

Karen Sullivan Accepts the 2011 President's Award for Excellence in Teaching

A college is all about providing students with an inspiring education. Queens College recognizes this through its annual President's Awards for Excellence in Teaching. At the October 5, 2011 Faculty-Staff Assembly, three full-time faculty members were so honored: Caroline Hong (English), Alexander Reichl (Political Science) and Karen Sullivan (European Languages and Literatures). Excellence in Teaching Awards were also given to Adjunct Faculty and Professional and Continuing Studies faculty. Professor Sullivan's speech appears below.



I thank the Queens College Foundation, President Muyskens, the awards committee, my colleagues in French and European Languages and Literatures, and my students for this honor.

Although it is very unlikely that a fireman's daughter, born and raised in the Bronx, would become a professor of French, that's me ... and teaching French literature and language has turned out to be my calling.

In second language pedagogy there is a concept called "lowering the affective filter" which I have striven to follow all these years – it means creating an atmosphere in the classroom where ridicule, aggression, and shyness have no place, where curiosity, inquiry, and experimentation are encouraged, where errors are welcomed as opportunities to improve performance, and where students are able to make mistakes and learn from them. This does not mean lowering standards, or changing the rules of the language. Students must still work very hard and expectations remain high.

"Lowering the affective filter" in the classroom really works—whether students are grappling with ambiguity in a work of literature, doing close reading of a text in its original language, or practicing – in public – the foreign sounds of French.

I'll share with you with two anecdotes that suggest that lowering the affective filter is a universal lesson: on the day I interviewed for my position at Queens College -- January 24, 2000—at 11:00am-- there was a terrible snowstorm on campus and I got lost on my way to King Hall. Since the semester hadn't started yet, the campus was fairly deserted and I stopped in the cafeteria where I asked a cleaning woman how I could get to King Hall. She set aside her equipment and walked me through the kitchen so I could see exactly where I should have been heading. She reached out, I relaxed, and she made me feel that the QC campus was a warm and welcoming place. My interview went better because of her kindness.

A few years ago, I was walking into Kiely Hall with the Dean when a mother and teenage son stopped us and asked us where the GED exam was taking place. The Dean told me to go up in the elevator while she walked the pair to the correct room. I am confident that the young man's exam went better because of the Dean's ability to connect. Both the Dean and the cleaning woman "lowered the affective filter" at Queens College.

Those of us who are part of it sometimes forget that a college campus can be an intimidating place. Each one of us, staff and faculty, can and does play a role in lowering or raising the affective filter of Queens College.

This is important because Queens College/CUNY is a public institution with a mission that reaches far beyond the boundaries of the campus. New Yorkers have a right to pursue higher education at CUNY and we who work here have an obligation to help them achieve that goal – by keeping standards high and the affective filter low.

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