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Fearless: Professor Hakim Williams

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Fearless: Professor Hakim Williams

Abstract

With his consistently energetic and enthusiastic personality, his progressive teaching methods using discussion and debate in the classroom, and his desire for his students to develop more comprehensive understandings of the problems facing education in a global context, Dr. Hakim Williams fearlessly uses his passion for change and justice in education to enlighten his students, sharpen their critical thinking skills, and change their outlooks on the future. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, peace, justice, education, educational methods

Disciplines

Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Education | Educational Methods | International and Comparative Education | Liberal Studies | Secondary Education and Teaching

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

FEARLESS: PROFESSOR HAKIM WILLIAMS

January 31, 2014

With his consistently energetic and enthusiastic personality, his progressive teaching methods using discussion and debate in the classroom, and his desire for his students to develop more comprehensive understandings of the problems facing education in a global context, Dr. Hakim Williams fearlessly uses his passion for change and justice in education to enlighten his students, sharpen their critical thinking skills, and change their outlooks on the future.

Dr. Hakim Williams teaches in the Africana Studies and Education Departments on campus, specifically focusing on issues of social change, human rights, and education. Originally from Trinidad, Dr. Williams brings his firsthand experience into the classroom, pulling from both his

personal life and his PhD doctoral work to make issues real and relevant for his students. “He is so passionate and dedicated to his work in the Caribbean—and everything he does—that his classroom is very interactive and focused on how we can learn about these issues together,” says Erin O’Connor, one of his students. “He really values what students know, and embodied in all of his classes is reflection on what we talk and read about during the semester so that we can learn from ourselves and each other.”

Last semester, Dr. Williams was recognized at Fall Honors Day for his exceptional teaching methods, receiving the Dr. Ralph Cavaliere Endowed Teaching Award. “His education philosophy is very progressive,” says Yaou Liu, another one of his students. “His classes are very student-centered, inquiry-based, and democratic. He really sees us as his peers, so we can debate with him, ask questions, and don’t have to agree with what he says. It’s unique to have a professor who interacts in debates and doesn’t mind intellectual ‘fights.’”





One of the first things Dr. Williams talks about with his students, in fact, is the idea of critical thinking and how necessary the skill is, not just for success in his classes, but for success as engaged, active members of society. “He’s very focused on critical thinking,” says Raksmeymony (Rex) Yin, an interdisciplinary education student. “He sets the tone for the rest of the semester by talking about critical thinking first. He gets students to think outside of their comfort zones, to not accept things at face-value, and to foster self-knowledge and self-learning.”

Professor Williams not only encourages students to think critically about certain topics, but tries to give the students a wide variety of texts and sources to expand their understandings. “We were reading old documents, anything from Plato to Socrates, the New Testament to the Quran, and all of these different texts helped us to becoming better critical thinkers,” says Erin. Dr. Williams focuses on enriching his students’ preconceptions about their lives,

communities, and world, helping them to question everything.

The interdisciplinary nature of his classes and discussion sessions is best seen when “he goes off-script if there’s an interesting point brought up in class,” says Yaou. “He’s great at facilitating conversations that will challenge you. He asks you to think critically, not just about what’s on your mind, but the reasons why you’re thinking that way.

“For example, in the first class we had, we deconstructed the idea of what critical thinking actually is, and found that critically thinking means challenging previous conceptions and reconstructing your perceptions of the world. And he really does that in class through his democratic style. Somebody says something, and then somebody disagrees, and then we just have a conversation. At the end we don’t have to reach an agreement—it’s through the process that we learn more.”

And the critical thinking doesn’t stop in the classroom. Dr. Williams always encourages students to pursue active engagement with the community at large, giving them lists of ways that they can volunteer with community service opportunities, not just to get them volunteering, but to get them thinking about the bigger issues at hand in terms of education, poverty, and privilege.

Dr. Williams doesn’t only change his students’ lives through the knowledge he shares with them—he changes them through his genuine, passionate personality, his welcoming character, and his real desire to know his students as people. “He’s really such an inspiring man,” says Erin. “Just being in the same room with him, you feel inspired and passionate. He has so much hope for the future and faith in change that it’s absolutely infectious to be around him.”

“Personally, Dr. Williams has been incredibly influential for me,” says Rex. “He’s very caring, constantly asks how you’re doing, and goes above and beyond to show you what you’re capable of achieving. He was my internship

advisor for my summer internship, and he really pushed me to reflect on my experiences, solidifying my own knowledge of how life-changing it had been for me.”

Professor Williams’ desire to help students reach their full potentials both academically and personally probably comes from his own drive as a student and individual coming from Trinidad to the United States for his education. “One of the things I find most inspiring about Professor Williams,” says Yaou, “is his story of trying to get into the PhD program at Columbia University. He told us that after going to a small liberal arts college, he applied to the PhD program and didn’t get in. So he got a Master’s degree. Then he applied to the PhD program again, didn’t get in, and got another Master’s. Then he applied again and still didn’t get it. It was only on his fourth try after his mentor convinced him to apply again that he finally got into the PhD program at Columbia. It’s that kind of drive, dedication, and persistence that I find really inspiring as a student.”

Dr. Williams also inspires his students on a more personal level, serving as a role model for academic and personal success. “It’s very humbling and inspiring to hear about his background,” says Rex, “because I come from a similar situation growing up. His stories inspire me to do the same. As an IDS Education major, his focus on international education development, his continued work in Trinidad, and his ‘pay-it-forward’ mentality are very relevant to me as a Cambodian American interested in education and improving the Cambodian American experience of education.”

Constantly helping his students to see beyond themselves while also helping them to better understand themselves, Professor Williams encourages his students to develop their passions, understand more about the issues in their communities, education systems, and world, and inspires them with his dedication and drive. His personality is infectious, his classes life-changing, and his impact on campus immeasurable. He is an absolute asset to the campus community, and a true model of engaged activism.

<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2014/01/31/fearless-professor-hakim-williams/>