aggregate scores are closely aligned between being a department chair and working in higher education, further scrutiny reveals a major discrepancy. Note that if we compare those who responded definitely (42 percent) and probably (45 percent) that they would be a chair and compare this with definitely (71 percent) and probably (20 percent) that they would go into higher education, there are compelling differences. It appears that there is ambiguity in being a chair opposed to a clear and positive response to working in higher education. This alone, although a small sample size, may have a long-term effect on the selection of chairs in the future.

Conclusion

Hall of Fame catcher Yogi Berra was well known for his seemingly unintentional witticisms, known as “Yogi-isms.” One in particular comes to mind when discussing department chairs and their careers in higher education: “If I had to do it all over again, I would do it all over again.” Sadly, this is not as true as one would hope when focusing on the work of department chairs. Although emphatically clear in their desire to replicate their choice to live and flourish in the ivory towers of academia, there is an equally clear apprehension in repeating the decision to be a department chair. Given the ever-increasing challenges of workload coupled with diminishing resources under the ominous clouds of incivility, the forecast for new department chairs is potentially dismal. Yogi was also known for another quote: “When you come to the fork in the road, take it.” In the future, we wonder who will take the fork—and why they would want to.

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Save Your Budget: Skype-a-Scholar

TREY GUINN

When I was a freshman in college, a new television show—Who Wants to Be a Millionaire—was reviving the game show genre. As I was learning to bubble scantron exams to pass my intro courses, Millionaire contestants were also answering a series of multiple-choice questions to win big bucks. One of the prominent features of the show was that contestants could use lifelines. My personal favorite is the Phone-a-Friend, which allowed the contestant to make a thirty-second call to a friend who they would consult with about a particular question and associated answer options. Contestants explain to the host and audience who they are calling and why they believe that individual is the right person to consult on the given question. This lifeline is a good reminder that we all get by with a little help from our friends. The odds of winning increase when we rely on the insights and expertise of others. And although I didn’t get to phone any friends while bubbling my scantrons, like the contestants on the show, I realize that my odds at winning are better when phoning a friend. For instance, I make smarter technology purchases when I call Greg, my good friend who has worked in high-tech for over a decade. Daunting home repair jobs are in better hands when I call Jennifer, my realtor friend who always connects me to a trustworthy contractor. The idea of phoning my friends has also improved my curriculum while saving my budget. I call it Skype-a-Scholar. Let me explain.

To Skype-a-Scholar is simply to invite a peer-expert into your conference room or classroom space by video conference. For nearly a decade, I have routinely conferred experts into my undergraduate and graduate courses as well as during team meetings. It is a budget-friendly solution with key benefits that I will highlight here.

A Budget-Friendly Solution

About a decade ago, I was advising a student and faculty group that needed a morale boost. A negative campus event had left members deflated and a pick-me-up by a campus affiliate would have gone over poorly. I needed an outside expert voice to join our meeting and help me revive things. But I had zero budget to bring someone in. Anyone with budget woes understands that when you face a roadblock trying to purchase new staplers, it is hard to imagine that you will get the go-ahead for flying in a guest speaker. Then it dawned on me: if I can Skype in job candidates for a first-round interview, then I can Skype people in for anything. And why not? Aside from a few glitzy experiences, the technology is effective. Why not use this same technology to bring in guest speakers to staff and faculty meetings? And it worked—by calling in my friend and colleague from states away, I accomplished far more good in that meeting than I could have alone. No flight needed. No per diem required. The only real cost was thirty minutes of time that my friend gave to the cause. The benefit was felt. As a team, we gained from the perspective of someone with rich insights into the issue who was not associated with our campus. Those in attendance later commented that they appreciated that I went the extra mile for them.

Classroom Benefits

About five years ago, I was slated to teach a graduate-level seminar that had one central theme but had a breadth of related topics. I noticed that most of the readings had been authored or coauthored by friends of mine—people I went to graduate school with or who I had met at conferences over the years. Out of convenience and personal interest, I found myself reaching out to these scholars to ask for any new research I should include or ideas that I should share with my class. My friends were flattered that I was asking, and a couple said things like “Sounds like a cool class. Wish I was teaching it!” Then I realized, why not invite them to join the conversation? That’s what I did. For each night the class met, one scholar would join the conversation for about thirty or forty-five
minutes to discuss a manuscript(s) they had authored; great conversation would develop from there. I would project them onto the large screen, and then spend a few minutes chatting about life and the weather. Students would go around the room briefly introducing themselves to our visiting scholar for the night. Then, once everyone was at ease and feeling familiar, I jumped in with something like “Well, Dr. Brody, we read your work on cyberbullying this past week. These bright graduate students have some thoughts and questions for you.” I always advise the scholar that they are the expert and I am taking the role of discussion leader and curious learner.

