

DISCOVERING ANSWERS, UNCOVERING POTENTIAL: DR. JOEL STAKE, BIOLOGY PROFESSOR CHALLENGES STUDENTS TO ASK QUESTIONS

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Upon completing his doctoral degree, Joel Stake, Ph.D. knew that he wanted a faculty position at an institution similar to the one where he had gotten his undergraduate degree: small and liberal arts based. He quickly discovered that Rivier was that place where he would fit perfectly—and would have an opportunity to positively impact the lives of students.

“I still cherish the relationships I built with my undergraduate professors, and I wanted to bring that kind of experience to undergraduates today,” he says. “I spent one year as a postdoctoral

researcher at the University of the Virgin Islands before I started looking for open faculty positions, and it reaffirmed this desire. As exciting as the research was, it was the interaction and mentoring of students that was my favorite part of my time in St. Thomas.”

Since joining Rivier in the fall of 2008, Stake has formed strong relationships with countless students in his classes—something that he attributes to creating a relaxed, fun and engaged classroom environment, where students are encouraged to ask questions and enjoy the learning process. That very collaboration with students is what Stake enjoys most about teaching.

“I really like the interaction and dialogue between professor and student,” he says. “I like the idea that we can facilitate their discovery of a new idea, or a new way to approach and answer questions. I truly value my time with the students, and the challenge of pushing them to places they didn’t know they were capable of going.”

Stake is also involved in two exciting new opportunities in his classrooms and beyond—the first when his classroom moves to the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), where he did his postdoctoral research. In March, he will take a group of students to St. John, USVI for an experiential biology excursion.

“The course is being offered over spring break and students will be snorkeling coral reefs, hiking through tropical forests, exploring mangroves, and experiencing biology in a natural, interactive way,” Stake says. “The students are very excited, and I’m really looking forward to being able to teach them in such a vibrant setting. The trip will really be hands-on learning at its best.”

This is just one of many opportunities that will be offered to students as part of Rivier’s global engagement initiative, allowing them to become immersed in other cultures and develop a heightened awareness of the world around them.

The second is his participation in the iPad Pilot program, where students and professors are using iPads in the classroom to enhance learning. Students have the opportunity to use the iPads to become more engaged and active in their educational experience—something that Stake already encourages in his students as much as possible.



“The most valuable thing I teach my students is to always ask questions,” he emphasizes. “Even if they think they have the whole answer, there are always questions to be answered. Science as a discipline is built on asking questions. Answers are great, but questions keep us moving forward.”

Stake says that, in life, the thing he is most proud of is his family, and at Rivier, his colleagues—“their commitment to our students is unmatched and unwavering,” he adds.

Although he may encourage his students to ask questions, when it comes to the future, there is no question in this professor’s mind about where he belongs or what he wants to do.

“I plan to continue to do what I am doing,” he says. “I love it.” ■

Joel Stake, Ph.D.

Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Biology Program

Academic background

- B.S. Louisiana College
- M.S. University of Louisiana at Lafayette
- Ph.D. University of Louisiana at Lafayette
- Postdoctoral Research University of the Virgin Islands

Favorite travel destination

Any place tropical, especially in the Caribbean

Favorite movie

Beautiful Girls

Favorite book

There’s a Wocket in My Pocket by Dr. Suess