

Dr. Mike Awalt

With the support of a “FIG” group created by Mike in 1990, I believe, he began to work in earnest to develop a Teaching Center. In 1992, he was able to have a Teaching Center included in the strategic plan for Belmont, and he sought grant funding to bring it to fruition. The grant funding and university funds enabled Belmont to establish the Teaching Center in 1994 and Mike Awalt was named its first director.

As director, he was able to lead the faculty in fostering reflective teaching practices, including portfolios, “FIG” groups, lunch discussions on a range of topics, workshops on best practices, travel to teaching-related conferences, early support for the scholarship of teaching, peer tutoring, a newsletter featuring faculty writing, and individual consultations with faculty. He enjoyed knowing faculty from across the disciplines and across campus, and he made the Teaching Center a place that brought together diverse groups of faculty to share ideas about the common concern for effective teaching. Mike could talk with faculty from business, music business, the arts, health sciences, as well as he could with those in his home discipline of philosophy. He gave us a vision of how a university community with shared goals and common interests could function.

Mike aspired to cultivate these university programs and offices for the sake of enhancing our work with students. All the faculty conversations were directed to “the art of teaching”—the art of bringing students into a thoughtful and rigorous and exciting conversation about whatever was important about our various subjects.

As much as the Teaching Center was a space for honest and soul-searching conversation among faculty, it also changed the campus conversation. The Teaching Center gave visible form to Belmont’s vision to be a “premier teaching university,” a phrase that has been in the university’s vision statement since the early 1990s. The Teaching Center was the first place faculty wrestled with technology, with the “guide on the side” version of teaching (not “sage on the stage”), with the concept of the “student-centered” or “subject-centered” classroom, with concepts of “active learning.” These are familiar phrases today at Belmont and elsewhere—it was Mike Awalt who helped us think through this new vocabulary.

During the 1990s and 2000s as I attended regional and national conferences devoted to the state of the university and to college teaching, I was always amazed at how far ahead of the conversation Belmont was. I heard faculty at major universities struggle with the concept of the student as active learner and the centrality of teaching to faculty life. I recognized that Mike Awalt had led us much deeper into that discussion, and with greater authenticity, than I was hearing from peer and ivy-league universities. He did it not because he sought reputation, but because he sought the best for our students, and because among his many paths of inquiry was “what do I

mean as a teacher?” His fearlessness in his own self-reflection was a model that it is incumbent upon us as a faculty community to take up, as several of those who reflected on Mike’s life at his memorial service said. We do have his language to guide us—in 2003, Mike Awalt served on a committee that reviewed and revised Faculty Handbook statements on teaching, among other items. Though the language coming out of committee is supposed to be just that, a collective voice, I think I am correct in remembering that Mike authored these words about teaching:

- Belmont expects its faculty to be reflective practitioners who consciously reflect on their goals, methods and strategies of teaching; who strive to create classroom communities where student learning is supported, encouraged and finely honed; and who strive continuously to refine their teaching methods and effectiveness and explore new methods.

These words reflect, to me, Mike’s sense that teaching was a lifelong adventure, filled with new challenges and new discoveries about ourselves as teachers, our students as learners, and our subjects. We are so fortunate to have had someone like Mike Awalt, who embraced his vocation with joy, among us for so many years.