

# Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

---

Volume 1  
Issue 13 Fall 2014

Article 8

---

October 2014

## The Student Observer Program at Carleton College: Three Perspectives on Supporting Good Teaching

Fred Hagstrom  
*Carleton College*

Jon Olson  
*Carleton College*

Charlie Cross  
*Carleton College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe>



Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hagstrom, Fred; Olson, Jon; and Cross, Charlie "The Student Observer Program at Carleton College: Three Perspectives on Supporting Good Teaching," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 13 (2014), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss13/8>

## **THE STUDENT OBSERVER PROGRAM AT CARLETON COLLEGE: THREE PERSPECTIVES ON SUPPORTING GOOD TEACHING**

*Fred Hagstrom, Director of the Perlman Learning and Teaching Center, Humphrey Doermann Professor of Liberal Learning, Rae Schupack Nathan Professor of Art, Carleton College*

*Jon Olson, Visiting Lecturer, Political Science Department, Carleton College*

*Charlie Cross, Student Observer, Carleton College*

[Jon] was particularly good at using student knowledge to build up the subject matter being discussed—a strategy he wasn't aware he was using.

Charlie provided me insightful views into student behavior, their concerns, and ways to engage students in discussion that would afford an even greater depth regarding our subjects of study.

**Fred Hagstrom:** The two excerpts above, taken from the dialog between Jon Olson and Charlie Cross that constitutes the majority of this essay, capture several qualities of their partnership through the student observer program at Carleton College. Each recognizes and values the other's abilities and insights, both identify key areas of focus and practice that have the potential to improve the learning experience, and together they work to make the classroom a place where deep learning happens. Below I provide some background and information on the program to frame the dialog between Jon and Charlie that captures some of what they experienced in working together.

The student observer program at Carleton hires and trains students to visit classes to offer feedback to instructors. This is a paid work/study job for the students. Started in the 1970's and administered by an Associate Dean, the program has always been separate from any form of evaluation that might be used for promotion. It is used confidentially by teachers who seek the feedback to improve their teaching. Junior faculty members make the greatest use of the program, but it is open to all faculty. When Carleton started the Perlman Learning and Teaching Center (LTC) in 1992, the program's administration moved to that center and is overseen by the Director.

The student observers are hired and trained by the LTC. The training stresses the importance of confidentiality. The observers are not intended to offer direction in terms of the content of the course, but instead focus on how the class is run. There is no attempt to match the discipline of the course with the background of the student observer. Observers are ready to visit classes outside of their own educational background, including observing classes taught in languages they don't speak. They are hired as LTC Fellows, and they often are students with an interest in going on in education. Usually there are 4-5 fellows per year, coming from the junior and senior classes. In addition to serving as observers, the fellows take on other projects related to teaching and learning, and also can help with some of the office requirements of the LTC. We hire and train enough fellows to have scheduling flexibility in an attempt to cover any possible requests for observations.

Class observations might be limited to just one or two classes, or a faculty member can request to have classes visited throughout the entire term. When a faculty member requests an observer, the director of the LTC appoints an observer who has that class time open in her schedule. The observer and faculty member meet before the class so that the faculty member can explain what particular aspects of the class they might want feedback on. They meet again after the class to discuss the issues that were supposed to be the focus of the observations.

Some examples of the kind of things faculty want observed are class dynamics, how well discussions are run, the instructor's sense of rapport with the class, the attentiveness of the students, how the teacher responds to questions, etc. For instance, a faculty member who spends a good deal of time writing on the board might ask an observer to watch for how this can be done without losing the attention of the class. The emphasis is always on the class itself, rather than on course content. Carleton has an active faculty mentoring program, overseen by the LTC. Our process is kept completely separate from the evaluation process and is grounded in helping new colleagues to develop as effective teachers. The student observer program is a valuable tool in that process.

The best way to understand how the student observer program works is through an example of the kind of interaction that takes place between a professor and an observer. Below is a short dialog that explains how a new faculty member at Carleton used the help of a student observer to learn how to reach his students more effectively.

**Jon Olson:** I was afforded the opportunity to serve as a visiting lecturer in the Political Science Department at Carleton College during the fall term of 2013. During our new faculty orientation, I was introduced to, and subsequently chose to explore, the Student Observer Program offered by the LTC. Shortly after requesting support from Fred Hagstrom for this program, I was contacted by a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed senior student named Charlie Cross. Charlie came to our first meeting fully prepared and brimming with questions regarding how he could support me in crafting and delivering the most effective lectures possible to the students in my class.

**Charlie Cross:** If I was upbeat, it was partially due to nervousness. Jon was my first assignment as a student observer, and I knew from the start that I was taking on a sizeable responsibility. The LTC had given us fellows a decently thorough training, but my first meeting with Jon felt a little bit like getting thrown into battle. We went over some expectations and strategies. He was concerned with things all professors worry about: Was he engaging and articulate? Are the students getting the big picture? But mostly, he wanted earnest and direct feedback. I would show up to class whenever I was free, afterward we would discuss.

**Jon Olson:** As a retired commander in the U.S. Navy, a career intelligence officer, and an adjunct professor, I am a 28-year veteran of public speaking and presenting formal presentations and briefings to admirals, generals, and even high-ranking public officials on subjects as varied as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, human intelligence operations, and other such topics. However, I had never faced a classroom full of students with the kind of enquiring minds possessed of the students in my class at Carleton College. I quickly found my students were far more informed and engaged than most college students, even students at other top-level schools

around the United States. Additionally, my Carleton students demand answers to sensitive and nuanced questions, which I was prepared to deliver. But, I had some minor hurdles to overcome, and Charlie helped me to see the very real differences between college students and flag and general officers in the military services.

