

## Why I Teach (and Advise)



Lisa Bullard, *CEE* Publications Board

I was a late bloomer when it came to teaching. After finishing my Ph.D. at Carnegie Mellon in the area of process design and optimization, I briefly considered academia, but thought, “If I’m going to teach people how to design processes, I’d better first design one myself.” And so I did. Working as an engineer at Eastman Chemical Company for nine years, I learned firsthand about how industry works and what it expects of new graduates. I enjoyed using the technical skills I had honed while getting my Ph.D., but I tended to enjoy most those positions that involved coaching other people. When I had the chance to return to NC State (my alma mater) in 2000 as the Undergraduate Director, I jumped at the chance. The fact that I had never taught before was intimidating, but I decided to make the leap, and I have never regretted it.

When asked why I teach, the following anecdote comes to mind. My colleague Carol Schroeder, the Director of the NC State Career Center, was helping a chemical engineering student who was seeking an internship at a local company. The details of the student’s request required quite a bit of legwork on Carol’s part to chase down some funding opportunities. One of her co-workers expressed disbelief that she would spend so much time to help just one student. The co-worker admonished her, “For goodness sakes, Carol,  $n = 1!$ ” Or, in other words, “How can you afford to spend so much time helping one student when there are so many others who also need your help?” As Carol shared this story with me, we agreed that, in education, “ $n$  always equals 1.” To the extent that I possibly can, I view each student as an individual in need of support, assistance, and encouragement.

Given our large department of 596 undergraduate students, balancing my advising load with my teaching responsibilities can be a challenge. One day last semester, I was dreading a very busy day ahead. As I thought about my day, with students

filing in every few minutes and a long line forming outside my office, I suddenly had a mental picture of a student coming through my door carrying a beautifully wrapped package in her hands. Looking at this student holding her package, I had a choice: I could tear open the package, toss the wrapping aside, take a brief look at the contents, and then get down to business. OR, I could accept the package, spend a moment admiring the beautiful wrapping, carefully unwrap it, take a few more moments to admire the contents, and thank the person for sharing this beautiful and special package with me. Here’s the thing: the second approach doesn’t necessarily take more time than the first, but it does require being totally present during my time with the student. This image so moved me that I bought some beautiful wrapping paper and a lovely bow and wrapped a small square box to sit on my desk where I can see it each time a student comes in. It reminds me that each person who walks through my door comes in holding an invisible package. Each is an offering to me, and it’s my choice as to how to respond to the gifts given: their talents, their hopes, and their fears.

Research is clear that if an undergraduate student connects with at least one person on campus, her chances of staying in her major and graduating increase dramatically. NC State is a big school. It’s easy for students to fall through the cracks. Teachers are the front line to connect with students—students who come to our office hours holding an invisible beautifully wrapped package and who appreciate our taking the time to receive it. I teach and advise because I hope to be the one who might provide that crucial bit of encouragement, support, or assistance to a student for whom it will make all the difference between staying or going, floundering or blossoming. For me, teaching is a calling, not just a job. For me as a teacher,  $n$  always equals 1.