



The Power of Effective Mentoring

Teaching Beyond the Podium Podcast

00:06 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Hello, my name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey and welcome to the Teaching Beyond the Podium podcast series. This podcast is hosted by the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Florida. Our guests share their best tips, strategies, innovations and stories about teaching. Our guest today is Dr. Jeremy Waisome, who's been at the University of Florida now for 16 years. She started here as an undergraduate, and has been here ever since, becoming a triple Gator. She's now an Instructional Assistant Professor in the Education Engineering Department in the Herbert Wertheim College of Engineering, which is a new title in a brand new department.

00:50 Dr. Jeremy Magruder Waisome

I grew up in Orlando, Florida, and really kind of found my passion for engineering early on. That first interaction that made me want to go into engineering was me meeting a black female engineer at a summer camp, and she had a PhD in chemical engineering. And I was like, I want to do that. So I came home and told my mom that's actually how I ended up pursuing engineering. And went to an engineering science and technology magnet school. And while I was there, I had the opportunity to participate in a lot of outreach. And one of the programs that I was involved in was connected to the University of Florida called Gator tracks. And the person who created Gator tracks was Dr. Jonathan Earle, who became my mentor after I matriculated into our undergraduate program. But at the time, he was just somebody who I looked up to as a black man in engineering, I didn't have any other role models, right? Like I didn't have anyone else that I really gotten to know who was an engineer who looked like me. All of the images and information that I had gone through as a student was really counter to that. And so I was grateful to have that relationship. And when I kind of faced a decision on going to college, Dr. Earle was the person who convinced me to come to Florida, over my top school. He said, you know, you would be great at any school, you're going to flourish and do well. But if you come to the University of Florida, you'll have a family. And that really resonated with me.

02:29 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

These official and unofficial mentoring relationships helped to open doors and make Jeremy's dreams not only a possibility, but a reality. Jeremy explained that it is these mentoring relationships that helped her to understand the opportunities made available by earning a PhD. Too often, classroom labs and office hours don't offer enough space for deep discussions that can help students to understand the benefits that come along with earning a PhD. These conversations unfold with and through intentional mentoring relationships.

03:04 Dr. Jeremy Magruder Waisome

I don't think that I realized what you could do with a PhD. Even though I'd been connected with people with PhDs throughout all of college like I don't, nobody ever talks about that. Like I went and got a doctoral degree so that I could do x y and z. Nobody really knows what their faculty members doing unless the faculty member is making a concerted effort to share that information. And so I really didn't have a good grasp on what it took, or what it required to get a PhD or what I could do with one. And I even went through a program where I was supposed to learn all that information and I still don't think that like it clicked with me.

03:47 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Dave Bloomquist, another mentor and important influence had a huge impact. By investing in Jeremy and offering her guidance and advice. Dave Bloomquist helped Jeremy not only understand the value of a PhD, the doors a PhD might open, but he also helped to open her eyes to the impact she could have on other students. But Dr. Bloomquist didn't stop there. As a true mentor, he advocated for Jeremy too.

04:15 Dr. Jeremy Magruder Waisome

You know, I applied for the master's program, because it was a natural next step for civil engineers, like it's almost a requirement that you get a master's degree at this point, to practice in the field, and to have like a leadership role, which is something that I aspired to attain. And so I was already like that application was in when we were having this conversation. And he was like, well, you can do so much like you're passionate about students, you could help design programs like the ones that you participated in, you can advocate for students better. You know, you can have a faculty position and teach. I just think that we need more people like you who care about students in academia and so if you are willing to stay, I think you should change the application and think about a PhD. And I told him, I'll change the application. But I'm not doing a PhD if I don't have funding, if you find me funding, I'll stay. And he's like, well, I'm retiring. So he's like, but I will go around and ask all the faculty members who I think you'd be a good fit for, if they have room for you in their lab. And he did. He literally went door to door asking faculty in the department if they would hire me.

05:36 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Jeremy did not begin her career functioning as an advocate for other students, particularly students that come from underrepresented or underserved backgrounds. She started out with a love for pure engineering. Jeremy had numerous mentors and influences, faculty who went to bat for her. But it did not eradicate the deep isolation she felt in graduate school. It is this isolation and loneliness that served as a catalyst for Jeremy.