**Charlie Cross:** Ironically, I found myself being even more alert in Jon's classes than I am in some classes I take for credit. The main strategy taught to student observers is called mirroring—simply writing down what is going on in class, from minute to minute. This aims at giving the professors a bird's-eye view, showing them what they can't see when they are moving class forward—a challenging task given enticing tangents and a wealth of information needing to be squeezed into a ten-week term. All in all, the process allows the professor to see and understand more of what is going on from the student's perspective. Not doing the readings and showing up intermittently, I had difficulty following the acronym-heavy class, but I was able to empathize more accurately with the students and articulate what I saw when things got fuzzy or consternated—or even when things were flowing smoothly. And often they did, in ways Jon didn't realize. He was particularly good at using student knowledge to build up the subject matter being discussed—a strategy he wasn't aware he was using.

**Jon Olson:** It never occurred to me that students in college might fall asleep during a lecture in a darkened room, or that they may be suffering from pre-test anxiety and would not be focusing on the detailed material I was presenting to them. I had also not considered the fact that college students, even while attending class, might really be focusing on their personal relationships, potentially to the detriment of their studies. It also never occurred to me that a student might be hesitant to speak up in class to ask questions, or to offer their thoughts or opinions on a topic. Being shy about your questions is not really a trait we encounter very often in the U.S. military. With Charlie's able assistance, and working in conjunction with him weekly during the term, I was able to hone my teaching techniques to achieve maximum effect, and I am certain I delivered a much better course to my students thanks to Charlie's involvement. Charlie provided me insightful views into student behavior, their concerns, and ways to engage students in discussion that would afford an even greater depth regarding our subjects of study.

**Charlie Cross:** I think that a certain tentativeness often accompanies an enquiring mind. Approaching a subject earnestly, be it the organization of our intelligence community or a relationship, takes time and thought. This earnestness—combined with the tiring and overwhelming grind that is college—can make the silent boundaries of a classroom difficult to read. In this regard, I found Jon continually inspiring. Every teacher wants to reach the edges, but it takes some honesty and humility to ask for help in doing so.

**Jon Olson:** I have been contacted on numerous occasions by many of my students from that class in the fall of 2013. I have been honored to be asked to draft letters of recommendation and make phone calls on their behalf for summer internship programs, and I have had the pleasure of being asked to review their senior thesis projects. For these privileges, I owe Charlie a debt of gratitude for his assistance in my course, and for helping me to become an even better lecturer for every course I teach from this day forward.

**Charlie Cross:** I was also surprised by how rewarded I felt working with Jon. I am passionate about my studies and activities at Carleton, but seldom do I get to witness the tangible, immediate effects of my efforts. As with teaching of any kind, one's ability to convey information is partially dependent on the receptiveness of the students. All of the several professors I've since worked with were open to advice and discussion, but few were willing to go to the extent Jon was.

**Jon Olson:** I would recommend the Student Observer Program to every professor at Carleton College. Quite frankly, I would recommend every university or college across the nation adopt a program like the Student Observer Program. Regardless of how many lectures a professor may have delivered over the course of years of teaching, there is always room for improvement. The students who will likely be selected to support professors in programs like these will prove their worth after the very first session. It is likely professors will gain insights into their teaching style which they had never before considered, and this will be of immeasurable benefit. It is, after all, a very true and accurate statement that college professors have likely never been trained in pedagogy, and Charlie Cross provided me outstanding insights into teaching skills—both those I already possessed and those I needed to develop—so that I could apply them in the most effective manner possible. I am certain any university or college that institutes a Student Observer Program will be fully satisfied with that decision.

**Charlie Cross:** Part of the beauty of the Student Observer Program is its simplicity. While the training I received from the Learning and Teaching Center helped me feel confident, it doesn't take a student interested in pedagogy to be an effective observer. Every student sees things in the class that could go better, but doesn't get the opportunity to discuss the fundamental, operational minutia with the professor in the mid- and end-of-term reviews, which cover broad, blending area. Moreover, while much of what I did with Jon Olson could have been done with a fellow teacher (articulating concerns and outlining goals), I think some distance from the subject matter and a position closer to the audience provides a crucial perspective.

**Fred Hagstrom:** This exchange illustrates our goals for the use of the student observer program. Separate from any form of evaluation, an instructor can use the program to test out new approaches or to get a reading on how effectively the class is being run. The positive experience relayed by Jon Olson and Charlie Cross is not at all unique. It is also interesting to note that both participants see it as a positive experience. Our goal is the advantage that can be gained by faculty members, but it is also clear that for the students involved in the program it can be highly beneficial and insightful.

Having a student observer means a professor not only gets his practice "mirrored" back to him immediately, he also gets to analyze it in conversation with that observer. Through the combination of observation and discussion, both the faculty member and the student observer develop deeper insights into teaching and learning, they feel more engaged in and confident about those practices, and they deepen their appreciation for one another. These outcomes benefit, in turn the teachers and students they work with subsequently.

The program is a useful tool in mentoring, either for addressing specific issues that arise or in monitoring the general flow of a course. While it is mostly new teachers who take advantage of

the program, it can also be helpful to established professors, especially when they are trying out new approaches. Carleton has a strong culture of striving for high quality teaching. Our mentoring program is an important element in this goal, and the student observer program can be a crucial tool in assessing and improving approaches to teaching.