



At UConn-Avery Point, a new approach to teaching



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Assistant Professor in residence in ecology and evolutionary biology Michael Finiguerra works with his students at UConn Avery Point in Groton Wednesday, Oct. 12, 2016. (Tim Cook/The Day)

Published October 16, 2016 7:44PM | Updated October 17, 2016 7:54PM

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Groton — On day two of ecology class, Michael Finiguerra asked his students: "How many people in this class have been snorkel-certified?"

Tom Webb wasn't exactly expecting that. He's 52, so it's been a while since he's been in school and he was nervous he wouldn't pass such a test.

But he went to the University of Connecticut-Avery Point pool, got the certificate and spent the afternoon snorkeling with his classmates during their "discussion" time.

It's not your typical college discussion, but Finiguerra takes a real-world approach to teaching. It's a style that's gained the attention of students and faculty.

"I mean, we went out for a hike for our discussion," said Chris Alfera, 22, a student from Waterford. "It's never boring. We went out snorkeling over here."

"He doesn't just walk into the classroom. He really has a plan and he thinks thoughtfully and critically about (students') experience in this classroom," said campus Director Annemarie Seifert. "Everyone wants to be cared about like that. We think of it as innovation, but I think students think about it as thoughtfulness and consideration."

Finiguerra, an assistant professor in residence at UConn-Avery Point, is teaching four classes this fall and three more next spring.

He sees his job as helping students succeed.

"I want to do everything in my power to make learning fun, but effective," he said.

His ecology class snorkeled on Sept. 20 to see ecological concepts in real life, like different kinds of algae covering rocks. Students hiked and camped from Sept. 23 to 25 and climbed Mount Monadnock in New Hampshire to learn about zonation, or changes in types of organisms as you go up a mountain.

"I try to get them to think about what's causing it. So obviously it gets colder up there and it gets windier up there," Finiguerra said. "So I'm trying to connect environmental observations with biological observations."

He doesn't believe in traditional final exams, or cumulative, multiple-choice-based tests for advanced classes. He'd rather see students apply what they've learned in a novel way. In genetics, his students create a poster and present it to the full campus in a conference environment. In human evolution class, students give an oral presentation in a conference-style setting.

He also incorporates Twitter into assignments. Students must tweet something from everyday life that connects with a lesson. He chooses his favorites to discuss with the class.

"He has this ability to get you excited about it. Like, I talk to my boyfriend about evolutionary concepts," said Megan Barry, 23, of Mansfield. "But he's also approachable. There are always kids in his office."

"He really makes you a nerd," said Allison Steinmetz, 21, of Ellington.

Webb spent a semester in 1982 at Cleveland State University, and it was so different, he said.

"It has changed so much. I can send (Finiguerra) an email and say, 'I'd like to see you for a half hour before class,' and magically, his schedule opens up."

Webb attributes some of this to the small classes and attention given by faculty at UConn-Avery Point as a whole. But other aspects are specific to Finiguerra, he said.

"On an hour field trip in Mystic I learned more about plants than I have in 20 years," Webb said.

He knows he'll remember it, because when he rakes leaves, he finds himself pondering ecological questions like why one tree turned color before another. He didn't even know it was happening, but he realized he was learning.

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