

Professor Colum Leckey Reflects on his Career

William Waugh, staff writer

Colum Leckey, professor of history at PVCC, has always been passionate about the study of the past. From the responsibilities of a Civic Engagement course, the early days of being a professor, and the essence of world history, Leckey's teaching style has been anything but stagnant.

Leckey considers himself to constantly be learning and questioning the world.

"I've always been curious," Leckey said. As a self-proclaimed "bookworm," Leckey has a natural inclination to the analysis of historical documents.

"I guess I've always had a knack for history," he said, and then took a brief pause to reflect. Growing up, his father was always reading about history, and Leckey has no doubt that his passion was passed on to him.

Leckey remembered his old history professors at the University of Virginia and the University of Pittsburgh who inspired him to teach. He especially admired their "ability to frame a good discussion," he said.

Having taught for over 22 years, Leckey still remembers the difficulties of starting out.

"The first years of teaching college were really, really hard for me, and I think they are for all teachers," Leckey said. The most difficult part is acclimating to your environment and "developing your own approach and your own identity as a historian and as a teacher, and you don't know it yet, but you still don't have a style yet," Leckey said, laughing.

When starting out, Leckey tried to emulate his professors to no avail.

"I tried to do what [my professors] did, and I found out, in a zig-zaggy kind of way, that I am not them," Leckey said. It took time for Leckey to find his own style, but he quickly became comfortable in his approach to lectures.

One thing students quickly learn is that Leckey will call them out to include their perspectives in class discussions.

"I work hard to include all the students as much as possible in class, even if it means sometimes putting students on the spot. Kind of putting them on the hot seat and enduring long, uncomfortable silences," Leckey said.

This can be difficult for new students to adapt to, but quickly becomes second nature once they are used to it.

For myself, the idea was intimidating at first, but I ended up sharing opinions on topics in class where I never would have raised my hand traditionally. It began to feel like my input was wanted in the class discussions.

Leckey acknowledges that there were days when he had just felt off or had a terrible lecture.

"In the first five to eight years, even early into Piedmont, I had some god-awful days, just horrible days. Nothing I did worked, and I still feel that way sometimes, but little did I know at the time, I was steadily improving and working out my own method of teaching: one that suited me, and one that suited my students as well," Leckey said. "And I'm still striving for it," he added.

Leckey applies his same philosophy on learning to teaching; he is always improving and experimenting.

As for Civic Engagement courses, a new program brought by the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) for community colleges statewide, history courses naturally lend themselves to this prospect.

"I really want students to understand the Enlightenment origins of the American political system, more than anything else. I think it's really important for us to examine the intellectual, ideological, and cultural roots of our system," Leckey said.

Leckey argues that understanding political origins of the United States is crucial to being civically engaged and educated.

"I think it's really important for all students who are civically engaged to have some semblance of understanding about the Enlightenment origins of modern politics," Leckey said.

Leckey particularly struggles with a dilemma as old as time: teaching the uninterested.

"The main obstacle is those who are [not interested in history] are in a pretty big majority, so you gotta make it interesting for them, or at least try to for 70 percent of the time," Leckey said.

Read the full article online at piedmontforum.com.