As ACE and the Association of College and University Educators’ launch a national effort to advance effective higher education instruction, ACE’s Deborah Seymour writes on the importance of quality teaching at the college level.

Years ago, when I was still in my 20s and a graduate student in linguistics at the City University of New York, I decided it was time to embark on the journey of what I pictured would be my life’s career: teaching post-secondary students and making a name for myself as a researcher (who was well published!) in the academy.

Well, life doesn’t always turn out the way you expect it will when you’re 28. But what I did grow to learn about myself is that I had a strong affinity for teaching, and I loved every minute in the classroom for many years.

Along the way, I discovered that being an effective higher education instructor is not just a practice that requires intelligence and many years of scholarly study and work. Truly impacting my students meant using a craft and a skill set that was partly learned from my father, who had been a teacher for many years; argued over with my sister, who is a higher education instructor to this day; and practiced through much trial and error.

There are many ways of reaching students. Some instructors use a sense of humor. Others employ creative uses of technology in the classroom. Still others follow effective practices that have been proven, through scholarly research and years of others’ trial and error, to be effective.

I recall a summer semester during which I had a student who came to class daily wearing his sunglasses, which he never removed. Day after day, this irked me. I finally decided it was time to say something. The next day, I came to class and told my students that we were all going to agree that we wouldn’t wear sunglasses during class.

Sure enough, the student in question removed his sunglasses. Imagine my dismay when I discovered that he had an eye abnormality that was quite visible when his sunglasses were removed. The next day he wore his sunglasses to class again. I never mentioned it again. I’m sure that there are better ways of managing this kind of situation in the classroom. Unfortunately, I had had no professional development to teach me any of those ways.

Another semester, I was teaching a class in poetry, and I had a student, Maggie, who announced on the first day of class to all in attendance that she hated poetry. A retiree, she was still required to complete this class to earn her bachelor’s degree. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here,” she said.

I shot back that I guaranteed by the end of the semester, she would no longer
“hate poetry,” and that it was my goal on the last day of class to ask how she felt about it by then. This instance turned out a little bit better. On the last day of the semester, unprompted, Maggie announced to the class that she no longer hated poetry—but she was glad that she could finally graduate with her four-year degree.

Over the years, I have often wondered how many postsecondary students’ lives might have been more positively affected had their instructors been trained in effective teaching practices. It has occurred to me that when students say that an instructor is “boring,” they are describing so many attributes that could be retrained to not be “boring.” That when students say that a course is “too hard,” it is often not the subject matter to which they are referring, but the way it is being taught. That when students say an instructor “doesn’t care,” they may simply be misreading the teacher’s intentions because of his or her inability to express how much they care.

Our new collaboration with the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) is designed to address just these challenges.

ACUE has launched a national effort to advance effective college instruction through state-of-the-art online professional development programs. ACE is collaborating with ACUE in a joint venture as part of our nearly century-old mission to prepare campus leaders, support the work of colleges and universities and assist institutions in strengthening student learning, persistence and completion.

With the high-quality professional development offered to instructors through this collaboration, many of those who teach on college campuses will be able to master or perfect their teaching style to reach and impact as many students as possible.

As we see the trend numbers rising of students failing to complete their degrees, I think one of the questions we need to ask ourselves is, how much difference could that one good instructor have made? We know there is a range of reasons for low graduation rates, and that we cannot oversimplify them. But I still think from time to time of Maggie, and how if it were not for her completing that one last class in poetry, she would not have earned the degree on which she had worked for years.