

Participants Reflect on Time In Professor Gore's Class

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When former Vice President Al Gore climbs into his limousine after class next week, he will drive away from a semester as Columbia's best-recognized faculty member.

If next week is anything like this week, almost no one will notice. When Gore first set foot on College Walk in February, he was greeted by dozens of reporters shouting questions and snapping photographs. As Gore left his first class, he dodged questions about the controversy surrounding the class' reported off-the-record status, saying only that he was "excited" to be teaching.

Two weeks later, at Gore's second class, the reporters were gone, and by his penultimate class this week, the former vice president had faded into near anonymity, barely attracting the attention of students enjoying the sun on Low steps or Furnald Lawn.

Gore said from the start that he wanted to be a professor, not a celebrity. As he completes his first, and possibly only semester as a Columbia professor, he seems close to achieving that goal. It is, in many ways, the surest sign of Gore's transition from public figure to private citizen. On Wednesday, Gore said that transition had gone "smoothly."

As the semester wore on and Gore's rock star status faded, his students say he became more comfortable in his new role, able to take advantage of his experience in public life without allowing his celebrity to interfere with his teaching.

School of International and Public Affairs student Leah Yoon said that as the course progressed, Gore "found his comfort level with us," becoming "much more relaxed and personable."

"Gore is the kind of guy you would love to go have a beer with--make that a Diet Coke with," Yoon joked. The media attention did impact what went on inside the classroom, according to Yoon.

"Some of us had to report on the class afterwards. There was the feeling that these students wanted to make sure they had good material to work with," she said. Architecture student Benjamin Bolger felt similarly.

"I think it's unfortunate that there have been some students that have asked questions that are not pertinent to the class discussion, but instead they are trying to get the scoop for some story they might be working on," he said. "It's always unfortunate when people can't keep their focus on the topic."

Yoon said the three biggest lessons she learned from the seven classes taught so far were that journalists need to "earn the trust of readers and viewers," that "being ethical is practical," and that "balance is frequently a cop-out for mastering a subject."

After many of the classes, Gore said that he had learned a great deal in his new role, and the change has been a natural part of transitioning back to private life. When Gore first took the visiting professor post in January, President George W. Bush had just recently moved into the White House, and memories of the razor-close election and its 36-day aftermath were still fresh in the minds of Gore and his students alike.

Three months later, both former candidates have settled into their new roles. Gore has maintained an intentionally low profile both on and off Columbia's campus. Signs remain of his status--the motorcade, the Secret Service, the omnipresent public affairs officers--but Gore himself has done little to draw attention to himself.

Still, according to Graduate School of Journalism Professor Craig Wolff, while Gore may not dwell on his past in public, his experience is invaluable as a professor.

"Students got to see, hear, and share thinking with someone who had just experienced one of, if not the, most extraordinary experiences in politics ever," said Wolff. "We forget just how soon after the election he came. It was as though he walked out of a fifty-car pile up, dusted off, and came into our classroom." Wolff said he knows students are upset that Gore did not give a "blow by blow" description of the events following the election, but that they "nonetheless" learned what he reads, what influences him, and what he thinks is wrong with the media.

Wolff also said Gore "spent time looking at what's wrong with journalism, but he's at the Columbia School of Journalism, which has high ideals." Wolff added that Gore could have focused more on "talking about how to do it right than how not to do it wrong," but said, "I could wish he had done more of this or that, but you can see why he is so confined."

"I think he's a very good teacher," said Wolff. "I wish he had felt more liberated to draw more specifically from his own experiences, to talk more specifically about the relationship between government and the press."

Gore said he wanted to come back in the fall, but was unsure whether he would. Yoon proposed another role for him, teaching at SIPA. "It makes sense to teach a class of future policy makers," she said.