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## **The Impact of Getting Caught in the Act: Assessing the Institutional Impact of a Teaching Award**

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*This study examined the institutional awareness and impact of a low-stakes teaching award at Augusta University and asked if the perception of the award would vary as a function of teaching context. Faculty members from departments that did or did not include recipients of the “Caught in the Act of Great Teaching” award completed a survey that inquired about their awareness of the award, their perception of how knowing about and receiving the award should affect teaching motivation and performance evaluations for faculty in general and for recipients, and their perception of how much the award should impact interest in attending faculty development events. Survey responses revealed broad awareness of the award and agreement that the award should have positive impact on outcomes for recipients, although few agreed that the award should impact interest in faculty development. Faculty members from the health sciences were somewhat more positive about the award. These findings are consistent with previous research that reported that teaching awards should and do communicate the value of teaching and are affirming for recipients.*

### **Introduction**

Chism and Szabo (1997) articulated several goals of teaching award programs, including affirming and assuring instructors that their teaching efforts are valued, encouraging teaching excellence, promoting the value of

teaching at the institution, providing publicity for the university, and balancing an (over)emphasis on research. There is some evidence that recipients of teaching awards value the recognition and are inspired to enhance the quality of their teaching (Bledsoe & Richardson, 2016; Brawer, Steinert, St-Cyr, Watters, & Wood-Dauphinee, 2006; Carusetta, 2001). In general, recipients report that awards are affirming and encouraging (Madriaga & Morley, 2016).

Brawer and colleagues (2006) noted that important questions remain regarding the influence of awards on the entire teaching community of the institution and whether those who had not received or been nominated for the award might also be motivated to improve teaching. The present study is designed to address those questions by evaluating faculty members' perceptions of Augusta University's "Caught in the Act of Great Teaching" (CIA) award.

Faculty members at Augusta University are eligible for a variety of teaching awards through their department, college, or the institution; however, most of those awards require relatively complex application or selection processes, and relatively few faculty members (typically tenured or tenure-track) receive the award. The CIA award was designed to be a morale-boosting, low-stakes award that could be bestowed frequently and required few administrative resources.<sup>1</sup> Since few resources were available, the award was not accompanied by a monetary reward.

The process of selecting CIA award recipients is efficient: Short (100-word) nominations are solicited through occasional announcements to students and faculty members; previous recipients serve as the selection committee; and final selections are based on two ratings of each nomination from the members of the selection committee (i.e., whether the nomination described an act and whether the act was exemplary). Because of the efficiency of the process, awards can be distributed frequently (generally every three weeks). All instructors, including part-time and non-tenure-track, are eligible for the award; and selections are made for both the traditional undergraduate and the health professions campuses of the university.

The spare criteria enlarge the pool of likely recipients by accommodating a wide range of teaching activities in a wide variety of contexts: in and out

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term "low-stakes" to indicate that the award was intended to have no or only a limited direct significance within the official framework of the institution's professional evaluation of faculty members. This usage is similar to that in the term "low-stakes assessment," which indicates an assessment that has no or limited direct consequences for a student's grade in a course.

of class; advising and mentoring; in traditional, online, experiential, and clinical settings. In one case the award was given to a faculty member who overheard students expressing confusion about a topic and helped them understand the material, although it was for a class for which he, the eventual award winner, was not responsible. In the first year of the CIA awards, nominations were received from seven of the eight colleges. The recipients were from five of the colleges (some colleges having multiple winners) and encompassed a mix of contingent and tenure-track faculty. Subsequent years have had similar distributions. To enhance the award's potential to boost morale, the presentation is a surprise to the recipient, ideally taking place during a class meeting in the presence of students and/or colleagues. Furthermore, the Office of Faculty Development and Teaching Excellence as well as departments and colleges distribute announcements and congratulations through newsletters, social media, and web postings.

In an earlier study, we described the development of the award in detail and examined how recipients and nominees perceived the award (Bledsoe & Richardson, 2016). Award winners and nominees who responded to a survey about the award felt that receiving or being nominated for the award contributed positively to their sense of self as a teacher; a large majority agreed that receiving the award in front of their students was a positive experience; most reported that the award or nomination had improved their awareness of their teaching. The respondents also reported that they felt validated or recognized in their role as instructors and that they felt more motivated in their teaching role. We concluded that "A . . . survey of the faculty corps as a whole might help determine the depth and breadth of awareness of the award, the perception of its value, and whether faculty who have not been recipients or nominees have been motivated by the existence of the award to improve their teaching" (p. 65).

