Teaching Students To Ask Questions, Take Risks

SRQ Story Project Partner Spotlight

BY SRQ DAILY WEDNESDAY PHILANTHROPY EDITION WEDNESDAY DEC 27, 2017

Mine Dogucu was far along in her job search when she heard New College of Florida was seeking a statistics professor, but she visited Sarasota anyway.

"I came here for my job interview, and I fell in love," she says. One reason was that New College students stood out: "One thing that really affected me was that students asked me questions."

"In statistics, usually students are hesitant" – they're afraid to ask what they fear is a silly question, she says. "Here, students here are always engaged and they are always curious. They are not afraid to ask questions."

That benefits teachers as well, because it encourages them to teach in new ways, she says: "Risk-taking is welcome here."

Dogucu is innovating in the community as well as the classroom. She has founded R-Ladies Sarasota, a group for women interested in learning R, a popular open-source statistics program. Information is available at this link on Meetup.

She's also organizing the local event of the American Statistical Association's Hackathon, where teams analyze a major dataset, unearth trends and present their findings – all in 48 hours. It will be April 13-15 at New College.

But Dogucu sees statistics as more than just math. One morning she heard a radio news story claiming married people were less likely to develop dementia. She walked into class and asked students how they could test the finding.

"I want my students to be able to distinguish fact from fiction," she says. "I don't see it as, they're going to calculate something. It's about building this reasoning, for them to do evidence-building."

"Statistics is all about uncertainty, and we're trying to teach that – how to make a choice when you're uncertain."

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