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Master Class - Negotiation is the key to success

Dr. Merideth Thompson, assistant professor of management, encourages her students to rock the boat. Her Negotiations class, MGT 4600, isn't the type of class where students sit in rows and raise their hands. It's a class where words are used as tools and nonverbal communication is king.

At least once a week the students undergo a negotiation simulation. In groups of two to eight, each side is given a role to play along with its associated positions and interests. The scripts entail monetary goals that must be reached, personal attributes that must be defended or specific details they must use. Each side is given time to study and prepare.

And then the students go.



The students may reach a settlement, which sometimes seems impossible. Other times, an impasse is the best outcome as not all negotiations can end in a deal that is good for both sides. Once the negotiation is complete, the students then share their side of the script. Often exclamations of "Oh, I didn't realize..." or "Why didn't I think of that?" echo through the classroom.

"A lot of times we don't negotiate because we don't think there's an opportunity to do so or because we're afraid of what might happen if we do," Dr. Thompson said. "My goal is to help the students recognize every possible opportunity to negotiate and to engage in negotiations with confidence."

Dr. Thompson encourages students throughout the semester to keep a journal of each instance they negotiate something out of the classroom. This is where Dr. Thompson says she sees the ripple effect take place.

"The students definitely benefit the most, but there is a huge ripple effect to anyone they interact with on a regular basis," she said.

"Too often we assume that what we want is the opposite of what somebody else wants, and if we're not willing to negotiate then we miss out on a win-win opportunity," Dr. Thompson said.

One example of success came when Annie Knight, Business Administration, '14, used her negotiation skills when she was charged a late fee for rent. Annie knew that if she went into the landlord and explained her situation, and was willing to listen to his, they might negotiate for the best possible outcome. And indeed, the landlord and Annie understood each other's interests, and the landlord dismissed the late fee.

"Having taken Dr. Thompson's class makes me feel stronger in who I am," Knight said. "I have learned what my weaknesses and strengths are in conversations, and that applies to almost everything I do."

"This has become the class I am the most passionate about because you can see the impact it has on a student's day-to-day life," Dr. Thompson said. "Everybody goes out and negotiates job offers, everyone buys a car, and everyone negotiates with their family. We're always coming up against conflict, and with negotiation skills, we can deal with that conflict in a way that doesn't burn bridges or damage relationships. When students leave my class I hope that they can negotiate more often and more effectively than they think they can."