

et al.: Tackling tough issues—together

# Bright Lights

## Tackling tough issues—together

Communication studies professor urges students to keep people at the table

BY SARAH FEATHERSTONE ('13)



## B R I G H T L I G H T S

**J**MU communication studies professor Lori Britt has spent the last eight years inspiring her students to tackle challenging public issues.

“I have always thought the university is a place to get students to think so they are prepared to deal with the world on its terms,” she said. “The world is not easy, and it is not simple. But we’ve got to start this work now.”

The “work” Britt is referring to involves getting people engaged and addressing difficult issues together. Her courses revolve around a foundational principle: keeping people at the table.

“We have to stop this demonizing of the ‘other,’” she said. “We have some very real problems in the world to address, and we can’t just throw up our hands and say, ‘I can’t work with those people because they think differently than me.’”

Two years ago, Britt successfully piloted an honors section of the Fundamental Human Communication course, which has since been made a required cohort class for all Honors College students. The curriculum engages students in public problem-solving, delving deeply into the group facilitation process by incorporating academic concepts and an examination of these concepts in the public sphere.

To encourage collaboration, student groups are asked to identify a public issue they care about. The students name the issue, research how people talk about it, investigate what the problem looks like today and collect demographic information to begin drawing the boundaries of the issue.

Then they produce a series of guides based on the work of the Kettering Foundation, where Britt works as a research fellow. The nonpartisan research foundation focuses on a simple question: “What does it take for democracy to work as it should?” The Kettering guides focus on getting citizens involved in the work and naming issues in a way that makes them relatable to all individuals at the table. The guides then provide possible solutions based on values, which in turn promote deliberation and collaboration.

“We’re not trying to find a solution that’s based in facts. We’re trying to find a solution based in values, because issues come down to values,” Britt explained. On the topic of gun control, for example, a

person might rate security higher, seemingly putting that person at odds with another person who rates freedom higher. But understanding foundational values offers room for common ground, she believes.

“It’s not that we’re right or wrong,” Britt said. “We share the same values, but we order them differently. Once we understand this, it can provide some room to reframe the issue.”

With this in mind, Britt’s students in the pilot course worked to develop a process of examining and addressing issues. In groups, they developed guides that offered three different approaches based on values. For each approach, they developed action steps and potential outcomes.

“I couldn’t believe how much they learned about these issues, and when they dive down and dig deeper, they realize it’s so much more complex,” Britt said. And the students loved it. “They said they found out more about public issues and were proud of themselves for sticking with the process,” she said. “If we can show them this habituated way to approach issues—learn what you can, hear how others talk about it, ask questions of one another out of the spirit of curiosity—I think we’re doing the world a good service.”

Britt is extremely passionate about the curriculum because it’s so

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**Britt and her students share a light-hearted moment during a meeting of the Fundamental Human Communication course. The curriculum engages students in public problem-solving.**

important to the students’ lives, both now and when they’re ready to embark on their careers.

“The curriculum helps students develop the good habits of citizens: learning to ask questions, learning to value compromise and collaboration, and staying there, at the table, when it gets tough,” she said.

“I think this is what the world needs.”