06:06 Dr. Jeremy Magruder Waisome

It's almost like it, it happened to me, it didn't really start out as an endeavor that I wanted to pursue. So like my dissertation work is very fundamental civil engineering materials research on asphalt pavement. But I also realized I was alone at some point, right? Like, there wasn't in my lab, I was the only American, I was the only female I was one of the youngest. And I'm African American, so it was just it was almost like - and I grew up in a predominantly white community in Orlando - this was way different. The feeling that I felt in my PhD program of isolation was heavy, like it was a very difficult load to carry on my own. And I'm well connected, right, like I did my undergraduate degree at Florida, I had a faculty member walk around office to office talking about me, because people knew who I was. And I felt alone. And I made the decision to focus on figuring out a way for other students not to have to have that feeling. And I knew that I had the unique leverage and privilege to be honest, to have a relationship with our administration, where I could speak candidly about my experiences, and what it was like. And so really, it became me advocating on behalf of others. And that's what opened this space up to me as one where this is something that's considered scholarly work.

07:52 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Jeremy's mom helped her discover her voice and the change she could help to inspire through relationships, advocacy, and mentoring, the role we as faculty can all aspire to take. In fact, our fields and areas aren't as key as our desire to affect change. Advocacy and mentoring can make all the difference in the life and learning of any student.

08:17 Dr. Jeremy Magruder Waisome

My mom inspires me a lot, because, so she works for the US Department of Housing Urban Development. And she's always advocated for underprivileged and underserved communities. And I've watched that journey through her seeing how like you can really create effective systemic change if you go about things the right way. And so really watching her, understanding how to navigate political structures, and how to leverage language because her background is English to your benefit has been invaluable, an invaluable lesson for me.

09:04 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Though this work started as an add-on to her engineering work, Jeremy quickly discovered that there is a real need for faculty to invest and do academic work specifically focused on diversity, equity, inclusion and access.

09:19 Dr. Jeremy Magruder Waisome

Ultimately, while I was doing it, I started having conversations with people across the country who were doing this work, and they were well known for the work. And I was like, Well, why are

you well known? What are you doing, you know, how did you get involved in this? What pushes you to continue to open these doors and a lot of them explained to me like, you know, this is something that could be a career for you. It's academic work. It's not something that we traditionally see in engineering, but it's something that is of great value. And obviously, you know, diversity, equity, inclusion, access, these principles are all across our campus, right? It's not just unique to engineering that there are issues where representation is a problem, where inclusion is an issue where people feel like they don't belong, or they don't see their identities represented. But in engineering it's a very unique space, where, you know, we've kind of held to some systemic ideas and things of who belongs in these spaces a lot harder and faster than some of the other disciplines on our campus. And so breaking those barriers has been a different type of challenge that I'd never really saw myself pursuing.

10:40 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

As faculty, we don't have to shift our entire work and focus to become experts on diversity, equity, inclusion and access but maybe simply grab hold of some easy and simple changes that any one of us can adopt. One easy win within all our grasps is to be more conscientious of the language we use.

11:01 Dr. Jeremy Magruder Waisome

You know, one of the things, there's a lot of low hanging fruit, right that faculty can leverage to even just serve as role models of what it looks like to be somebody who practices inclusion, right. And I'm constantly thinking about the words that I use, and how they might impact other people, it's really hard to get that like constructive feedback about like, this is a hurtful term. You know, some things that we say, we just think like, Oh, this is natural for me to say, because everybody says that. And, really, and truly, it can be triggering to others. And so, language I think is a good place to start. I'm notorious for saying, you guys, right, and I think it's a normal thing to say. But I'm a woman, and I have classrooms where I have women, I have people who are gender non-conforming, in my classes, I don't want to make them marginalized by just repeatedly saying this term. And so I've fought with my mind about how I refer to collective groups of people. Even using like ablest language, like, That's crazy. So that term, you know, doesn't seem like it would be something negative. But to some people it is, and I had a moment where I really had to think about whether or not it would be okay for me to use that terminology. And I've since worked towards eliminating that from my language as well.

12:45 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Another easy win is to bring in diverse perspectives and the work of diverse researchers to the course content so students are exposed to multiple influences.