The study presented here addressed the suggestion in that conclusion by examining the institutional impact of the award after it had been ongoing for several years. Our goals were to (1) evaluate impact in terms of faculty awareness of the award and in terms of faculty perceptions of the impact of the award on recipients; (2) examine whether perceptions would be more positive in units that included an award recipient than in units that did not have a member who had received the award; (3) consider whether faculty who were more aware and positive about the award would be more likely to attend faculty development events; (4) determine if faculty perceptions varied as a function of the teaching context (health sciences vs. comprehensive undergraduate). We expected that there would be fairly widespread

awareness of the award and that it would be perceived positively. We also anticipated that faculty members from departments that included an award recipient would report more awareness and more positive perceptions of the award.

Although the literature on the outcomes of teaching awards primarily addresses how the awards are perceived by faculty members, we wanted to extend the question of institutional impact to consider how teaching awards might affect participation in faculty development events. In our case, the Office of Faculty Development and Teaching Excellence administered the process of selection, presentation, and announcement of the award. One might hope that faculty members would see that connection and feel more motivated to attend faculty development events, especially those related to teaching.

The institutional profile of our university allowed us to examine whether the disciplinary focus of the faculty members (health sciences versus comprehensive undergraduate) would relate to the perceived or expected impact of the award. Brawer et al. (2006) noted the special teaching context of medical faculty: "In the current medical school cultural climate there seems little to motivate a faculty member to develop into a capable, committed, professional educator" (p. 614). They also noted that the "research-intensive, clinically demanding environment" leads to perceptions that teaching is not valued. These arguments suggest one of two possible responses to teaching awards among educators in the health sciences: (1) receiving an award may be especially motivating because it provides rare recognition for an activity that is required but not often rewarded, or (2) receiving a teaching award may seem unimportant or irrelevant because of the lack of value placed on that role. Thus, we expected that health science educators' responses to the awards might differ from those of faculty who taught in the comprehensive undergraduate program, but there was no basis for a specific directional hypothesis.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Participants ( $N = 94$ ) were university faculty members recruited from 10 academic departments. The departments were selected from the Summer-ville (SMV) and Health Sciences (HS) campuses of Augusta University. The

SMV campus ( $n = 69$ ) houses most non-medical undergraduate programs including the colleges of Education, Science and Mathematics, Business, and Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. The HS campus ( $n = 22$ ) houses professional medical programs within the university including the College of Allied Health Sciences, College of Nursing, the Dental College of Georgia, and the Medical College of Georgia. Approximately half of the respondents were from five departments that had among their faculty a person who had won the CIA award in the past two years ( $n = 51$ ). The remainder were from five departments that had not had a CIA winner ( $n = 43$ ).

After determining which departments included and did not include faculty members who had won the CIA award in the last two years, five departments per category were randomly selected to recruit for participation. We made an attempt to select departments with and without award recipients from the same or similar colleges (e.g., History with a recipient and Music with no recipient are housed in the same college; Advanced Studies with a recipient and Teaching and Learning without a recipient are both housed in the College of Education). One HS department that did not have a recipient among their faculty did not accept our invitation for participation in the study.

The five departments that included faculty members who had won the award were Biostatistics & Epidemiology (HS;  $n = 9$ ), Advanced Studies & Innovation (SMV;  $n = 11$ ), History, Anthropology, & Philosophy (SMV;  $n = 12$ ), Physiological & Technological Nursing (HS;  $n = 9$ ), and Psychological Sciences (SMV;  $n = 10$ ). The departments that did not have faculty members who had won the award included Chemistry & Physics (SMV;  $n = 16$ ), Music (SMV;  $n = 9$ ), Dental Hygiene (HS;  $n = 7$ ), and Teaching & Learning (SMV;  $n = 11$ ).

Participants completed the short survey during a department meeting. The front page assessed the awareness of the CIA award with six questions: "Have you heard of the 'Caught in the Act of Great Teaching' award?"; "Has anyone you know received the award?"; "Has anyone in your department received the award?"; "Have you received the award?"; and "Have you nominated anyone for the award?" The response options for these questions were "Yes," "No," or "Not sure." Those who indicated that they had heard of the award were also asked to indicate how they had heard about the award.

In order to assure that all respondents had a correct and similar notion of the award, when they turned to the back page, they found a description of

the award. They then answered seven questions about how they and recipients might respond to the award on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Two questions assessed the effects of knowing about the award: “Does knowing about this award positively impact...” (a) “your motivation to be a good teacher?” and (b) “your interest in attending faculty development workshops and events that address teaching?” Then participants answered four questions about how receiving the award might positively impact the recipient: “Should receiving this award positively impact...” (a) “evaluation of the recipient for tenure or promotion?”; (b) “the recipient’s teaching component of [annual] performance reviews?”; (c) “the recipient’s motivation to be a good teacher?”; and (d) “the recipient’s interest in attending faculty development workshops and events that address good teaching?” The final question asked participants to evaluate how much receiving the award would impact self-perception: “How much would getting this award impact your perception of yourself as a teacher?”

