

Understanding Your Undergraduates

By the beginning of February, the add/drop period has ended and the semester is in full swing. At this point in the year, some Teaching Assistants will have learned the names of all of their students and will be making an effort to get to know them in various ways. Others will consider it a hopeless or a useless task, and they get on with the business of teaching classes or leading sections and labs without much of an idea of who they are teaching. At a large school like Rutgers, instructors will commonly get to know a few of their students—the most vocal ones, the strongest students, and the students who have or cause problems, while many students remain anonymous. Getting to know your students takes some effort, but it can help you better serve their pedagogical needs and avoid a variety of problems. Letting students know that you're concerned about them and their academic needs can positively impact class attitude and help you create a comfortable learning environment.

The most basic thing an instructor needs to know about students is their names. When the instructor knows who the students are and encourages the students to get to know each other, students can begin to feel a sense of community in the classroom and that they have a stake in the class and how well it runs. If a student feels like a recognized member of the class, rather than an anonymous member of the crowd, he or she may be less likely to engage in disruptive behavior or violate norms of academic integrity and may be more likely to ask questions or participate in discussion. Instructors use a variety of tricks to learn students' names, including taking pictures of students, using a seating chart, and having students say their names when they speak. Instead of using a sign-in sheet to take attendance at section meetings, have students say their names aloud while you check them off on your roster. Try to call on students by name and use their names whenever you refer to a student's comment or question.

Another important thing to find out about your students is their level of academic preparation. You can ask students

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Tax Workshop for Graduate Students

Do you have questions about your taxes? Get them answered at the Tax Workshop for Graduate Students. Learn timely tax information and where to look for tax savings. This workshop is especially important for graduate students holding fellowships and assistantships.

Brian Levine, MBA, CPA

**Monday, February 6
6:00 p.m.**

**Busch Campus Center
Multi-Purpose Room**

Reservations are not necessary, and refreshments will be provided. If you have any questions, contact Alex Bachmann at 732-932-7449 or abachman@rci.rutgers.edu.

The workshop will only address tax issues for U.S. CITIZENS AND PERMANENT RESIDENTS.

The Center for International Faculty and Student Services will be offering international students free access to an online non-resident tax-filing program. Information on the program will be posted on the Center's website (www.rci.rutgers.edu/~cifss/) as soon as it is available.

Undergraduates...

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to complete a note card listing their class year, their major, and any other classes in the discipline that they've taken. You may also want to give ungraded, diagnostic quizzes to find out how much students know before you begin teaching about a given subject. Most classes will include students with a variety of academic backgrounds. Introductory courses may contain both first-year students, some of whom come to Rutgers with strong academic skills and others of whom are less well prepared for college, and juniors and seniors who have already taken other courses in the field. Eighteen-year-olds may be cognitively less able to process information in certain ways than 21-year-olds. Finding out your students' academic backgrounds will give you a sense of how to aim your material. It will help you identify students who may need extra help, and you can encourage them to meet with you during office hours, do background reading, or visit one of the Rutgers Learning Centers for tutoring or academic coaching. If there are advanced students in the class, you may want to occasionally introduce more complex topics or ask more challenging questions to keep

them engaged.

A third useful piece of information to have about your students is what they want, or hope, to get out of your class—in other words, why are they there? Ask students to write down why they are taking the class; be sure to let them know that you won't hold it against them or take it personally if they are trying to fill a general requirement rather than being motivated by a deep love for the subject matter or a desire to have a career in the field. Knowing why your students are sitting in your classroom will help you determine how to motivate them and how to present material in ways that are relevant to their concerns. Try to make connections between the course material and the world beyond the classroom, as well as to the rest of the discipline or careers in the field.

A final set of details that will help you understand your undergraduates and their needs is elements of their personal lives. Students will come to your classroom from a diversity of backgrounds with widely varying sets of experiences. A student's family or cultural background may affect the way he or she presents him or herself in class. Different cultures have different expectations about the appropriate relationship between student and teacher and about what constitutes appropriate

classroom behavior. Some students will have more confidence than others, and students who don't speak up in class may not be unmotivated or unengaged, but may simply be less comfortable speaking aloud. Some undergraduates have serious work or family commitments that compete with course responsibilities for their time and at the very least make it difficult for them to attend events or group meetings outside of class time.

