

GETTING TO THE POINT (S2E1): Prof. Laura Garofoli Awarded Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service

[Getting to the Point theme fades in]

[00min 02sec]

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

Welcome to *Getting to the Point*. I'm Zoe Chrisostomides, your host of today's podcast. The titleholders of this year's Governor's Performance Recognition Award, have been named, and we have a winner right here at Fitchburg State University.

Professor Laura Garofoli of the Psychological Science department will be recognized next month by Governor Healey and Lieutenant Governor Driscoll as the 2023 recipient of the Manuel Carballo Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service. The Manuel Carballo Governor's Award for Excellence is presented to employees who selflessly personify a deep commitment to serving the people of the Commonwealth and exemplify the highest standards of public service.

[00min 44sec]

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

I am happy to introduce our guest, Professor Laura Garofoli, to discuss her achievements as well as her impact here at Fitchburg State.

[Dr. Laura Garofoli:](#)

Thank you, Zoe.

[Getting to the Point theme fades out]

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

So my first question for you today is where were you when you learned of this amazing recognition?

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

Well, it's funny, I was actually in the car with my husband. We were heading to my son's soccer game, and I got pinged on my email and saw that I had a voicemail from President Lapidus. And you know, my initial response was, okay, why is the President calling my office? Why am I not in my office to receive this phone call?

So I listened to his message and he said that it was good news and I called him back immediately, and he told me that I was the recipient of this award.

GETTING TO THE POINT (S2E1): Prof. Laura Garofoli Awarded Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

Wow, that is amazing. I would have panicked if I had a voicemail from President Lapidus. So we understand that someone nominated you for this award. What does that mean to you? So you must have a tremendous impact here in your department.

[01min 38sec]

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

Yeah, I was actually nominated by Dr. Christopher Adams. So he's a good colleague in my department and he has nominated me several times for the service award on campus. And we've got people who do amazing work here. So I haven't gotten that one. [*laughs*] But he decided to put me up for the performance recognition program and I received that award.

I was notified in August that I received that award and then the Carballo Awards were selected from that pool. So it's just – it's an extraordinary honor. It's very humbling to have your colleagues see you that way. I don't necessarily see myself that way, but I'm grateful that he nominated me.

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

That's awesome. So then I just have a quick question going off what you just said. So you were aware of the award back in August, that you were aware that you were in the running?

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

I was aware of the first one. So the performance recognition is like a bigger pool of awards. And then actually the President that day said to me that, you know, I would be in the running for one of the four state awards that are little, you know, higher level, more prestigious. And I told him not to get too excited. [*laughs*] So it was funny when he called because we both recalled that conversation.

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

So part of the acknowledgment of this award is your contribution to what we know as campus, the FYE program, which helps first year students become acclimated on campus. Can you talk a little bit about how you helped to develop this program here?

[03min 12sec]

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

Yeah, sure. So this course was designed – it's a seminar designed for first year students. All incoming students who have 29 or fewer credits take FYE. It was designed by committee. So we had representation from every department on campus. And it's always hard to come to consensus when you've got so many people in the room. But everybody was really dedicated to developing something that would be meaningful and useful for first year students.

GETTING TO THE POINT (S2E1): Prof. Laura Garofoli Awarded Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service

So I've been a part of that committee from the beginning. After two years of the pilot program, we revised the course to have tighter learning outcomes. So those outcomes are centered around metacognitive reading skills, information literacy skills, and just good habits of mind. So I was pretty heavily involved in the development of the three learning outcomes that we have now.

I currently coordinate the program, which means that I help with scheduling the courses, and I also train all of the faculty. So every faculty member who teaches FTE undergoes a professional summer learning program. It's pretty intense. We, you know, really share a lot with one another. We learn to use common methods because all of our courses, even though they're offered in different departments, have to have the same three learning outcomes met.

So it's a big, big effort by all of the faculty to make sure that we're all kind of doing the same thing. And I also run the faculty community of practice during the fall. So we meet every two weeks to talk about how things are going and try to improve our practice and improve outcomes for students.

[04min 48sec]

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

You are also lauded as a beacon in special education. Why is this work so important to you?

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

Well, I started out going to graduate school for a Ph.D. in developmental psychology, which I earned, but I did not jump into Higher Ed right away. So I was a reading disability specialist and educational assessment specialist and choral director, actually, at the former Dr. Franklin Perkins School in Lancaster – it's now RFK. And that work had a profound impact on me.

These are both residential and students who come to that campus with significant trauma histories, histories of abuse, neglect, mental health difficulties and it's really hard to learn when you're battling all of those demons, really. So my work in special ed really became a huge part of who I am. And having worked in that setting, we saw lots of kids from lots of places. So lots of towns in Massachusetts, but also lots of different states.

So seeing how special ed is handled around the region and even we had students from across the country as well and seeing how differently it's handled was really stunning to me. I have a very firm planting in social and educational justice and it was bothersome.

So I felt badly leaving Perkins. But there was an opportunity to join the faculty here in the Education Department, which was the first time that regular ed and Special Ed departments were merged together to be the Education Department on campus.

And so I took that, and then two years later, I ended up in Psychological Science. But, you

GETTING TO THE POINT (S2E1): Prof. Laura Garofoli Awarded Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service

know, you can take the girl out of Special Ed, but you can't take the Special Ed out of the girl.

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

I love that saying. So let's move forward and talk about your career. What made you want to become a teacher?

[06min 46sec]

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

You know, it's interesting. The first time I really thought about it was when I had a professor. He was a philosophy professor when I was an undergrad and he told us how great his job was. He got to stand there and share ideas with, you know, fresh young minds! And it had an impact on me. I never really thought about being a college professor.

