



## Chris Austin

*Instructor of Economics*

*Normandale Community College*

For almost 24 years Chris Austin has been a teacher of economics and business at Normandale Community College. He has also been a student of teaching and learning. And this teacher-student has remained aware of a teacher's need to adapt to each new generation of students and to shape his classroom to their needs. Chris's observations have made him profoundly aware

of how "fragile" students can be. Recounting the story of a student whose graduation came only at the end of her too-short life, he notes: "Their bodies are fragile; their psyches are fragile; and our time together with them is fragile. 'Fragile. Handle with care' ought to be stamped on the door to each classroom."

Austin's colleagues describe him as an explorer, always looking for new methods and techniques to make his lessons more pertinent. Visit his office and you'll see books on collaborative learning, active learning, classroom assessment, writing as a way of thinking. Talk to Chris and he'll tell you that "you can learn a lot about teaching by observing football coaches preparing players," or that "listening to students might be more useful than lecturing to them." To paraphrase Emerson, Austin rarely follows the paved path but creates new trails on his constant quest to find the perfect mix to engage and educate his students.

As a teacher of economics, Austin emphasizes learning the logic of economics and developing the ability to think like an economist. He then uses this expertise outside the classroom and is often referred to as the assessment "guru" on his campus.

Austin gives of himself, his talents and his expertise to his students and his college. He has served on a wide range of college and system-level committees. He has chaired his department, been active in his union at the campus and systemwide levels, and is active in his national professional association. His peers have selected Austin as a recipient of the National Institute of Staff and Organizational Development Award, and his students have honored him on several occasions as a recipient of the Phi Theta Kappa Golden Apple Award. His students have also nominated him for Normandale's Distinguished Faculty member award.

## REVIEWER COMMENTS

**Austin's teaching methods** consistently flow from the reverse design he uses to plan courses, establishing learning outcomes first and then charting a path for how to achieve them. He develops his own course materials and uses a range of collaborative and active approaches in designing classes—always with classroom assessment. He provides extensive platforms through which instruction can reach students at multiple places and at flexible times. For instance, he uses Desire2Learn to keep students working and communicating outside of the classroom, and recently developed a wiki for Normandale economics students.

**Austin's content expertise and ongoing professional development are evident** in the disciplines of business, economics, and technology applications. He holds two master's degrees: Business Administration and Economics, and has completed extensive graduate work in Higher Education and Economics. He conducts teacher workshops in assessment and is an active member of the National Association of Economic Educators. He has written feature and news stories on economic issues for local and national media and is frequently consulted by media as an expert.

**We can see his commitment to service** in his work as a Center for Teaching and Learning leader, faculty trainer and innovator. He served as a Minnesota State College Faculty association delegate and board member. We see it in his active membership in Shared Governance, Academic and Student Affairs, the Faculty Association Executive Committee, and the Higher Learning Commission's Academic Quality Improvement Program as a team leader. He developed and conducted numerous faculty development workshops on topics such as writing to learn, case-method teaching, College Assessment Techniques Workshops and games and simulations. He created and maintains the Normandale Economics Web site and served as Student Learning Assessment Coordinator and department chair. Students' appreciation of his service to them can be seen in the several Golden Apple Awards he's received.

**Austin's careful assessment** of student learning can be seen in the structure and design of each of his classes. He starts by stating and pursuing specific learning goals. To assess that learning, he has developed many rubrics for his classes. He also worked with the English department to create a six-level holistic rubric for assessing writing. He is a strong proponent of formative assessment and emphasizes learning the logic of economics and developing the ability to think like an economist in his teaching. Chris delayed his sabbatical to organize a college-wide assessment plan and establish the Learning Detectives School, an off-campus faculty retreat where he and his colleagues could learn how assessment can improve student learning.