

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CHRIS DAVIS: Welcome to the Career and Academic Resource Center podcast. I am Chris Davis, your host, the Associate Director of CARC. And it's my great pleasure today to have with me Jill Slye. We're going to be talking about a few things. But before we start, welcome, Jill, by the way.

JILL SLYE: Thank you. It's great to be here, Chris.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you. I'm really honored to have you here today. So you are an alum of the Extension School. You have worked as an employee at Harvard, directly working with the Office of Career Services. You you've been a TA for many years, and you're now an instructor with a bunch of classes under your belt. And you're actually teaching two courses this semester, right?

JILL SLYE: I am. I am. Very exciting. Five courses this academic year.

CHRIS DAVIS: Oh, how.

JILL SLYE: Yeah.

CHRIS DAVIS: And your specialty-- your background is in communication. And the courses that you are teaching this academic year include Fundamentals of Public Speaking, and Advanced Public Speaking, and Professional Presenting.

JILL SLYE: Yeah, and what's great is I do them in various formats. So I have an on campus version, I have a hybrid version, we've done the three-week version in J term, and I also do the summer class as well. Very different formats, but the same curriculum. It just changes a little bit.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I wanted to talk to you about a few things. Your experience at the Extension School with the Extension School, I think makes you very unique, and why originally we had partnered together for your webinars. So you were a student at that Extension School, and then you came back. And you've talked a little bit about it in your webinars, I believe, but tell us a little bit about what brought you-- what made you want to stay in the Extension School world, and now become an instructor.

JILL SLYE: Like all Extension School students, we all have a story, and my story brought me here in a very non-conventional way. I didn't finish college when I was younger. I got involved in my family's truck dealership business, and I sold commercial trucks for 15 years. And I was one of three women in the whole US that were selling-- we were selling Isuzu and Freight Liner trucks, and it always bothered me that I didn't have a degree.

And when I was early '30s, and insecurity just became too much of a noise in my own head, and I said, you know what, I really need to go back to school. And somebody said, do you know about this Extension School program? And I was like, no. And I just decided I was going to come here. So I started off taking two classes here. I was working in New York. I had a house in Connecticut, and then I would drive up, take two classes, and drive back down, and work a six-day week.

And then I just couldn't do it anymore. It was two years. I was exhausted. So I said to my dad, I can congratulate Harvard in nine years, but I'll probably be dead from commuting. Or I can do it two. So I sold my house. Left my family business. Left everything. And something really amazing happened when I came here. I felt like I was home. The students were really collaborating to make HESA work, and I started Harvard Extension Business Association. I felt here like I had never felt anywhere else. That I fit in. That I was home.

And the more involved I got in academics and social life, the more comfortable I felt. Suzanne Spreadbury, she was amazing, and the students were incredible. The instructors were so supportive, approachable. If you told me-- and all of my students can attest to this that I share this in all of my classes-- at the age of 20, I was terrified of public speaking. I had self-centered fear. I was insecure.

I was a mess, and I was handed a stack of business cards, and told to go out and pound the pavement, and sell commercial trucks. And that's what I did. It was what I had to do. It's what I was told to do, so I did it. And now, to be able to go from being that terrified, insecure, self-centered fear 20-year-old to now be somebody who speaks to people, and listens to people, and have that be in a place that I love to be, it's-- I pinch myself every day.

CHRIS DAVIS: And your experience is interesting because, certainly, when you were starting your degree, I think there might have been a handful of online courses. Now, it's quite different. We have many more online courses in different varieties too, including the live web conferences-- the hybrid courses that you referred to as well. As an instructor what is teaching an online course like?

JILL SLYE: It's funny that you say that because I don't even think there were-- I was here in 2002. So I don't even know if there were online courses at that point. There may have been.

CHRIS DAVIS: Right, maybe not in--

JILL SLYE: Yeah, there may have been a handful, but because I was fortunate where I was here, but it is-- I'll never forget. It was actually funny because I had a conversation with somebody five, six years ago, and we were talking about public speaking online. I was like, oh, are you kidding me? That's impossible. How could you ever teach communication public speaking online? And then I entered a Zoom room, and I was shocked that there is a level of intimacy that can be created through this online platform. And I was blown away.

I do think there are challenges, but as an instructor, I try to stay ahead of those challenges by making the promise to my students, you will not hear me speaking for more than 20 minutes. I will then get you into a breakout room, and get this class interactive so that you are using your communication. And trying to make the classrooms interactive, it is challenging, but it also is rewarding when students are put in these breakout rooms, and they're communicating, and I'm able to go into four or five different little classrooms, and engage, and hear what's going on, and kind of get the head nod that they're engaging, they're using their voice, they're using the techniques that I'm teaching in class in these breakout rooms.

