What characteristics, qualities, and practices do the best college teachers possess and employ? That is the central theme Ken Bain considers as he takes a practical, up-to-date, empirical and phenomenological journey of observation that yields some surprising answers. Bain introduces the primary audience for his book, college teachers as well as students and parents, to how he feels the best should be defined. Consequently, each of the six chapter headings to follow, as well as an epilogue, pose the type of straightforward questions any college teacher would ask Bain, as if they could speak to him directly themselves. For example: What do they know about how we learn? How do they prepare to teach? How do they treat their students? And most importantly, what can we learn from them?

In order to define excellence, Bain, a history professor, first recounts an anecdote about Ralph Lynn, a much-celebrated European history professor, who upon his retirement in 1974 was greeted by 100 former students—one grew up to be an editor of People magazine and another a governor of Texas—who praised him for his ability to inspire and motivate. Bain wonders, what did Lynn and other great teachers do to capture such a following? Bain and a few of
his colleagues assess the thinking and practices of more than 60 such teachers representing a sundry of disciplines, both undergraduate and graduate, medical and non-medical.

"All the professors we chose to put under our pedagogical microscope had achieved remarkable success, substantial, and positive influence on how those students think, act, and feel," writes Bain. When he and his colleagues found evidence of teacher excellence, it did not matter what the teacher did in the classroom to be considered in the study—awards, public recognitions, student impressions did. Most importantly, Bain was not interested in a popularity contest. If students could not demonstrate they were motivated to continue learning or the instructor had not "reached them," particular instructors were not placed on the excellence list. With a quite intricate methodology, students were judged based on what they learned. If the learning had not been retained no matter how much they liked a particular teacher, he or she also was tossed from the "best" list. The ones who were deemed excellent were then studied by a number of methods, including videotaping classes, content analyses of syllabi, interviewing current students and the teachers themselves, for example. The research is discussed in more detail in an accompanying thoughtful appendix and note section.

The book is well organized and the introduction summarizes the findings based on each chapter's main question. Therefore, one can examine an appetizer of the results or do a deep dive into the critical thinking and research challenges that ultimately led to answering the primary questions discussed above. That said, the most important attribute each of the best teachers possessed was a firm understanding of his or her subject matter. This finding by no means came as a surprise, Bain contends. It was simply the foundation upon which the answers to the other questions would emerge, ones that Bain creatively captures and explains.

Bain provides a valuable tool that does not just explain what the best college teachers do, but demonstrates the epitome of what college teachers should want to strive for—excellence. Excellence not just measured inside the classroom, but across a continuum of practices, ones that are longitudinally measured cultivating teacher as well as student inquiry, knowledge retention, and inspiration into and throughout adulthood. What the Best College Teachers Do is not a panacea for those who face a particularly difficult batch of learners that are for whatever reason not excited to participate. Moreover, it is not a prescription for a chair or dean's student retention woes in a traditional classroom setting. It should be viewed as a best practice approach to becoming the type of teacher we wish we always had—one that our current students wish they had too.