

## What is a Preceptor?

“*Expressing your own ideas, and defending them against conflicting ideas are the best ways to be sure that you have any idea at all.*”

--Donald Stauffer  
Princeton 1939

Woodrow Wilson expressed his commitment to student-centered inquiry introducing the preceptorial method at Princeton in 1905. He designed preceptorial sessions where students would develop “first-hand command of the leading ideas, principles, and processes of the subjects which they are studying”<sup>1</sup>A shared commitment to study and inquiry supported a learning community at Princeton that continues to the present day.

Originally, lead professors served as preceptors for their colleagues. Assistant professors and graduate students eventually assumed the role providing an essential link between a course's content, formal lectures and student discussion. Wilson enlisted fifty faculty members to serve in this role remembered in Princeton's faculty song as “fifty stiffs to make us wise.” That initial roster of Princeton preceptors includes two names found on the reading list for the National Academy—Edwin S. Corwin and Charles McIlwain.

The National Academy also imagines a scholarly community to be essential to its success. The

attentive listening and active engagement that marks such a community will shape each afternoon discussion with the three preceptors. Small groups of eight to ten participants will focus on key passages and essential ideas from the assigned reading. Joshua Katz, an Assistant Professor of Classics at Princeton, describes effective precept sessions as “above all a time for students to take the material that is presented to them and 'play' with it.” The preceptors will outline a map for the afternoon's discussion but the final destination is often unpredictable once participants have the opportunity to interact with the material and one another.

A 2003 guide for Princeton Preceptors suggests a good preceptorial session often struggles to arrive at a single right answer while continuing to clarify ideas, sharpen points of view and introduce important evidence. This hard labor of academic inquiry will call on the strengths of each participant, the preceptors and Professor Harris. Participants help create successful discussions by marking key passages and recording questions that arise while reading. A specific goal to make an original point, to offer a meaningful response to a colleague or to connect the topics discussed with previous topics during each session will reveal your commitment to the learning community. Participants should engage one another directly and resist the tendency to relay all discussion through the preceptor. Imagine your role as one in a scholarly community rather than

an academic audience.

A helpful listener and a careful observer, the preceptor will focus discussion on the key passages or concepts central to the work of the National Academy. Preceptors will work closely with Professor Harris to tailor afternoon sessions in response to participants' questions and each day's lecture. In this way, the preceptors of the National Academy seek to realize Wilson's preceptorial method as they connect coursework, lectures and participant discussions.

Our afternoon discussions will also pursue the National Academy's vision of the citizen, an active, inquiring and creative participant in civil society. Discussions at the National Academy withers without the participation of Academicians. Our discussion here would also be incomplete without the voices of former Academicians who described preceptor sessions as “the opportunity to translate theory into reality” or “an anti-grav belt when theory weighs heavy.” Participants and preceptors will work together to sharpen our command of political and constitutional theory and to play with it.

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1 Inspired Conversations. 2003. “The Princeton Precept.” September.