, and successes along the way. Student after student comments on how such experiences create a base of caring, openness, safety, and community, and a focus on each individual in the class. This commitment to each student is further exemplified by Professor Springer’s extraordinary efforts both in and outside of the classroom. One student commented that this is the only class he has ever taken where the syllabus was individualized to each student, optimizing the learning and growth that takes place.

The second pillar of Professor Springer’s teaching philosophy involves the content of his courses built around applied inquiry. Students read and discuss theory, research, and conceptual papers, and then they bring the concepts to life in applied ways relevant to their own professional development. Thus, in the highly unique team-taught, multidisciplinary course titled “The American Professorate,” students prepare their portfolio for applications for academic positions, along with creating their intended mentoring team for the future. In his Research and Scholarship in Education course, students write federal and foundation grants. These are not mere exercises, they are professional products, and Professor Springer spends countless hours meeting, editing, and providing feedback to individual students, which often extends well past the semester. Finally, as the third pillar of his teaching philosophy, Professor Springer views teaching as an art form, which involves a commitment to the highest standards of pedagogy, which is forever changing. Thus, Professor Springer has a personal commitment to attend at least two workshops each year on new approaches to teaching. It appears to pay off; across his various graduate level courses, he has an average rating of 4.9 on a 5-point scale when rated as an overall instructor.

It is not surprising that current and former students remark that Professor Springer has changed their lives. After his course has finished, they continue to drop by his office for advice or just to check in; former students remark that he often is the one professor they continue to contact even years after graduation. He embodies what we hope a professor can be in teaching and serving post-baccalaureate students. In addition to his outstanding scholarly contributions and leadership within the University, Matthew Springer has distinguished himself as an outstanding teacher, clearly meriting the 2023 Distinguished Teaching Award for Post-Baccalaureate Instruction.