During the semester, I knew that the students were enjoying this weekly activity. They began doing the readings! They even came to class with questions ready for the scholar. The first couple of times they even got a bit nervous as we were dialing them in. Our conversations often trailed from the readings to bigger life questions. But I did not realize how much they appreciated Skyping a scholar until I read the course evaluations. To summarize their comments, students were in awe that they had such access to different scholars from around the world. My students felt like this was above and beyond a typical graduate seminar, as if somehow the value of the course and our time together each Tuesday night was more beneficial because they were exposed to not only one professor (me) but also to many others who had special expertise. What surprised me even more, though, was that my friends—the Skyped scholars—were equally grateful and for three primary reasons. First, many of them were flattered that students from afar craved thirty minutes to meet a scholar and talk about their research. Second, they appreciated the casual format and opportunity to interact informally with students other than their own. Many of them Skyped from their home office or dining room table, sometimes even eating their dinner or drinking a glass of wine. Third, after each discussion, I would compile feedback from the students and email it to the scholar. For nearly all the invited scholars, they counted this activity as a guest lecture or act of service to be included on their tenure and promotion portfolio. The little notes from my students made it into some of their dossiers.

Not long after perfecting the art of Skype-a-Scholar for my graduate courses did I realize the potential for an undergraduate audience. In the past five years, I have transitioned all my courses to include some amount of Skype-a-Scholar. There have been many benefits to doing so but most of those are because of a few critical tips for success that I will share with you now.

**Tips for Success**

First, I am very particular about who I invite to participate. When I invite them, I state very clearly what I am hoping for. The last thing that I would want is for either the invited scholar or me to be confused about expectations or frustrated by the outcome of our Skype-a-Scholar session. One way that I prevent this is by sticking with what I know. Each of the scholars I Skype into my classroom is a friend, former colleague, or close acquaintance. This helps for several reasons. Primarily is the compatibility and quality conversation that I can lead. I want to Skype in an expert but not just any expert. I want it to be someone who I know will have the kind of effect on my classroom that I am seeking. I select scholars who will elevate the conversation but who also have a sense of humor, will smile at students, and will field their questions graciously.

Second, I talk up the scholars to the students. The week before we Skype them in, I show them any material I can to emphasize the status of our virtual guest. On the day of, one of their graded assignments is to bring to class a required number of high-quality, open-ended questions that demonstrate thoughtful inquiry and genuine curiosity. Doing so keeps the excitement of Skype-a-Scholar alive and ensures that students show the scholar the level of respect that each of us wishes we felt when giving an invited lecture. I have learned the hard way the importance of having students write down questions and screening them with you in advance. The last thing you want for your scholar or your students is the appearance of disinterest or a question that makes your student or you look ill-informed or unprepared.

Third, I make it clear to everyone involved what the roles are. I am playing host, and our scholar is the celebrity guest. My role is not to conversation-hog or to spar with my guest. My role is to hype the guest and to help my audience (the students) feel connected to them. To follow the analogy, as host I see it as my job to warm up the guest with small talk and to look for any opportunity I can to connect them with my audience, cue up punch lines, and ask curious questions that I know my students want answered. When my students get comfortable enough to ask questions and a dialogue between the scholar and my students is engaged, I take a back seat and seek ways to keep the conversation going until it is time to wrap up.

**Conclusion**

Skype-a-Scholar works beautifully when you pick the right scholars and set them and your audience up for success, whether for a faculty meeting, professional development workshop, or class. Part of that is being clear about expectations, getting your audience excited and participatory, and remembering that your job is to be an awesome host and discussion facilitator.

The benefits to Skyping a scholar are plenty—and the price is right. Yet there are some who might be reluctant to try this simple solution. I have encountered one such naysayer before. A colleague from Southern California, a friend of mine in fact, argued that he would not want to Skype in an expert because it could potentially diminish his own credibility in the classroom. I value his perspective but respectfully disagree. Rather than compromise my credibility in the meeting or classroom, I find that colleagues and students respect and appreciate my willingness to concede the floor to an expert. My students especially enjoy seeing me beside them, in the role of learner. As well, I believe that doing so models the kind of curiosity, humility, and self-awareness that I hope for in my colleagues and students. In conclusion: save your budget; Skype-a-Scholar!

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