But, you know, lo and behold, it really appealed to me. When I was in graduate school – once once you received your master's degree, you were able to teach courses in the summer. And I taught a junior writing seminar at UMass. I was at UMass Amherst, and all of the students in my course had failed the writing course multiple times.

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

Oh no.

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

And I watched them succeed. We had fun discussing, you know, difficult ideas. And I realized that I had the teaching bug. I went to graduate school assuming I was going to be this, you know, big R one researcher. And I figured out pretty quickly after teaching my first course that I really had the teaching bug and it fed my soul.

[07min 51sec]

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

Right. So it seems like you had a connection with your professor that kind of made you want to be another professor, and you had a really strong connection with your students. So why is it important to have an impact on students the way you have here at Fitchburg State?

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

And it's why I do what I do. So, as much as I love my colleagues and I love the campus and the surrounding community, I do what I do because I love seeing students succeed. I love seeing the light bulbs go off. I love watching students learn to advocate for themselves to gain confidence and skills.

You know, it's – I tell my students sometimes I'm kind of like a campus mom where, you know, my students are all my babies and I just love seeing them grow and change and develop and go

GETTING TO THE POINT (S2E1): Prof. Laura Garofoli Awarded Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service

on to have fruitful lives. It's just how I'm built.

[08min 42sec]

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

That's amazing. We really need more people like you on campus. You're also helping to develop future students. What does this mean to you?

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

It means that we have a brighter future, right? So not that I have all the answers, but for me, most of my job – I feel like the most important parts of my job are helping students to be seen and helping students to become who they can be. And sometimes that just takes that one person who really sees you and believes in you.

And when that happens, students have limitless potential. And I just want that. I want for – I want that for students. I want that for their futures. I want our society to have well-prepared people entering it. So it's – I take it very seriously.

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

So jumping back to the special, special education topic outside of the classroom, how else do you contribute to the importance of special education?

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

I've done a lot of consultation with families. I used to have a, you know, testing consultation on the side. You know, becoming a parent myself sort of made it hard to do those sorts of things. But I'm involved with the Simco. At my son's high school, I was at, that's the School Improvement Committee. I was involved on the Simco Committee at his middle school as well.

I've been involved with the school committee in town developing, helping to develop the life threatening food allergies policy. And I'm a member of a lot of different Facebook groups that that deal with special education issues as well.

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

Do you ever find it hard to balance?

[10min 17sec]

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

Always, always, always. I don't I admit I don't balance well. So, yeah, because I want to do everything at 100% and you can't. So some days are easier than others. You know, some periods of time here require more time, like advising and registration requires more time. And

GETTING TO THE POINT (S2E1): Prof. Laura Garofoli Awarded Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service

so, you know, my family has to adjust a little. And then there are times when, you know, my job has to adjust for my family's needs.

And it is definitely a hard balance. I don't – I don't know that I'm ever going to learn balance. Right. This is my 19th year here, and I'm not certain that I'm necessarily built that way. I think I've just learned how to juggle.

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

To finish up today, let's get into the next steps for you. The award ceremony takes place on November 8th at the state House. Who will be attending the ceremony with you?

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

Well, they've only allowed us one guest.

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

Noooo!

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

Yeah. So I was really hoping that my husband and my son could come with me. We are still trying to figure out –

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

Which one.

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

– Which one will it be. You know, maybe we'll all be going in. It will be either my husband or my son by my side.

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

That's awesome. And then what do you need to do to prepare for the ceremony?

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

Figure out where to park and where to go. So there haven't been a ton of instructions. So I'm going to reach out to them to figure out. But it sounds like we just show up, smile, hopefully shake hands with the governor. Right. And receive our award.

[11min 17sec]

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

Yeah, that's awesome. Hopefully, hopefully, you get like a little trophy that you can put up in your house.

GETTING TO THE POINT (S2E1): Prof. Laura Garofoli Awarded Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

I don't know if it's a trophy. I think it's probably just a certificate. Yeah, that that will be going up on the wall.

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

You may not have a chance to thank everyone on the 8th, but are there any special shout outs that you would like to share with us now?

[12min 01sec]

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

I would have to say first, I have to thank my family for always supporting my work. I don't identify as only through my work, but my work is a big part of who I am. And I certainly have to thank my colleague, Dr. Adams and my whole department, because they've always been behind the nominations. And Dr. Adams is wonderful.

He nominates everybody for everything. He's just fantastic, you know.

But my students and my colleagues, you know, they make, they make the work worthwhile. There are a lot of people doing a lot of great service on this campus. And I don't think it gets recognized just how much energy and effort and time and blood, sweat and tears goes into supporting students and one another on campus.

[Getting to the Point theme fades in]

So I don't really – It's very humbling to get this award, and I don't really feel like it's mine so much as I am representing all of my colleagues who do amazing service work on campus and off campus as well.

[Getting to the Point theme continues]

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

That is really heartwarming. So. Professor Garofoli, congratulations on your Governor's Performance Recognition award and thank you for being our guest today. We hope you continue to inspire future teachers like yourself.

Dr. Laura Garofoli:

Thank you so much Zoe.

[13min 27sec]

Zoe Chrisostomides (host):

GETTING TO THE POINT (S2E1): Prof. Laura Garofoli Awarded Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service

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[13min 57sec]

[Perseverantia theme music fades in]

Sara from the Library:

This is Sarah, Library Assistant in the library. You're listening to Perseverantia, the Fitchburg State Podcast Network.

[Perseverantia theme music fades out]