So they're gaining experience, and it's that experiential learning, and we're keeping it interesting and engaging. The other thing that I found really interesting about the online platform-- and this actually a student brought up to me-- that when you're presenting, you're obviously seeing the faces on Zoom. But as an audience member, if you have it on the gallery mode, think of when you're in a classroom. You're looking at the back of everybody's head. So you're not seeing the response to the speaker.

But on Zoom, you can actually see the facial expressions, and the non-verbals, and the interpretation or what they're taking in when they're listening to somebody speak. So it does give this other element that instead of looking at the back of everybody's head as an audience, you're actually also seeing your audience, not just the speaker. So I think there's ways to be creative, and I think Zoom is a great platform because they offer different ways of creating these interactions.

CHRIS DAVIS: Oh, that's interesting. So what I wanted to ask you more about, Jill, and I think we talked about this in-- or you had made reference to it in one of your webinars is the expectation of the student coming into a course. We have students who have had a lot of professional achievements in whatever field they're in, and they come back to school either at the undergraduate or graduate level or graduate certificates too, and it can be an interesting adjustment.

If you've been in the professional world, and certainly if you've been successful in the professional world, and you're coming back to a classroom, whether it's a physical, on-campus classroom, or a digital one, and putting yourself in the mode of a student with an instructor or instructors sometimes, on a TA or TAs. Now that you're on the other side of it, how do you help students adjust to that? Do you see any challenges that come from that? Is there any advice that you would give to students who are coming back into a classroom, and maybe struggle with some of the expectations around communication? Or how, or when, or why they reach out to instructors and teaching staff?

JILL SLYE: I think that what I would suggest-- I think there's multiple layers to that. I think coming in as a professional, no matter what position you're coming in from an organization, I think there has to be a shift in your mindset. I think you have to step out of your office, and come in here as a student. And that's not the easiest shift for a lot of people. And I think what I try to do is in all of my classes, I require an introductory speech.

And I'll have my students say, what do I have to do? What do I have to prepare? You can't prepare. It's an impromptu. You're never going to know what you're going to come in, and have to talk about, and we'll change it up, and I won't give a spoiler alert here, and tell you or them what they need to talk about. But we eliminate that they're going to say what they do, how long they've been doing it because what happens sometimes is people who are the 16-year-old that was home schooled that's in that same class versus the polished person who's been in an industry in 30 years, I try to level the playing field.

And that is something that when you do come into a classroom, and you kind of strip yourself of all of that, and just be in the mindset that you are all on a level playing field, and the common ground is that you're here to learn. And that helps, but I think the other thing is I always found as a student that Extension School instructors were very approachable. And I can't speak for all of the instructors, but I know it's laid out on the syllabus. I think what a lot of advice I would give to students is use the syllabus to get to know your instructor.

I put a lot of time, and my TA, Sarah Ann, who has been a godsend, she-- we both. She puts in hours. I put in hours. And we create the syllabus as a roadmap so that you know what to expect as a student, but to understand when you are reading that, that you are one student. And the one to one ratio does not exist when it comes to being an instructor. There may be 40 students and one instructor. There may be 60. There maybe 120. And having that understanding that our world has shifted into an immediate world, but I'm also-- this semester, I have 72 students. That's a lot different from my 19 students in the J term.

So I think me, as an instructor, I'm kind of adapting as I go to now scaling this a little bit bigger. But at the same time, I want my students to know that I'm here for them. But I think I also let them know that there's a number of them to one of me. And understanding that as a student that we live in an immediate world. We, at work-- and that's why when I say you can kind of take that work hat off, and when you come into a classroom, know that university time is very different from business time. There's requirements. There's deadlines.

So there is this similarity, I think, when you're dealing with an instructor to understand that the culture of the classroom is set, and laid out through the syllabus. And I know as a student, if you would have told me that, I would have been like OK because I'm self-centered. All I'm thinking is I'm here to get my degree to get my education. I'm trying to do it as fast as I can. I'm trying to manage family. I'm trying to manage work. I'm trying to manage all of this stuff. You have to look at things a little differently.

CHRIS DAVIS: So let's talk about grades. The expectations on the student side, and the realities of being in a course with an instructor with many students, and also being accomplished or successful in your professional life, and then what are the different expectations that you could or should have for your life in the classroom.

