

Julie Ooms, PhD
Statement of Teaching Philosophy and Professional Goals

I teach Augustine's *Confessions* every semester in World Literature, and I never tire of pointing out one early line to my students: "I had no love for reading books and hated being forced to study them. Yet pressure was put on me and was good for me."¹ My students, in turn, also never tire of pointing out what Augustine writes mere sentences later as he critiques his teachers, who sought "merely to satisfy the appetite for wealth and for glory" rather than considering their students' good.² This passage doesn't only allow my students and me to rib each other gently with the aid of a Church Father; it also undergirds my philosophies of teaching and of research.

Part of teaching, as Augustine's example illustrates, involves guiding students to complete—and even delight in—tasks they would rather not do, such as required reading. My students might say, and I may have said as an undergraduate, that they don't like to complete their reading because the texts are often old and almost always difficult. I have come to believe that the primary issue here, and one that my teaching practice must address, is one of attention. Modern life is full of things seeking to monopolize and often monetize our attention. My role is to help students recognize how their attention is being squandered, often without their conscious choice, and learn how to attend to what is good, true, and beautiful, even when it is also unpleasantly difficult. I do this by helping students train their attention through close readings of individual poems or sections of texts, by guiding them as they attend closely to their own writing as they write and revise, by encouraging them to attend respectfully to their classmates during discussion, and by attending to them as my students and as people, fellow bearers of the *Imago Dei*. All this attentive work is difficult, but it is also deeply good.

Another aspect of my teaching philosophy, one that overlaps with my philosophy of research and how I consider my goals as a scholar, is exemplified in Augustine's rebuke of his teachers. He describes his teachers as those "who were failing to do anything morally right" as they sought their own glory, but whom God ultimately used for Augustine's good.³ After a discouraging day of teaching, this rebuke keeps me from overvaluing my own efforts, particularly if my heart is oriented toward my own desire to appear sage rather than a true desire for my students' good. I am convinced that all teachers are charged with a weighty responsibility to prepare students not only to meet the challenges of modern life but to pursue what is good as they do so. Simultaneously, however, to regard myself as uniquely equipped to guide them unerringly is folly. In practice, this belief affects how I understand my relationship with my students, my colleagues, and the scholars with whom I dialogue in my own research and writing. I recognize daily that despite my years of training and experience, my students often catch me off guard with their astuteness and humble me with the interpretive possibilities they see and that I hadn't considered. I recognize, too, that any educational endeavor is necessarily corporate; it requires building community with students and also with colleagues whose expertise enriches my own. Finally, I recognize that in my scholarship, seeking to advance my own name is counterproductive if my overarching goals are pursuing truth and deepening the well of human knowledge. Thus, some of my current work and my research goals involve collaboration. I have edited two issues of *Intégrité*, Missouri Baptist University's faith and learning journal, which

¹Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 14.

² *Ibid*, 14-15.

³ *Ibid*, 15.

involved collaborating with and curating the work of other scholars. The largest research project I am working on right now is a co-authored book concerning Christian practices for teaching reading. I and my co-authors, two other literary scholars at other American universities, conceived of this project in our bimonthly writing group meetings, where we have been reading and sharpening each other's work for the past five years. In my own research, I have been working and continue to work in an area of Sylvia Plath scholarship that explores the political and philosophical thought evident in her work—an underpopulated area of Plath scholarship, but one that is helping to advance an often overlooked aspect of her writing. My most recently published article, concerning Plath's religion, particularly as she interacts with the ideas of Augustine and St. Paul, is an example of this type of work.

As both a teacher and a scholar, then, I hope to pursue the good of my students, my colleagues, and those with whom I share a scholarly discipline. Our work is difficult; it requires close attention; it necessitates the reading of complex writing; it forces us to pay attention in ways that do not come easily to us. But the rewards are worth the struggle: the delight of truth and beauty, the cultivation of our and others' good, and the furtherance of human knowledge. I also know that, ultimately and despite my own inevitable mistakes and failures, my efforts at teaching and research will be used—like those of Augustine's teachers—by God for my and my students' ultimate good.