



Center for Teaching and Learning Newsletter

September 27, 2017

Message from the Director



Faculty members take particular pride in setting high standards, and indeed a reputation of being “tough” is prized among one’s colleagues. There is a difference, however, between challenging students intellectually and establishing rules that are rigid and unrelated to the objectives of the course. Syllabi and website material have expanded over time to include a series of rules and requirements that were often generated by single, bad experiences that the faculty member has encountered in the past. Such rules deal with late papers, class absences, strict page limits, and the like.

The purpose is to deter future transgressions by the threat of punishment. Such rules might be appropriate and serve goals such as equity. That said, one standard to consider is whether they promote – or even inhibit – student learning. Is there a valid pedagogical reason to tell students that you won’t read papers over five pages long? If a student has a serious illness, should s/he be docked a grade for missing more than the allotted class absences? The “does it promote student learning” test is a useful one to assess all of what we do in teaching. Being rigorous is important, but we should not cross the line into being rigid.

Upcoming Events

- 10/4 *Teaching at a Community College*, a workshop with Collin College faculty for Graduate Professionalism Week
- 10/24 Workshop with Kerry Tate, Director of the Office of AccessAbility, on *The Role of Universal Design in Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners*
- 11/2 Workshop on *Academic Integrity and Student Misconduct*
- 11/8 “*Teaching Undergraduate Science*” with Dr. Linda Hodges, Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs and Director of the Faculty Development Center at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and former Director of the Harold W. McGraw, Jr. Center for Teaching and Learning at Princeton University
- 11/14 Workshop on *Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy*

Research Into Practice

Significant racial disparities in the numbers of students who earn degrees in STEM fields are well documented. African American and Latino students are far more likely to drop out of STEM majors or drop out of college altogether than are White students. Efforts to improve retention in these groups have focused, in part, on characteristics of students themselves, but such efforts, even though they are well-intentioned and can be somewhat effective, miss the role that individual institutions can play in addressing race and class achievement gaps. A longitudinal study of student persistence revealed that underrepresented minority students were 17.4 percentage points more likely to persist in STEM majors if they participated in undergraduate research, 9.3 percentage points more likely to persist if they joined

clubs or organizations related to their majors, and 13.6 percentage points more likely to persist if they frequently studied with other students. Working full time resulted in students 9.7 percentage points *less* likely to graduate in a STEM field.

Clearly, opportunities for involvement with faculty members and others in their major can promote retention. What may be less clear but no less important are the obstacles that working a full time job can impose. Professors would do well to consider ways to accommodate the needs of students who may be just as capable of achieving course learning outcomes but cannot always meet the demands of a traditional course structure. If a student has no choice but to work full time while earning a degree, is a failure to meet a deadline really an indication of poor time management that must be penalized? Or could it be that some students have far less time to manage than do others, and flexibility on *how* they meet the instructor's high standards—without compromising those standards—can make all the difference between success or failure?

For more on this topic, see:

Chang, M. J., Sharkness, J., Hurtado, S., & Newman, C. B. (2014). What matters in college for retaining aspiring scientists and engineers from underrepresented racial groups. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 51(5), 555-580.

Teaching Tip

Some of the course policies that professors take for granted may inadvertently penalize some students more than others, especially those with multiple competing responsibilities. Building flexibility into your courses by anticipating the obstacles that students may face throughout the semester can allow you to maintain high standards, keep your own workload manageable, and support students' success. For example, think of how often students are ill on the day of an exam. Certainly, they are a minority of students, but finding solutions as a reaction to each event can be time-consuming. One common solution is to allow students to drop an exam grade, but this may result in decreased learning. Instead of waiting for problems to arise, consider planning ahead to create two versions of your exams. Work with the Testing Center or your TA to make the alternate version available not just for students with documented illness, but for all students who could benefit from a retake. This frees you from having to evaluate and pass judgment on the quality of students' reasons for missing the first exam, and gives students a chance to focus on learning. Students also may have good reasons for missing deadlines for submitting papers or projects. Two ways that professors can prevent problems with meeting deadlines are (1) replace the single deadline with a range of dates, creating an automatic second chance within that window of opportunity, and/or (2) assign more papers than needed, and allow students to automatically drop some number of them.

What the Students Say

Students respect and accept faculty authority on matters that range from the mundane (e.g., papers must be stapled) to the fundamental (e.g., exams are the primary method of assessment). Although faculty regularly share stories about students who request exceptions to policies, such as handing in a paper late, these are far from the norm. Indeed, many students indicate that they are reluctant to ask for special treatment, even when they might have a legitimate reason for the request (e.g., death in the family, serious illness). This reluctance comes from several sources. Students become accustomed to faculty members who tolerate no deviations from the rules, and thus accept the punishment that comes from breaking them. In other cases, students do not want to reveal elements of their personal lives to others because of embarrassment or fear that it will be perceived as personal failure or weakness. Faculty can establish rules and high standards, and these will guide student behaviors in the right

direction. They also can express openness and empathy so that when circumstances do arise – and these will not be common – they can work with troubled students to learn and succeed in their classes.

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