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# 'Funny' Canadian professor voted Harvard's favourite

## Brian Little's course gets a perfect rating

Heather Sokoloff  
National Post

Tuesday, May 13, 2003

A Canadian academic has been voted the favourite professor of Harvard University's graduating class of 2003.

Brian Little, 62, spends half a year supervising graduate students at Ottawa's Carleton University and the other half as a visiting fellow at Harvard, teaching psychology to upper-year undergraduates.

His course on personality psychology was awarded a perfect rating of 5.0 by students, the best class evaluation a Harvard professor has ever received. The course ballooned from 70 to almost 500 students after the rating was published by Harvard's undergraduate student council.

Adam Grant, a 21-year-old Harvard student, said while most professors at the internationally renowned institution are too busy to meet with students, Dr. Little took



CREDIT: Harvard University

Dr. Brian Little splits the year between Carleton and Harvard.

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three hour to talk with him about a paper, then followed up with a series of e-mails on Mr. Grant's career aspirations.

"He is the funniest, most passionate and most engaging lecturer I have ever heard," said Mr. Grant, of Michigan. "He is willing to drop everything to make time for students."

But Dr. Little says his animated teaching style actually comes from his attempt to compensate for his extreme shyness. He carefully plans each lecture and is always scanning the room to make sure he has the attention of his students. If he notices anyone's eyes drifting away, he tries to make his lesson more engaging. The process allows him to act like an extrovert, even though he is naturally introverted, he says.

"I work hard at being spontaneous," he jokes. "My personal project is teaching with a passion, and I'll do what ever I have to do to bring that project to fruition."

Originally his Harvard research position did not include undergraduate teaching duties, but when a colleague fell ill three years ago, he picked up a few classes.

Dr. Little says the biggest difference between Harvard and Carleton is the amount of money the Boston institution can devote to research and supporting its professors. At Harvard, he is given a class budget big enough to hire more than a dozen graduate students to lead tutorials and grade student journals. Undergraduate students interested in taking on major research projects can get grants to compensate for not having enough time for a part-time job.

And despite tuition and housing fees of US\$32,000 a year, a Harvard class is just as diverse as any student body at Carleton or other large Canadian urban campuses because poor students are given generous scholarships and bursaries.

"There needs to be a priority set about attracting the best professors to Canada," he said. "Until universities get a real influx of funding, not just to stop the cement from cracking, we won't be able to bring back the professors who are leaving."

Dr. Little, who graduated from the University of Victoria in 1964, says he considers himself only a "tiny drip" in the brain drain of Canadian academics to the United States because Ottawa remains his home base.

"I think I am taking what I have learned from Harvard and giving it back to my students in Canada, as well as the other way around."

He says he is impressed by the intelligence and talent of his Harvard students -- though he says students at Carleton, where he has taught since 1977, can be just as bright. "No matter where you are, whether it's Harvard or Carleton, you find excellent students who are full of sparks.

"Carleton students are creative and risk-taking. They have less of a tradition to draw on, so in some ways they have more freedom."


At the start of the semester, he showed his Harvard class an undergraduate thesis on personality traits written by Carleton student Maryanne Joseph in 2002 as the best example of a research paper he has ever seen.

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