You can't demand that students share personal facts with you, but you can encourage them to do so and promise them that you'll treat whatever they tell you confidentially. Ask students to let you know if they work more than ten hours a week, have family responsibilities, are concerned about the class, or if there's anything they want you to know about them. Encourage your students to visit you during office hours, and chat with students before class starts.

You can't tailor your class to the individual academic and personal needs of each student, but you can try to provide examples that are relevant to their lives and be sensitive to how their individual situations will influence the ability of each student to perform successfully and conform to course policies. You don't need to lower your expectations because students have difficult or complicated personal lives, but you can work with them and help them find ways to meet the standards and achieve their personal goals for the semester.

TapTalk is produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School—New Brunswick.
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Letters, submissions, calendar items, and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.
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Mid-Semester Evaluations

In addition to getting to know your students, it's useful to check in with them regularly for feedback about the course. Most TAs have their students complete the pink rating forms from the Center for the Advancement of Teaching at the end of the semester, but these can only help you improve your teaching in the future. Early and regular feedback will allow you to improve a course immediately. Feedback from students can help you get a class back on track if you believe it isn't going well, or it can help you refine a course that is going well and alert you to problems that some of your students may be having. It's a good idea to find out if you are communicating your ideas

clearly to your students, both in the literal sense of whether they can hear you and understand your speech and read what's on the chalkboard, and whether they comprehend the concepts that you are trying to convey to them.

There are a variety of ways to elicit feedback from your students. The TA Project offers a sample mid-semester evaluation that you can use or adapt. The form is available on the TAP website (<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>), under the "Services and Tips" heading. Instead of, or in addition to, a formal mid-semester evaluation, you can ask your students for feedback more regularly. Some instructors like to ask students to write a one-minute memo at the end of each class, in which they quickly answer the questions: what was the most important idea of today's class and what questions were you left with? You can also hand out slips of paper every few weeks or after major assignments and ask the students specific questions about the coursework or something more general, like, "is there anything you want me to know about how the class is going for you?" Customize the questions to your particular class. For instance, if few of your students speak in class, ask them why they don't participate and what would encourage them to do so. If you frequently use group exercises in class, you could ask whether students feel they are getting enough direction and whether

they understand the purpose of the group activities. However you choose to ask the questions, allow your students to answer anonymously, to encourage honesty.

Take feedback from your students seriously. If one-minute memos show that a significant number of students have a different impression of the day's main idea than you do, don't just blame them for not paying attention—think about what you can do differently. Also, if you ask students for their opinions of the course but then don't respond to those opinions in any way, they will be understandably frustrated. You may not be able to make the kind of changes your students request, but if that's the case, you should talk to them about why it's not possible. Your evaluations may indicate that you need to do a better job of explaining the purpose of some assignments or class activities. Be willing to implement reasonable changes, and don't be afraid to try new teaching methods in response to student feedback.

All Rutgers students will be assigned a new student identification number, called an "RUID," effective February 13.

New student ID cards will be available from the RU Connection Card Office on designated days.

For more information, visit <http://studentaffairs.rutgers.edu/conversion.html>.

Get In Touch!

Tap Office:

<http://tapproject.rutgers.edu>

Graduate School - NB:

<http://gsnb.rutgers.edu>

TA Helpline: 932-11TA

TA
Helpline
Call
932-11TA
Monday-Friday
between
the hours
of
8:30 am - 4:30 pm

TAP Calendar

2/3	1:00-3:30 pm	Proposal Writing	BCC#
2/8	12:00-1:30 pm	CV/Resume Writing	BCC+
2/15	12:00-1:30 pm	International TAs: Motivating Students	BCC*
2/23	11:30 am-1:00 pm	Tips for Future Faculty Teaching Evaluations	CAC*

*Call 732-932-7747 for information or to register.

+Call 732-445-6127 ext. 0 for information or to register.

#Visit chaser.rutgers.edu/workshops.html for information

Want to be a Movie Star?

Get your class videotaped!

<http://taproject.rutgers.edu>

Call 932-11TA for details

The Master Faculty Observation Program

TAP has assembled a select group of outstanding faculty members who have volunteered to provide graduate students with the opportunity to observe their classes. The names, teaching schedules, and contact information of these veteran teachers are listed on our website. Earn a certificate by visiting three or more classes. For more information visit:

http://taproject.rutgers.edu/services_tips/Master_Faculty.php3

Teaching Assistant Project

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