

Golden Apple
Success Stories
Derrick Svelnys
Golden Apple Scholar 1998



By the time Golden Apple Scholar Derrick Svelnys began his fourth year of teaching, he had already built two high school physics programs from the ground up. The following summer, he took his best and brightest students to Argonne National Laboratory for a weeklong experience working side by side with scientists in the lab. That program, which he and two Argonne scientists created together, would go on to be recognized by the U.S. Department of Energy and the Nuclear Science Advisory Committee as one of the ten “Current Best Practices” in nuclear science education in the nation.

“I bring physics to my students--show them real world applications to draw them in,” he explained, describing his teaching style. “I draw them in so much that I got them to spend a week of their summer vacation doing it!”

Notably, Svelnys is creating physics enthusiasts from high school freshmen. Running one of the few freshman physics classes in the country at Rickover Naval Academy on Chicago’s north side is a challenge Svelnys easily accepted. After all, he created the physics class he taught at Chicago Military Academy from scratch – as his first job out of college.

“I was hired in June, and they said, ‘We want you to start a physics class. Here’s the catalog. Tell us what textbooks and lab equipment you need,’” Svelnys recalled.

During that first year, he was invited by the founding principal of Rickover to join the opening crew of the new school, which was two years in the making and is currently going into its fourth year.

“My Golden Apple experience helped me find my groove in teaching from the very beginning, so when he observed one of my classes that first year, he saw how I was able to pull kids into physics and make it fun with a lot of hands-on and lab work,” Svelnys said.

After just one full year of teaching, Svelnys began not only creating an innovative freshman physics program but also helping to shape an entire school. He became part of the decision-making process—providing input on everything from the curriculum to the paint colors.

“Golden Apple made me a strong teacher from the get-go,” Svelnys explained. “I had so much experience prior to my first day of teaching. I had learned about curriculum and planning – and was able to put it all into practice – so I wasn’t completely overwhelmed. I could focus on finding the best resources and tools to make physics interesting.”

Derrick credits his Golden Apple peers with helping him realize what not to do when teaching physics, as well.

“I think I was the first physics Scholar and one of only three science Scholars that year, so when talking to the other members of my class, I learned from their horror stories. ‘My physics teacher did this, and I hated it,’ or ‘I never understood physics because this was how it was taught to me,’” he recalled. “Physics is a tough subject to grasp, and you hear a lot of ‘Why do I need to learn this?’ I show them why!”

In addition to his freshman students, Derrick helps other teachers develop understanding and enthusiasm for physics in the science course he teaches at the Golden Apple Center for Ongoing Renewal and

Enrichment (CORE). A weeklong summer conference in residence at Chicago's St. Xavier University, CORE provides professional development and personal mentoring for teaching Scholars and other Illinois teachers, primarily in their first, second and third years in the classroom.

"I teach a science lab class for non-science teachers, who maybe have a language arts background but have been thrust into a job where they're required to teach science," he said. "I show teachers who 'don't know anything about science' experiments they can do with their students, so they feel like they aren't going in to this new class completely blind."

Prepared for success by the Golden Apple Scholars program and giving back to the broader teaching community through Golden Apple, Svelnys exemplifies the organization's full-circle commitment to improving teaching and learning throughout Illinois.