Bridgeport Professor Helps Students Build Community Connections

Donna Phillips, a professor at the University of Bridgeport, has taught at the school for 24 years.

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BRIDGEPORT, Conn. -- Donna Phillips’ primary objective as the chairman of the Human Services Program at the University of Bridgeport is teaching undergraduates how to connect with people.

Technology has made it easier to connect, but Phillips said students have a harder time developing relationships.

“They’re very connected, yet very disconnected,” Phillips said. “You think all these communication tools pull us all together. In some ways, it’s very isolating. In human services, you need that connection. If you’re going to be distracted by your cell phone, it’s not going to work in a human services field. You have to connect with self before you can connect with someone else. That is the biggest challenge teaching today’s students.”

UB offers a Human Services degree through their School of Arts and Sciences. Phillips said students who attain the degree frequently head to careers in social services, working with the elderly, children, rehabilitation patients and in criminal justice jobs. Some students join police forces, some pursue double majors in psychology or other programs, and some seek master's degrees. The school also offers an internship program for real world experience.

“It’s not a major that is known by a lot of incoming freshmen,” Phillips said. “As soon as they get here, they might not come, but they transfer in. A lot of psychology students are interested. From a teaching perspective, it’s great because they know what college is about and the commitment required after they transfer in. Some of our students get jobs with the Peace Corps, which opens a lot of doors for traveling. When they come out of college with a Human Services degree, they’re very versatile.”

Phillips also teaches in University of Bridgeport's IDEAL Program, which caters to older students.

“I love teaching adult students who often have experienced much more of life than traditional undergrads,” Phillips said. “The IDEAL students bring a great deal of living to the ‘table of learning.’ Their stories are inspirational, and together we carve out the next chapter of their journey. It is consistently an honor to be a part of their process.”

Phillips, who previously taught in Norwalk, has been at Bridgeport since 1990. She realized early in her teaching career that it was more than a vocation.

“I’ve never had another job,” Phillips said. “Teaching has been my passion for my entire life. Being present for the journey of the students is what I’m about. I want to be part of their process and make it easier for them on their journey. That’s my calling.”

She said another challenge, besides keeping a rein on unauthorized use of technology in the classroom, is developing confidence in students. Phillips said she wants her students to “see the issues that keep them from their dream or living their best life. I want them to see what challenges they face, and what strengths they bring to the table.” Once a student recognizes roadblocks, Phillips helps navigate them.

“One student remembered very vividly a third grade teacher telling him he would not amount to anything,” Phillips said. “He left school one credit shy of getting his degree. There was part of him that didn’t believe he could graduate, or that he could be successful. He returned and got his degree and he is successful. When he got his degree, he just waved his hat in the air as high as he could. It was beautiful.”

by Tom Renner
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