Matthew R. Lee, Ph.D., is a psychology professor at the James Madison University, known as an excellent communicator, by creating a comfortable atmosphere, being open to questions and willing to have discussions with his students, challenging them, making the class interesting and very enriching. He delivered in May 2014 a very successful “Psychology of Culture” course for the Romanian-American University students.

IMP/HMM: Professor Lee, you are well-known as a true promoter of the social justice, of the real-world critical thinking and engagement, of the same interactive classroom experiences, and of the intergroup dialogue as a classroom methodology. Did your prior jobs contribute to your professional skills and attitude? What made you choose an academic career?

(Matthew R. Lee) Yes, of course. Prior to becoming a professor, I was a graduate student with many roles: an instructor, a therapist, and also a researcher. I chose an academic career because the things I enjoyed most were working with students and making a difference in their lives and I think the best way I could do so was through education and researching the best kinds of educational methods for different kinds of classroom learning.
I would like to ask you about your research interests, professional goals, and your opinions on professional issues. What is the best thing about being a Professor?

My research focuses mostly on the psychology of minority status and also teaching students how to be less discriminatory. My lab students and I study topics such as sexism, genderism, racism, and also a type of phenotypism called hairism. Our most recent study is looking at how baldness is related to negative attitudes in certain situations. My professional goals are related to this, where I enjoy activities related to social justice and helping the larger society understand the psychology of different kinds of minority communities. I think one of the best things about being a professor is having the autonomy to decide what the best way is to help other people in the academic and non-academic world. I love teaching, and I love being in organizations where I can bring people together to understand common ideas. For example, for two years I co-chaired the national Asian American Psychological Association annual convention, and I helped to bring in guest speakers, select innovative proposals, and invite students to present their research for the first time to a professional community.

IMP/HMM: In what ways do you feel you can lend support to students so as to promote a genuine caring for and appreciation of people of other cultural backgrounds?

I try in all my classes to help students see how the information they are learning can help them to understand people and ideas from different cultural backgrounds, and to be fair and less judgmental, less stereotyping, to be more accurate in their comprehension of people and their situations. To instill a sense of genuine caring is very difficult, but I use a methodology called intergroup dialogue to achieve this. Intergroup dialogue refers to the idea if you bring people from different backgrounds together to talk about their lives, and how their lives are impacted by ideas you are learning about in class, it can help people see many more ways in which they are common, and also appreciate the ways they are different. Intergroup dialogue takes some time though – usually over the course of 7-8 weeks, or in the US, a full semester of up to 15 or 16 weeks. Students need to learn how to trust one another by engaging in small exercises where they take some risks to reveal their own ideas and experiences, and little by little they can learn to express deeper ideas, even some emotions, and when everyone in the room can see that, everyone can learn to appreciate one another. In Romania, I have adapted many of my classroom activities to try to have deeper discussions about complex issues and I think they are successful and memorable.

IMP/HMM: Please tell us something about your discussions and social interactions at the level of your collaboration with the Romanian-American University (RAU). Is there a potential for development of the relations?
I have been very fortunate to be invited by RAU for the past few years, and every year I learn different things about Romanian culture and also the university. I really enjoy learning about the surface culture – the language, food, traditional customs, architecture, and things like that. Over time, I am learning to appreciate what psychologists call the “deep culture” – it’s parts of Romania that you cannot always see on the outside, but the more you encounter the culture and understand it, you can see more things going on. For example, I have noticed something that Polish psychologists call “humanism,” which is not a typical norm in the US. With humanism, people are engaged in multiple relationships with you at the same time – for example, they might be a student and also a friend, or they might be a professor and also a tour guide. And, even without notice, the nature of the relationship can change, or the plans will change, but everything will still work out. In the US, people often separate their professional persona from their personal self, so it is a unique aspect for me to see so much humanism in Romania. This year has been my favorite so far, which included my attendance at events from International Week and the Japanese Studies Center. I presented a brief talk on Japanese and Romanian similarities and differences. There is always potential for further development of the relationship between me or my home university and RAU, and we are always open to hearing new ideas.

Thank you very much, Professor Lee.