What do you say to students who come to you and say, if I don't get an A in this class then that's not successful for me. This is my objective, and nothing less than that is going to work. What would you tell a student who has that outlook for not just your class, but across their academic experience? Is that healthy? Is that something that's going to benefit them? What would you say?

JILL SLYE: It's interesting because since you and I have been working together and we've had conversations, I've tried to think in my head how can I explain this to a student from my perspective so that they kind of get it? So I finally figured it out. I'll let you know if it works, but I turned to-- this semester, I started out the class by saying OK, please don't come up to me and tell me what grade you need to get in this class for two reasons. One, this is a class that you will get out of this class what you put into it.

So I don't control that. I cannot control that. And the class is set up that I have guidelines, I have requirements, and expectations. So if you do all those, then you should do really well. And I walked up to the front row, and I said to one student, I said, so just like I am responsible for doing the best I can to educate you, and do it to the best of my ability, I have the same expectations of you. But you can't put your grade on me because it's not my responsibility. So I think what I've tried to do is create a situation in a classroom environment where I'm very specific about my requirements.

I lay out the expectations, and I allow an open dialogue, but it has to be-- the students have to understand that there's an accountability. And for me, I can tell you, I had-- it was the scariest thing when I was three months before I graduated, and I found out that I was going to probably get the top 10% of my class. And I found this out, and I was horrified. Oh my god, I'm going to lose it. Now I have to get all A's. And I never thought to go to my instructor. I took on that responsibility, and I owned that if I had to spend every moment doing my work, and rewriting papers 50 times, it was up to me.

So I think I would share with students that I know how important it is, and I know the pressure, and I know that there is a significant amount of pressure that we automatically put on ourselves because we wouldn't be at Harvard if we weren't that self-motivated and driven. But we do have to know that that's self-motivation, that's self-driven.

So it's important for us to be accepting that that's our job to get the A, and not the instructor. And I think that's why we have a syllabus. As an instructor, I lay it out so you know what you have to do. Now, some classes don't have it as spelled out, and that's something you have to weigh out, and look at the culture of the classroom to see if it matches what you need to get out of that experience.

CHRIS DAVIS: One final question. So I'm curious, whenever I talk to instructors, I always ask them to tell me about the student populations that they teach. In your experience, and you've been a TA, you've been an instructor, how diverse have your students been? And does that add to what you're teaching? I would imagine it does.

JILL SLYE: Oh my goodness. I am overwhelmed, and I am so grateful for the Extension School for what they are able to accomplish and create in a classroom. I mean, just this J term, I had a student from Germany, I had a local student. I mean, the diversity. I have seasoned professionals that come in with years and years of experience, and I call it the aha moment, and each of them have a little light bulb go off at some point. I tell them to look for that.

But what's amazing is from different backgrounds, from different cultures, from different experiences, different ages, it's incredible because our world is becoming smaller outside of Harvard, and now we've been able to take people from all over the world that have different views, different cultures, different backgrounds, different family experiences, and we're all in a room, and we're communicating. And not only that, but the platform of the class allows people to communicate about things they're passionate about.

So I watch students get together. I'm hoping-- I've only been doing this for-- well, I've been TAing for about five or six years now, and teaching my own courses for two or three. I can't wait in five or 10 years now to have students call me, and say we created a business, we conquered the world. The accomplishments that I think are going to happen because the Extension School is bringing people from such diverse backgrounds into one room, and they're collaborating, working together, and sharing ideas, and sharing their passion.

It's like watching firecrackers go off. It's really fun. Or should I say fireworks, because it's just amazing. And I think what that also allows us to do is what I teach is about tailoring your message to your audience, and adapting to audience feedback. And you have to make sure that you consider that you're talking to people that aren't from the same culture, aren't from the same background, aren't the same age group.

So even just when somebody says something about having children, well, maybe half the class has children, maybe half of them don't, maybe some of them are full-time students, maybe some of them work, maybe some of them are from a different culture. I mean, it's just incredible, and I think it opens up opportunities that don't happen anywhere else.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, on that note, Jill, I want to say thank you so much for joining me today. It's always a pleasure to talk to you.

JILL SLYE: Thank you.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you so much for sharing your experiences, your viewpoints. I mean, your enthusiasm is always contagious, and I'm so glad that you came into the studio today. Our paths will cross again, and I really am envious of the students in your classroom in your courses because I'm sure they have a terrific experience.

JILL SLYE: Thank you. It's been great.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

You have listened to the CARC podcast. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School, and I hope you will join us again.