Sitterson Award for Teaching First-Year Students: Professor Megan Plenge

Professor Megan Plenge has exemplified scholarly instruction as a Teaching Associate Professor in Earth, Marine, and Environmental Sciences since joining UNC in 2016. Professor Plenge leveraged research on how undergraduates perceive geology to revise the entire system for teaching GEOL 101: Planet Earth. She is still teaching the course, supervising its curriculum, and receiving high praise from her students. Engaging with undergraduate students through her research as well as her teaching shows a true dedication to supporting students from the very beginning of their career at Carolina.

Professor Plenge is a fantastic introductory and FYL instructor. She is devoted to pedagogy and bridging high school and higher education. Praise for being an “amazing professor” appeared very frequently in Professor Plenge’s course evaluations. Students love her because she teaches with “awesome enthusiasm and funny stories,” she is “great with questions and explaining things further,” and she is the favorite professor at UNC of many students.

Professor Plenge’s engagement and passion as an instructor is best reflected by the comments from her students:

A first-year student wrote: “Professor Plenge has had a huge impact on my career and in my future endeavors. I had never thought of pursing a degree in geology before her class but she inspired me to think deeply about the subject, was always there to answer questions that I would have after class, and made me think of ways in which I could create new paths for myself in the geology field as a computer science major.”

“I was kind of dreading taking GEOL 101, and was just taking it for the PL requirement. However, Dr. Plenge has easily been the best professor that I've had at UNC. She is obviously caring about her students and extremely engaging as an instructor. I am shocked at how she has been able to transform what could be rather dry material into something that I am excited to learn about.”

“Very enthusiastic about the subject and wanted everyone to enjoy the course and learn. Impressed by how personal she was with students in such a large class.”

“I really appreciate the way you teach. It’s engaging and honestly geology would be a pretty rough class if you weren’t so receptive to how we learn. You did a great job of explaining the logistical sciency stuff to students that most likely do not have STEM backgrounds. Never stop telling your stories and making analogies for the concepts: they’re very helpful! For example the refrigerator analogy in reference to earthquakes or the zinc and copper in reference to magma melting. You rock!”

Megan Plenge is an excellent instructor, focused on engaging her students and making the course material relevant. She helped more than one first-year student recognize a new passion that they pursued in their lives. For her dedication and achievements in first-year teaching, Professor Plenge is truly deserving of the J. Carlyle Sitterson Award for Teaching First Year Students.
Sitterson Award for Teaching First-Year Students: Professor Danielle Zurcher

Professor Danielle Zurcher has embodied the highest quality academic instruction as a Teaching Assistant Professor of Chemistry since 2017. As a professor, she is willing to go above and beyond to help students. Professor Zurcher embodies calm and confidence in supporting even students in a 250-person class in a one-on-one way that engages every person by “cultivating a safe environment to ask questions and engage with the course material.” She is especially dedicated to supporting students in introductory courses so they will be better prepared for the later courses within the department.

Professor Zurcher strives for continual improvement in her teaching and implements evidence-based strategies to redesign the courses she teaches to increase learning for all students. Students repeatedly commented on how easy it was to pose questions, and how comfortable Professor Zurcher made it for them to do so in class, office hours, or anywhere they were interacting with her. Students and colleagues can see the genuine care she has for students and the strength of her belief that every one of them is capable of succeeding in her courses.

Professor Zurcher’s engagement and passion as an instructor is best reflected by the comments from her students:

“Dr. Zurcher deserves this award by living up to the true definition of being a teacher. By this, I mean she inspires, she encourages, she helps individuals learn in the best ways for themselves, and she does not live to trick students on tests but rather assigns fair assessments and discusses them in detail after the fact.”

“In a class as challenging as organic chemistry, Dr. Zurcher taught us the skills to be able to work through difficult problems on our own.”

“I gained a lot of confidence through this course, and this was highly supplemented by Dr. Zurcher’s positive means of teaching. Rather than being afraid to make a mistake and afraid of being seen as incompetent, I felt comfortable and encouraged to engage in the learning process, making mistakes and learning through them.”

“By sharing her journey’s transition points, vital personal experiences, failures and accomplishments, Dr. Zurcher continually rejuvenates students’ faith in their abilities and clears their vision to realize the potential they carry.”

Professor Zurcher is an energetic and caring professor who leverages the best new teaching techniques to engage and support students. For her dedication and achievements in first-year teaching, Professor Zurcher is truly deserving of the J. Carlyle Sitterson Award for Teaching First Year Students.