

Working with Students: Office Hours

The university requires all teachers to make themselves available to advise students outside of class meetings. While the decision about the duration and time of office hours is generally up to the teacher, most instructors find they need to schedule at least two hours per week and to make themselves available by appointment for students whose schedules conflict with the designated hours.

Because all undergraduates have access to electronic mail accounts, some teachers are encouraging their students to communicate with them via electronic mail. This can be a particularly useful option for those teaching a Saturday or evening class, in which many of the students have full-time jobs. Instead of trying to schedule appointments at a time convenient for both parties, students may e-mail their questions, comments, or even essay proposals, and the TA can respond at his or her leisure (in the middle of the night, for example, after finishing a seminar paper).

Of course technology cannot always replace face-to-face interaction, and TAs should encourage their students to meet with them in person. Just announcing office hours and listing them on a syllabus at the beginning of the semester is not enough, however. This would be fine if the purpose were to set aside time grading papers or attending to course work, but treating scheduled office hours like this is a disservice to your students and to your own professional growth as a teacher. Often students--especially first-year students--find themselves in a position where going to see their instructors can make a tremendous difference in their academic progress. Only a few months removed from high school, many students are too burdened or bewildered by the new demands of college life to have the courage to seek out their teachers. For them, walking alone down a strange hallway toward the office of someone whom they may see as an imposing figure of authority can be quite frightening.

TAs, then, should make a special effort to encourage their students to see them and should not wait for them to take the first step. Make it clear to students that they do not have to be facing a crisis to justify a visit. Not only should instructors invite their students to see them, but, when students respond to the invitation, TAs need to be welcoming --even if they were

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Seventh Annual TAP Orientation Held in August

On August 25th, approximately 350 first-time teaching assistants participated in the seventh annual Teaching Assistant Orientation in the Rutgers Student Center. Over two dozen faculty, administrators, and experienced TAs shared insights and advice on a wide range of topics. Among the diverse offerings were workshops on motivating students, ethics, time management, and using the library's electronic databases.

After registration and a university resource exhibition, the orientation got underway with a welcome from Joseph A. Potenza, Provost and Dean of the Graduate School, New Brunswick. The centerpiece of the morning's activities was a panel discussion, moderated by Barbara E. Bender, Associate Provost for Academic Support and Graduate Student Services. The panel fielded questions from the floor, addressing such concerns as finding the proper balance with students between authority and comradery, avoiding the appearance of impropriety in dealings with students, and teaching non-traditional students. The rest of the morning was spent in workshops, after which TAs, faculty

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Office Hours

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hoping to get three more student papers graded, or to read the last thirty pages of a seminar assignment. Leave the office door open, and if you see one of your students wavering in the hallway, look pleased and invite him or her in. Put your work away and give the student your whole attention.

Of course, a teacher can be friendly and still have students who are reluctant to pay a visit, even--or especially--when they most need to do so. Such students may require an extra incentive, such as an invitation on the bottom of an essay or exam, or a brief word before or after class. The first visit is the hardest; students need to see for themselves that they are not dealing with an anonymous and remote instructor but a human being with whom they can have a cordial and helpful conversation.

Although holding office hours is an important part of a teacher's duties, they must not be allowed to jeopardize a TA's own academic work. Students can take advantage of TAs, for instance, by persistently

using their office time to share personal concerns. Obviously, if a student is troubled, a sympathetic ear can be very important. Remember, however, that you are not a trained counselor; if a student needs professional help--with, say, alcohol abuse, depression, relationship problems--you should refer him or her to the appropriate office for counseling. But if students are just dropping by for casual chitchat, TAs may need to remind them that office hours are scheduled to provide all students with an opportunity to discuss their academic concerns, and a few individuals cannot be allowed to dominate the entire session.

It goes without saying that teachers should treat all their students with courtesy and respect. Misunderstandings between students and teachers do arise, however, so it is prudent to leave the office door ajar when meeting with students. Doing so announces to the students and to the world at large that all interactions in your office with a student are professional.

When asked on end-of-semester course evaluations what they most liked about a course, a large number of students take the time to write in a comment such as, "I liked the fact that the teacher was so available to the students." Clearly, this matters to many students. Take their advice: make yourself available and help them to take advantage of this availability.

Call
932-11TA
with questions
about teaching!



I am concerned that I am not reaching all of the students in my class. Some of my students seem very bright, some average, and a few are really struggling with the material. I want to give all the students the attention they need to do well in the class, but I am afraid that I will either lose the brighter students if I slow down or those who are struggling if I maintain the pace I have set.

Making a course challenging for all students in the class can be challenging. Teachers, of course, must make a reasonable effort to reach all students during the class, but they should also remember that all learning does not take place in the classroom.

