



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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Lost in the Crowd? Helping Individual Students

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Would you prefer that your students really use your office hours? Ask about the material? Talk about their future plans? Consult with you about their work? Are you interested in helping your students individually, as people? Many of us, both faculty and TAs, believe that our teaching and students' learning improve when we devote some attention to individuals and small groups of students outside regular class time. The reasons are many:

- Students who are confused or lagging behind can better catch up.
- When we know something of students' lives, we can better present our discipline in ways relevant to them.
- With individual encouragement, particularly talented or enthusiastic students will likely learn more about our discipline.
- People who believe they matter in a group tend to put forth more effort and take more responsibility.

Yet too many students hesitate to take us up on our availability during office hours. They may not think their questions or problems are important enough to bother us; or they don't realize they have problems; or they don't realize the variety of interactions they can have with us; or they are simply timid or overly impressed by our eminence.

If you number yourself among those who prefer productive office hours, try one of the following approaches, thus showing students explicitly that you are interested in talking with them.

Require an office visit.

With an enrollment of 20 or fewer and ten-minute appointments, you can meet with each student in less than four hours; that's your regular office hours over a two-week period, time that might otherwise go begging. Tell students that you'd like to get to know them and their concerns about the course. Or you might prefer to focus the meeting on a current course requirement, such as choosing a paper topic, defining a project, fine-tuning an oral presentation. To set up interviews, pass around a sign-up sheet in class and ask students to choose a time slot. Here are some of the benefits for students:

- They learn where your office is.
- They find that it is less intimidating than they imagined to talk with their instructor.
- They become more of an individual in your eyes.
- They learn more about you and the course.

Benefits for you include these:

- You become acquainted with your students as people.
- You can get a better sense of which students are struggling in your course, which are most excited by the course topic, which are not yet very motivated.

- Throughout the rest of the semester, students will be more likely to take advantage of your office hours to a greater extent.

Make specific appointments with individual students.

But such small courses are relatively rare. If you have a larger enrollment or aren't inclined to talk individually with all students, focus on students who could most benefit from a conversation with you: those having trouble and those showing the most interest in and/or talent for your field. Simply announcing your availability—whether in class or on your syllabus—is relatively unproductive. Instead, target students who have done especially well or poorly on an exam, paper or assignment. Talk with them individually before or after class, mentioning your interest in their situation and suggesting meeting during your office hours. Be sure to propose a specific day and time, get agreement, and ensure that the student writes down the appointment and can find your office. Many people learn organization as undergraduates; you can concurrently help your students learn time management and reduce your frustration about missed appointments.

After productively meeting with a few individuals, you may well find that more students take advantage of your office hours, even without appointments. Apparently, students recount that such meetings were valuable, thus encouraging others to consider one-on-one conversations with you.

Hold optional review sessions.

Another way to engage with smaller groups of students—again focusing on those who need help and those are particularly interested or dedicated—is offering optional review sessions

before major exams. These garner much praise from students writing in support of faculty and TAs for teaching awards and have several benefits for all:

- Students appreciate their teacher's recognition that they may need more explanation or review of major points after much material has been covered.
- As in office hours, students can ask individual questions.
- You see which students make the effort to attend an optional review. Granted, some may be looking for easy answers; but others are struggling and working hard to succeed, and still others aim to learn as much as they can.
- Students who have seen how helpful you are with a smaller group may be more willing to come to your office.

To work well, optional review sessions must be offered when students can attend; in many cases, this means the early evening. Schedule them close enough to the exam to get students' attention, yet far enough in advance that they have time to review material the session showed they don't understand.

Interact through e-mail and the web.

Although not done in person, individual e-mail communications can offer similar benefits. Some people are more open about their problems and their perceptions of a course when writing e-mail. Thus your being available through e-mail may provoke some students to unveil difficulties you might not otherwise have seen. And a written answer to a specific question—or feedback to an idea—can greatly help a student. In addition, like review sessions, with e-mail exchanges you can efficiently teach a larger group of students. After removing identifying information, send an individual's question and your answer to all

students and/or post the question and answer on your course web site. As we know, if one student asks a question, a number of others have wondered the same thing.

With only the time commitment your schedule allows, you can connect with a number of your students individually, even in courses numbering in the hundreds. Particularly at a large research institution such as U.Va., many students assume that they won't matter in the crowd. Working with even a few individuals in a course sends the message to many more that they do count. And we reap the benefits of greater student engagement in our classes and with our discipline. □