

Shannon Coyne Talking Points on Academic Rigor and Engagement

I came to SJU as a business major, I was confused about what I wanted to do so I thought that it would be a good idea for me—coming from a business-oriented family!! And hey, I was sure that I could make a decent living in a corporate office somewhere.

It was sophomore year when I began caring less and less about my business classes because I had no interest in them whatsoever.

I found out that it was nearly impossible for me to put effort into classes that I disliked. Why did I dislike them?

These aren't generally true about business classes, but it's what I found in some of the classes that I was dissatisfied with.

One—business is just not my thing!

Two—I never developed relationships with my teachers.

Three—I am sick and tired of PowerPoint.

Four—there was little discussion in my classes, rather lecture, PowerPoint, lecture, PowerPoint.

Taking a Gender Studies class at SJU is what changed everything. It was the first class that I felt passionately interested in and intrigued by.

Now I'm the first Gender Studies major at SJU.

At this point, the classes that I take, I want to do my very best in, but it's easy to do your very best when you love what you study. I would say that yes, my classes are demanding. The most demanding classes that I have taken thus far were taught by an English professor. Yet I keep attempting to be a part of her classes every semester.

Why are her classes demanding?

They are writing intensive.

Reading is very extensive and not of the level that you would grasp with a last minute skim.

Reflection is required.

Three of the four classes I have taken with her are service-learning classes. This means three hours of volunteering outside of class and additional writing reflection on one's experience.

Outside of class events are required.

Many, often cumbersome, projects are assigned.

Attendance is, of course, required.

The final portfolio for that specific teacher was 80 pages of my own writing last semester.

Why do I like her classes so much?

Well, first of all, I like her, She combined many of the Jesuit ideas in her teaching, for example, cura personalis, care for the whole person, the whole student.

She encourages visits to speak about papers and has definite office hours.

She always responds to emails quickly, even to last minute questions.

She responds to work personally and effectively. She doesn't focus on grades, there are no pop-quizzes, she trusts in her students.

The final grades in her classes are determined by a portfolio of your work that you did over the entire semester and a reflection on that work.

Class is lead by discussion.

Discussions in her classes cause me to think deeply about the subject.

I believe that writing is an important part of learning, and revision is as well. Revision is always recommended and accepted.

Though these English classes have been demanding for me, they have been very rewarding.

Not only have I learned about literature, various writers, theory, and society, but I have learned more about myself.

In these classes learning has gone beyond the classroom, I have brought what I have learned home with me. And that is my personal goal with my education.

The amount of time I spend on work varies every day. There will be some days where I try to get by with just an hour or two, if I only have one to two classes the next day or I am already prepared. And then there are days like this past Sunday where I will spend seven hours on work.

For my peers, I would say it ranges from zero time spent on work to all-nighters.

When looking at my peers at SJU, I see all different types of attitudes regarding demanding and engaging classes. I would say that a general consensus may be something like "This is a ridiculous workload, but I am learning a lot and I enjoy the class."

The classes I take are in primarily the English and Sociology departments.

Because of the nature of Sociology and English, I think that students find it quite easy to engage in relevant and thoughtful conversation.

I am able to see a broader range of students in my GER classes. There are all kinds of students, there's the slackers, the students who won't settle for any less than an A, and there's me who will settle for a B.

I cannot deny that I have dreaded taking certain GERs, and often looked at ratemyprofessor.com for the teacher who was rated "easiest."

I've done it, but then I figured out that it doesn't work for me to take those teachers.

Theology was definitely a GER that I had nightmares about taking. I couldn't understand why we were required to take three classes to graduate. A professor recommended me specifically to a certain theology teacher who encouraged writing. Without looking at ratemyprofessor.com, I decided to take him.

I remember being completely scared the first day of class when he announced that this class was only for serious student and hard workers.

He said that the class was demanding, and that extensive reading and writing were essential to make it.

Since this was a GER, I thought to myself—maybe I should find an easier professor.

I decided to stick it out anyway. Honestly, theology is not of particular interest to me, but to my surprise I enjoyed the class and did well.

He engaged us in conversation, he did little lecture, but when he did have to lecture he still found ways to involve us and keep our minds working.

He had an open-door policy and was always available for questions and help. He actually knew all of our names.

Though there was a lot of writing assigned, he allowed us to be creative. Even on the day of our final exam we had several different choices and approaches to how and what we wanted to write.

He also graded us using a portfolio. Though portfolios are exhausting for students and teachers, I believe in the portfolio as a great way in evaluating a student's work.

The professor is able to look at all of a student's work at once, rather than go assignment by assignment.

He also encouraged rewrites, and had us as students evaluate our own work over the course of the semester.

When using a portfolio method, the professor is also able to look at the progress that a student has made over the semester.

If I had taken a different professor who was less demanding, I know that I would not have gotten nearly as much out of my first theology class as I did with this specific professor.

I believe that professors are one of the most important parts of a student's education.

I've had classes with the professor who doesn't know my name, or care if I come to class. The professor that tells me everything that's going to be on the test the day before so that can cram and get a decent grade.

I've had the professor who acts like this is the 500th time that he has taught this very class and recites his lecture from memory never asking for feedback or interaction. It makes it easier for me to get an A maybe, but I take nothing home with me... I usually forget everything the day after I completed the final.

These are the professors whose classes will fill up first because college isn't always an environment of academic rigor.

I would definitely say that the majority of students would go with the no-attendance policy, tells you what's on the test, don't worry about doing your reading, boring professor rather than the demanding and engaging professor. The professor must know my name, if he or she knows me—I definitely don't want to let them down with slacking off in his or her class. I wouldn't make it a requirement for the class to have a heavy-workload, but a workload that forces me to look deeper into the subject matter than simply what the textbook says.