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Young and Confident, a New Professor Confronts New Challenges

By Joseph Torres

Things were going smoothly. He was finding his footing as a young, new professor at Cal State Long Beach. Relationships with the student body were coming to fruition. Finally, everything felt just right. But then, the world shut down, and Professor Bell had to adapt to changes yet again.

Trevor Bell teaches research methods, strategic communication, and social media communication in the department of journalism and public relations. Bell first taught at Texas Tech University and at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he achieved his Ph.D.

When Bell landed a full-time faculty job at CSULB, he was used to the classroom environment and the material. However, a balance was difficult to establish because of his age.

“Oftentimes I have been a very similar age to students,” Bell said. “From a pro standpoint, there’s a little bit more relatability. And whenever I talk about the current academic struggle, it wasn’t too long ago that I was in the same seat as the students. I use The Office references all the time and memes and culturally relevant jokes.”



Bell and Splenda posed together for their faculty photo. Photo by Trevor Bell

But that level of relatability was missing an authoritative touch.

“I remember a lot of students when I first started automatically called me by my first name,” Bell said. “That may be the culture within the department, but I was like, ‘no, call me professor or doctor.’ With me being young, it may help because they think, ‘he’s going to be fun.’ At the same time, I walk in and maybe people don’t take me as seriously as they should. It’s usually by the first or second assignment when they realize, ‘wow, he’s actually kind of difficult.’”

Bell made his debut at CSULB in the fall of 2019, shortly before COVID-19 cases first spiked in America.

“My first semester in research methods, I probably got through half of the syllabus of what I had originally planned,” Bell said. “Then, in the second semester, I was feeling good, and we had a really good class going. The pandemic hit. I’ve been to southern California three times my entire life, and then all of a sudden, I move from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to Long Beach, California, which is 2,200 miles. I didn’t know anybody.”

Bell accepted his fate as an online teacher, but it came with more challenges.

“Student engagement is much lower,” Bell said. “Some hybrid models may work, and some classes are built for an online format. But research methods is not built for an online format. You don’t get the same level of connection. One of the things I enjoy most is building these relationships and connections with students.”

Samantha Troisi, a former student from Bell’s second semester, values that connection and still keeps in touch with him.

“Professor Bell actually cares,” Troisi said. “It’s really as simple as that. I’ve actually asked him for help and input on projects and campaigns that he had nothing to do with, and he’d take hours out of his schedule to help my teammates and me. He wants us to succeed and to give us the tools to do it.”

Bell and other professors do more than just lecture and grade. Behind the scenes, they conduct their own research. For example, Bell has dedicated time and effort to spreading awareness toward a disease he shares with roughly 1.5 million Americans, Type 1 diabetes.

“I was diagnosed when I was around 11,” Bell said. “People wouldn’t believe me because I wasn’t big, and I was young. Generally, when you say ‘diabetes,’ people think of Type 2 diabetes or being overweight. Growing up, I would order a Diet Coke. People would ask why I’m drinking diet. I say that I have diabetes. They’re like, ‘no, you don’t.’ There’s a big lack of awareness about what Type 1 diabetes is.”

Type 1 diabetes is an auto-immune disorder in which the body does not produce insulin and cannot consistently keep blood sugar within regular intervals.

“It’s one of the few diseases in which you are required to be your own doctor,” Bell said.

A lot of forethought and equipment is invested into managing Type 1 diabetes.



Bell uses a CGM called a Dexcom that links directly to his iPhone to provide his blood sugar levels in real time and in hourly intervals. Photo by Trevor Bell

“I’ve got a CGM on my arm and an insulin pump,” Bell said. “I remember I pulled this thing out during class when I was an undergrad, and people thought it was a pager. I had professors in college that would think that I was texting in class. The awareness is really low.”

Bell also has a companion to aid in his self-care. Splenda, a 6-year-old yellow lab, is his medical alert dog.

“She’s trained to detect when my blood sugar goes too low or too high,” Bell said. “When your body gets too low or too high, it releases a pheromone. She can smell it about 30 minutes before it actually happens. Let’s say my blood sugar is 100, and she starts acting weird, bumping me or staring at me. I know my blood sugar is about to change. Within 30 minutes, I am probably going to be low.”

But Splenda is more than just his medical assistant. She’s his best friend.

“I got her while I was in my Ph.D. program,” Bell said. “She was trained by a local non-profit organization called Eyes, Ears, Nose and Paws. She went to every class with me when I was getting my Ph.D. She walked the stage with me. We’ve gone on mini-vacations together.”



Splenda walked the stage with Bell when he got his Ph.D. Photo by Trevor Bell

Splenda even accompanies Bell in the classroom during lectures and is a favorite among students.

“She goes off whenever I let her go say hi. I don’t let her roam around while I’m giving lessons. But before and after class or during group work, I’m just like, ‘Splenda, go lighten the mood.’ Especially for a class like research methods that is intense and has kind of a bad reputation, at the very least Splenda will calm nerves and help on test days to relieve some of the tension.”

Research methods is a course involving research, surveys, interviews, focus groups, statistics, and analysis to understand an audience. Bell is trying to turn its reputation as an uninteresting course into one of usefulness.

“I try to incorporate real-world problems, so the students feel like they’re contributing to something,” Bell said. “I try to build up skills they can utilize and have tangible products that they can show to employers.”

Bell’s spring 2020 class studied students’ mental health for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). The data and analyses they compiled were sent to CAPS and were utilized in faculty training

soon after. He continues to create applicable projects each semester and welcomes more journalism students to take the course since it is not a requirement for them like it is for public relations students.

“The biggest advantage is that whenever you guys are reporting and looking at secondary data like studies that organizations have released, you can actually analyze what those findings are,” Bell said. “You can analyze the quality of the data. Research is expensive. If you can develop the skills and do it yourself, that is valuable to employers.”