### *Procedures*

The researchers contacted the chairs of the selected departments and asked to attend a faculty meeting to administer the survey. At the faculty meeting, a researcher (one of the three authors) described the purpose of the study and answered any questions about participating in the study. Participants then responded to the questions and put their completed survey in an envelope provided for that purpose. The study was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board.

## **Results**

### *Awareness of Award*

Most respondents were aware of the award (87.9%) and knew someone who had received the award (64.8%). About half of them knew someone from their own department who had won the award (48.9%). Few had nominated anyone for the award (6.7%) or previously won the award (9.9%).

Seventy-two respondents reported how they had heard about the award. Most ( $n = 47$ ) knew about the award from campus communications—the university’s weekly newsletter or from announcements from the Office of Faculty Development and Teaching Excellence. Several ( $n = 14$ ) reported that colleagues had made them aware of the award; over half of those indicated

that a colleague had won the award. Three people mentioned the Celebration of Faculty, the annual event where all recipients are recognized; one said they had helped create it; and three could not remember how they knew, with one stating, "No idea; it's just out there."

The Chi-square test for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) revealed that more SMV respondents (92.8%) knew about the award than HS respondents (72.7%),  $\chi^2(1, 91) = 4.55, p = .03, \phi = -.26$ . Respondents from the two campuses did not differ in knowing someone who had received the award (68% SMV, 54% HS;  $\chi^2(1, 91) = .82, p = .37, \phi = -.12$ ), having nominated someone for the award (7% SMV, 5% HS;  $\chi^2(1, 90) = .00, p = 1.0, \phi = -.05$ ), or having personally won the award (9% SMV, 14% HS;  $\chi^2(1, 91) = .07, p = .79, \phi = .07$ ). As expected, respondents from departments with a previous recipient of the award were more likely to report that they knew someone who had received the award (79.2%) than were respondents from departments without an award recipient (48.8%),  $\chi^2(1, 91) = 7.87, p = .01, \phi = .32$ .

### *Perception of Award*

Questions about the award addressed how respondents perceived that the award (1) should impact someone who received it and (2) would impact them if they were to receive it. We examined the percentages of respondents who responded 4 or 5 (agree or strongly agree) on the 5-point scales. Although few agreed that *knowing about* the award would have much impact on their motivation to be a good teacher (32.2%), respondents were more positive about the likely impact of *receiving* the award. With regard to expected impact on recipients, 58% agreed that receiving the award should positively impact evaluation of the recipient for tenure or promotion, 58% agreed that it should positively impact the teaching component of performance reviews, and 45.7% agreed that it should positively impact the recipient's motivation. In terms of likely impact on themselves should they receive the award, 47.3% agreed that receiving the award would positively impact their perception of themselves as a teacher.

### **Does having a recipient among immediate colleagues relate to perceptions of the award?**

We conducted independent samples *t*-tests to determine whether respondents from departments with and without a recipient of the award differed in

their perception of the motivational impact of the award. As revealed in Table 1, the near presence of an award recipient was not related to perceptions of the impact of the award.

Table 1  
**Perceptions of the “Caught in the Act of Great Teaching” Award  
 in Departments with and without Recipients**

	Department				<i>t</i> (91)
	With Recipients ( <i>n</i> = 50)		No Recipients ( <i>n</i> = 43)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Does knowing about this award positively impact your motivation to be a good teacher?	2.78	1.37	2.60	1.28	.63
Does knowing about this award positively impact your interest in attending faculty development workshops and events that address teaching?	2.66	1.44	2.72	1.28	-.22
Should receiving this award positively impact evaluation of the recipient for tenure or promotion?	3.57	1.51	3.37	1.09	.85
Should receiving this award positively impact the recipient’s teaching component of performance reviews?	3.73	1.23	3.30	1.04	1.79



Should receiving this award positively impact the recipient's motivation to be a good teacher?	3.37	1.20	2.98	1.22	1.54
Should receiving this award positively impact the recipient's interest in attending faculty development workshops and events that address good teaching?	2.94	1.23	2.86	1.19	.31
How much would getting this award impact your perception of yourself as a teacher?	3.38	1.38	3.16	1.15	.81

<i>Note.</i> * $p < .05$
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### Interest in faculty development events

Few (34.4%) respondents agreed that knowing about the award would provide motivation for attending faculty development events, and only 35.8% agreed that receiving the award should positively impact the recipient's interest in attending faculty development events.