Invite students who seem to be having difficulty to see you in your office. Try to find the root of their problem and recommend them to the appropriate support service--perhaps peer tutoring or a class in study skills or notetaking. If you see that a few students are struggling with a certain topic, do not waste class time going over it again and again; invite all who are interested to join you for a special session during office hours. Encourage students to form study groups and work together over difficult material. Do not overlook the advanced students. Supplement the reading list with some related works and encourage students to do reports on them. Give the advanced students a challenging question to think about between class sessions. Also encourage these students to visit you in your office to explore some of the issues in more depth.

TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-New Brunswick.

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Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the editor.

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IN THE PROGRAMS

The Department of Computer Science held an orientation on September 9th for all new TAs and offered special sessions for the TAs in the department. One workshop, "How to Survive as a TA," presented by Girish Welling and Pradeep Sudame, offered a discussion of the academic expectations, teaching requirements, and record-keeping responsibilities of TAs in that field. The second workshop, "How to Survive in the Classroom," presented by Aashu Virmani and Naveen Agarwal, discussed "What do you say after you say 'Good Morning'?"

BROWN BAG LUNCHES

Friday, October 7

"Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual:
Awareness in the Classroom"

Friday, October 14

"Challenges and Rewards of
Teaching Your Own Class"

Friday, October 21

"Responsibilities to Students
with Physical Disabilities"

Bring questions. Bring problems.
Bring solutions. Bring friends.
Bring lunch. TAP will supply
dessert and drinks.
All meetings will be held at
25 Bishop Place, CAC,
from 12:00 noon to 1:30 p.m.

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

Learning Disabilities

At the TAP Brownbag Lunch on September 23, Pat Grove, Campus Director of the Cook/Douglass Learning Resource Center, offered the following suggestions for working with students with learning disabilities.

Even if a TA thinks that a student is struggling in the course because of a learning disability, the TA *cannot* ask the student if he or she has a disability; the student must volunteer the information. Students are responsible for informing the teacher. Students who tell TAs that they have a learning disability must also provide a letter from the college Coordinator for Students with Disabilities verifying that the student has been tested. Any special accommodations that a teacher must provide to the student --and the university is obliged by law to provide reasonable accommodations for all students with disabilities--will be prescribed by the campus coordinator, who will assist the teacher if necessary.

Although it is certainly the students' responsibility to inform their teachers, some may hesitate to do so because they are afraid of being stigmatized. Many teachers suggest on their syllabus that students with any special needs speak to them as soon as possible. TAs can also incorporate a few general practices into their teaching methods that will

enable students with learning disabilities--and, in fact, all the others--to learn more effectively.

1. Deliver the information to your students in more than one mode. Use an overhead projector or the blackboard to provide students with an outline of the lecture. This will not only help students with auditory or motor problems but, of course, all of the students in the class. Give handouts when possible of class notes.
2. Do not rely exclusively on multiple-choice tests. Vary the types of questions.
3. Give directions both orally and in writing.
4. Be very organized. Try to be consistent; do what you say you are planning to do.
5. Repeat directions and key terms or ideas. Speak slowly, giving students a chance to catch up.
6. Be creative in your assignments. Consider having students collaborate on projects or presentations.
7. Last, but certainly not least, maintain a sense of humor even in the face of frustration.

TA Helpline

Call 932-11TA

**for answers to your
questions about teaching
or
to set up an appointment
to have your class
videotaped.**

**Monday-Friday
between
the hours of
8:30 and 4:30**

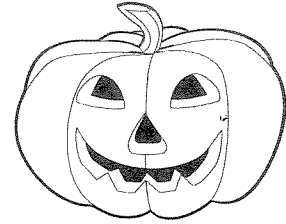
Orientation

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members, and administrators exchanged ideas over lunch.

The afternoon offered workshops on various topics such as creative teaching and motivating students in math and science, followed by nine discipline-specific master classes, in which faculty members provided both frank talk and encouragement to the new TAs. The day's events closed with a reception in the Rutgers Student Center.

In addition to the all-day orientation, a welcoming dinner for all newly appointed foreign TAs was held on August 24th. The dinner permitted international TAs to meet some of their colleagues and exchange ideas about Rutgers, the U.S., and teaching.



October

- 7 Brownbag Lunch for TAs*
 25 Bishop Place, CAC
 12:00 noon
- 14 Brownbag Lunch for TAs*
 25 Bishop Place, CAC
 12:00 noon
- 21 Brownbag Lunch for TAs*
 25 Bishop Place, CAC
 12:00 noon
- 30 Daylight Savings Time
 Ends
- 31 Halloween

**See page 3 for workshop topics.*

Teaching Assistant Project

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