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PROFESSOR MELISSA QUALLS EXEMPLIFIES LINDENWOOD TEACHING SUCCESS

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By Hazel Denother

In the classroom, Melissa Qualls is electric, lighting up the room with her joyful laughter, sharp wit, and deep philosophical and literary intellect. Her excitement about topics like Gender Studies and Existentialism is infectious, and students leave her classes feeling a little lighter and a lot smarter, their minds abuzz with the words of great thinkers like Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. Qualls is not in the business of facilitating dull rote memorization; she constructs classes that center on something much more important: *wisdom*.

Hired in 2002, Professor Qualls was initially tasked with creating and directing the English Preparedness Program (EPP) at Lindenwood to help international students navigate the intimidating terrain of U.S. higher education. Qualls, who taught English in South Korea after earning her undergraduate degree, was hired for her valuable insight about ESL (English as a Second Language) education. She initially taught literature classes part-time at the university while running the EPP, and a few years later, she transitioned to teaching literature and composition classes full-time.

Professor Qualls is a major advocate for students' creativity and self-expression. She comments, "I try to convince my students that their perspective, their voice, and their experiences are crucial to their writing. They shouldn't leave themselves behind when they write.... The first step for me in any of my [courses] is to convince my students that they have something to say that matters." She tries to make complicated philosophical and literary masterpieces accessible for all students, and she acknowledges that not everyone learns the same way. "Some students just don't feel as comfortable or adept at expressing themselves through writing, so I feel that if I can give them as many avenues as possible to express themselves creatively, then I can tap into what they are really thinking," she explains. "Plus, it's just fun! Especially during this pandemic, whatever we can do to create something beautiful in this world is necessary."

Qualls' students are given the opportunity to explore literature through different mediums of expression, and throughout the years, they have created artistic marvels in the form of paintings, drawings, original songs, and more. Some students gift their art to her at the end of the semester, and it finds a new home on her "art wall," a mini gallery

of student works in her office on campus. Professor Qualls is proud of her students' creations, and she feels that the creative process is valuable in the classroom. She states, "Engaging in creative projects will change you, and it allows people to appreciate the literature or the art around them more. Many of my students will tell me semesters later that they remember the art they made for my class—it sticks with them!" Her deepest hope for her students is that through her classes, they will develop a love of reading.

Professor Qualls loves her job ("I get to walk into class and talk about Camus—what's not to love?"), and she is incredibly good at, too. She was recently featured in the Lindenwood Learning Academy's *The Learning Log* for her innovation in the classroom, and she was selected to work closely with the renovated Honors Academy at Lindenwood, teaching her Existentialism class to different cohorts of the brand new Honors Learning Community.

At Lindenwood, Qualls has found an intelligent, supportive academic community, a wonderful place to teach and learn. She appreciates the administration: "Lindenwood's administration have allowed me to teach how and what I want to teach. I've been given a lot of academic freedom.... I've always had a lot of support from the administration at Lindenwood and a lot of encouragement." Qualls says that her students, too, are a part of what makes her time at Lindenwood so enjoyable. She says, "I'm continuously amazed at what level of thinking Lindenwood students have shown.... The students at Lindenwood are just so *kind*. They're willing to go on these crazy literary journeys with me and they're willing to be challenged. Lindenwood is a great place to teach."

Professor Melissa Qualls is an amazing teacher, beloved at Lindenwood by students and faculty alike. Her lessons are infused with joy, absurdity, deep contemplation, and a little bit of hope, and the concepts she teaches stick with students long after the end of the semester. Good, dedicated educators are vital; Professor Qualls is one of the best there is, and she is making the world a better place one class at a time.