We calculated Pearson Product Moment correlations in order to examine the relationship of interest in faculty development events to perceptions of how much the award should motivate teaching and contribute to evaluations of faculty work. The correlation coefficients appear in Table 2. We anticipated that respondents who felt that the award would or should motivate good teaching would also report interest in attending faculty development events related to teaching, a route to learning more about and improving teaching. And, that is what we found. However, interest in attending faculty development events was not as strongly related to perceptions that the award should contribute to evaluations of teaching in annual reviews or for promotion/tenure.

HS respondents were more likely to link motivation for good teaching to interest in faculty development than were SMV respondents. They were also more likely to see a connection between faculty development and using the award as evidence for annual reviews and promotion/tenure decisions.

Table 2  
**Correlations of Reports of Interest in Faculty Development Events  
with Teaching Motivation and Evaluation**

	Interest in attending faculty development events <sup>1</sup>	
	Own <sup>2</sup>	Recipient <sup>3</sup>
Does knowing about this award positively impact your motivation to be a good teacher?	.68 (.85, .58)	.65 (.80, .56)
Should receiving this award positively impact the recipient's motivation to be a good teacher?	.53 (.69, .45)	.67 (.67, .66)
How much would getting this award impact your perception of yourself as a teacher?	.53 (.84, .59)	.70 (.73, .66)
Should receiving this award positively impact evaluation of the recipient for tenure or promotion?	.32 (.49, .21 <sup>ns</sup> )	.42 (.62, .30)
Should receiving this award positively impact the recipient's teaching component of performance reviews?	.29 (.56, .11 <sup>ns</sup> )	.43 (.66, .29)

*Note.* All correlations are significant at  $p < .05$  except for those marked as *ns*.

<sup>1</sup> First number in parentheses is correlation for Health Science respondents; second number is correlation for Summerville respondents.

<sup>2</sup> Own: "Does knowing about this award positively impact your interest in attending faculty development workshops and events that address teaching?"

<sup>3</sup> Recipient: "Should receiving this award positively impact the recipient's interest in attending faculty development workshops and events that address good teaching?"

### **Does perception of the award vary by teaching context?**

We conducted independent samples *t*-tests to examine differences in responses between respondents from the two campuses. Table 3 displays relevant statistics. Compared to SMV campus faculty members, respondents from the HS campus agreed more strongly that knowing about the award

positively impacted their motivation to be a good teacher and their interest in attending faculty development workshops and events. HS respondents also agreed more than SMV respondents that receiving the award should positively impact the recipient's teaching component of performance reviews. SMV and HS respondents did not differ in their extent of agreement that receiving the CIA award should positively impact evaluation of the recipient for tenure or promotion, the recipient's motivation to be a good teacher, and the recipient's interest in attending faculty development workshops and events. Faculty from the two campuses also did not differ in their perception of the extent to which receiving the award would positively impact their perception of themselves as a teacher.

Table 3  
Differences in Perceptions of CIA Award Between Campuses

Outcome	Campus				<i>t</i> (91)	95% Confidence Interval
	SMV ( <i>n</i> = 69)		HS ( <i>n</i> = 24)			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Does knowing about this award positively impact your motivation to be a good teacher?*	2.54	1.24	3.17	1.47	-2.04	.017, 1.24
Does knowing about this award positively impact your interest in attending faculty development workshops and events that address teaching?*	2.49	1.29	3.25	1.39	-2.43	.137, 1.38

How much would getting this award impact your perception of yourself as a teacher?	3.16	1.26	3.63	1.31	-1.55	-.132, 1.06
Should receiving this award positively impact evaluation of the recipient for tenure or promotion?	3.37	1.05	3.79	1.28	-1.60	-.102, .946
Should receiving this award positively impact the recipient's teaching component of performance reviews?*	3.38	1.08	3.96	1.30	-2.13	.038, 1.11
Should receiving this award positively impact the recipient's motivation to be a good teacher?	3.07	1.23	3.50	1.18	-1.48	-.146, .999
Should receiving this award positively impact the recipient's interest in attending faculty development workshops and events that address good teaching?	2.78	1.14	3.25	1.33	-1.66	-.092, 1.03

*Note.* \* $p < .05$

## Discussion

This study was designed to answer four questions. Did the low-stakes CIA award (1) have institutional impact in terms of awareness of the award and in terms of perceptions of how the award would impact the recipient; (2) have different impact depending upon whether units included an award

recipient or did not; (3) encourage participation in faculty development events and activities; and (4) have different impact as a function of the teaching context (health sciences vs. comprehensive undergraduate)?