12:56 Dr. Jeremy Magruder Waisome

When you design your course content, thinking about who you're highlighting and why, bring in lesser known names, bring in people who are well known who aren't highlighted, just because they don't fit the generalization of your discipline of who belongs. I have a class that I teach, that's around learning and teaching and engineering. It's a graduate level class, to really help graduate students in engineering, get the understanding of what it takes to be an effective instructor. And, you know, we have two modules devoted to this, because it's really important that we're creating opportunities for our students to engage with material that challenges them to think beyond what they've been taught in their traditional classrooms. Like, how do you design for diverse learners? How do you open doors for people to get into your discipline that might otherwise not be able to just because the content isn't accessible to them? And so thinking through that, and it's really tough to do, it's like a first time instructor to think about ways to make your curriculum more inclusive, but it's incredibly important. And, you know, that's just faculty, right like, that we're referring to staff play a huge role in this too.

14:17 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Jeremy also points out that our campus is full of resources for our students and faculty. She recommends looking into how you can use the campus resources to support students.

14:29 Dr. Jeremy Magruder Waisome

And we have offices on our campus. You know, for graduate schools, we have the division of Graduate Student Affairs, and for undergraduate students, Student Affairs, the Office of Student Affairs, like there are spaces where we can send students who need that support, who want community, who desire to have additional resources that affirm them. But if we aren't aware of what exists on our campus, it's to the detriment of our students like we need to know, what is available, how we can support students, where we can send them if they need support, assistance, whatever, whatever it might be. And so that's the other piece making sure that you're aware of the resources that exist and how to leverage them.

15:18 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Jeremy also suggests exploring the Crucial Conversations training offered through the Office of the Chief Diversity Officer. In addition, the crucial conversation trainers collaborated and developed a workshop named C4 and Equity, which is offered in collaboration with the Center for Teaching Excellence. These trainings are key to tackling difficult conversations with students and peers as they arise.

15:46 Dr. Jeremy Magruder Waisome

One of the really great things that has now popped up on our campus, through our Office of the Chief Diversity Officer is the Crucial Conversations series. And I haven't gone through the training myself, but it is something that I've talked with other faculty about. And they've told me,

it's been invaluable to help them tackle these very difficult conversations, you really don't know when a student enters your office or the Zoom room, you don't know what they're going to bring to you. And we aren't trained faculty aren't trained in how to have conversations that can be difficult. I went through training, offered through a professional society that I'm in that's around the LGBTQ plus community, because I knew that that was a space for me, that's difficult for me to have conversations with like, I love all of my friends and colleagues who identify that way, but to speak with them, or a student, who might be looking for support terrified me, and I feel that way about religion, about you know, mental health, there's a lot of really tough spaces that we have to navigate. And so attending professional development is huge. And we offer so much like I said, on our campus, there are a lot of resources, you just have to do the due diligence to learn about those resources. And so I would encourage people to participate in the Crucial Conversations workshop series, and then look for resources at your professional societies, where you might be able to go through the training, the training that I went through is called Safe Zone training. And it's something that's like nationally or internationally recognized.

17:41 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

Jeremy authentically believes in the power of community and relationships. This space is where we have the greatest impact on our students, mentoring individual students, and engaging in communities is how we can have a transformative impact.

17:57 Dr. Jeremy Magruder Waisome

So I just had a conversation with somebody recently, and they're like Jeremy, you know no strangers. And I genuinely feel that way. Like I really tried to connect with people in a meaningful way, when I meet them. And I think it's really important that we think of ourselves as humans first, and we thrive off of community. That's who like how we were created. Right? And so to be isolated, and not really integrate into different communities and learn about them is to our detriment. Our goal should be to learn as much about everyone that we can as possible. That's extrovert, Jeremy speaking, right? I know that some people are like, I don't need that. I don't want it, I have no desire to find it. I'm good with me, my books, and whatever else, maybe a cat or a dog. I would suggest figuring out the things that you love. So I play the violin. And so I have a whole community of people that I connect with because of music. What is it that brings you joy? And figuring out like communities that you can find to engage with that do that thing is really great. It's a great way to find different people that you know, you're not necessarily looking for the group of black women who have natural hair on campus to just be friends with because that's the thing that I would do too. But you are looking for a mutual interest that you might share with a really wide variety of people and you can get to know all of them.

19:34 Dr. Alexandra Bitton-Bailey

If you're new to mentoring or are not sure how to engage check out the mentoring workshops offered to the Center for Teaching Excellence and the International Mentoring Association at the University of Florida and join learning communities on topics of interest so you can find ways to easily connect with others. Thank you for listening to this episode of the Teaching Beyond the

Podium podcast series. For more helpful resources developed by the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Florida, visit our website teach.ufl.edu we're happy you joined us and we hope to see you next time for more tips, strategies and ideas on teaching and learning.