Most respondents were aware of the award, and most knew a recipient of the award. Most also agreed that the award should have a positive impact on promotion and tenure decisions and on performance reviews. Almost half agreed that the award should have a positive impact on motivation of recipients and lead to a positive perception of the recipient's teaching. Therefore, although the CIA award is small recognition in the sense that it is accompanied only with a certificate and presentation in the presence of a group of students and/or faculty members, it has had notable institutional impact.

As expected, respondents were more likely to report knowing a recipient if someone in their department had received the award. However, we did not discover many differences in regard to award awareness between units with and without recipients. Since almost all respondents were aware of the award, there was little opportunity to discover differences. The lack of difference would seem to indicate that attempts to publicize the award were effective.

On the other hand, the results include some potentially disconcerting news for Centers for Teaching and Learning or other faculty development units that support teaching excellence through awards. Few respondents reported that either awareness of the award or actually receiving the award would/should influence interest in attending faculty development events, although health science faculty members were more positive than the primarily undergraduate faculty members. Future research might examine whether actual attendance at faculty development events is greater among individuals who receive awards or among those who have a more positive view of such awards.

Teaching context did make a difference in perceptions of the award. Although awareness of the award was somewhat greater among respondents from the comprehensive undergraduate campus, those from the health science campus were more likely to agree that knowing about the award increased motivation to be a good teacher and to attend faculty development events. Health science faculty respondents were also more likely to agree that the award should impact performance reviews. Thus we provide evidence to support the notion that receiving a teaching award may be more motivating among educators who desire recognition for this role that is required but not often rewarded in the health science context.

In our previous study (Bledsoe & Richardson, 2016), we suggested that an evaluation of the award according to the ten guidelines for exemplary recognition programs articulated by Svinicki and Menges (1996) yielded mixed results. We found that the CIA award was consistent with our institution's mission and values, recognized significant facets of instructional activities, did not preclude or displace other institutional rewards, and was adaptable. However, that earlier study was unclear as to whether the award promoted self-reflection. If, as we would argue, motivation and considering one's role as a teacher involve self-reflection, then the award also meets the criterion for exemplary recognition programs of promoting self-reflection on teaching practices.

Consistent with previous reports on the goals and effects of teaching awards, Augusta University's CIA award meets the goal of affirming good teachers (Chism & Szabo, 1997), and our findings are consistent with others' reports that the recognition received through teaching awards is valued and encourages good teaching (Carusetta, 2001; Madriaga & Morley, 2016). Notably, this award achieves its impact with an efficient process that requires few resources.

The statistical indications of the award's impact and value are supported by anecdotal evidence. Department chairs and colleagues of a recipient are typically informed about place and time of the presentation of the award so that they can be present when the award is delivered—and, in most cases, a number of colleagues are hiding in corridors or offices awaiting the presentation of the award. The Director of the Office of Faculty Development and Teaching Excellence received a call from a new dean on campus who was quite distressed that *she* was not informed about the delivery of the award—because she wanted to be present to congratulate the recipient personally as well. This anecdotal evidence suggests that faculty members and administrators value the award and that it is perceived as boosting morale of recipients and their colleagues.

The CIA award has limitations. It focuses on an *act*, a specific behavior that a colleague or a student perceives to be “great.” Thus the “evidence” used during the selection process consists of anecdotes and individual perceptions rather than documented evidence of student learning. And, as is the case for most teaching awards, there is no clear evidence that it actually impacts behavior by leading to better teaching. Yet, overall the award has had a notable institutional impact and increases some instructors' motivation to improve teaching. Since one cannot ascribe this increased motivation to the prestige of the award, it seems—at least in part—to be based on what may

seem to be an inherent limitation: its low-stakes character. Since the award recognizes specific acts and, therefore, not sustained term- or career-long commitment to teaching excellence and is awarded frequently (multiple times a semester), receiving it is an attainable goal for instructors with varying levels of instructional expertise. So, it may be motivating for instructors who may not consider themselves to be, or may not aspire to be, truly exemplary teachers.

This study only examined the impact of the award on faculty members. Institutional impact might also be examined from the perspective of administrators or students. Do students' perceptions of their instructors become more positive when the award is presented in their presence? Do administrators acknowledge the value of such a low-stakes, widely distributed award? The consideration of this broader institutional impact might be a fruitful direction for future research. On a more global level, it might be productive to examine the conditions in an institution that affect faculty members' perceptions of the value of teaching awards as mechanisms for increasing motivation.

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