

## Faculty Strategies for Increasing Student Use of Office Hours

- \* On the first day of class, when verbally reviewing the syllabus, encourage out-of-class interaction with students by explicitly emphasizing your availability outside the classroom, and by inviting students to visit you during office hours.

Make specific mention of your office hours and office phone number on the first day of class, and make it clear that individual appointments can be arranged if listed office hours conflict with a student's out-of-class responsibilities (e.g., work; child care). Also, it would be nice if students are informed of your home e-mail address and possibly your home phone number) and are given assurance that they can contact you at home if a need arises. (It has been my experience that students rarely abuse this privilege, and they abide by any stipulations--for example: "No calls after 11 PM, please.") For commuters, part-time students and re-entry (adult) learners, all of whom may have little or no time to visit with faculty during their scheduled office hours, the opportunity to interact with instructors by phone or computer may represent the only opportunity they have for out-of-class contact.

Taking time during the very first class session to state that you welcome interaction with students outside of class may serve as an explicit signal to them that you genuinely value such interactions. This sends a much stronger and sincere message than simply listing office hours on the syllabus--which, for some instructors, is done only as a perfunctorily fulfillment of departmental or institutional requirements, and students often see it as such.

Empirical support for the recommendation that instructors convey their out-of-class availability to students while in class is provided by a large-scale study of faculty who were identified as "outstanding" by students, faculty colleagues, and administrators. These outstanding faculty were found to have interacted frequently with students outside of class and tended to give cues inside the classroom which signaled their "social-psychological accessibility" outside the classroom (Wilson, 1975).

To further encourage out-of-class contact with students, it might also be worthwhile to report to students on the first day of class that there is a large body of collegiate research that supports the value of out-of-class contact with faculty for

promoting student success. Tell them that help-seeking is both normal and appropriate, and that it represents an interactive learning strategy, rather than an admission of dependency or failure.

**\* Consciously arrange your office door in a way that sends signals to students they are welcome.**

Specific practices for implementing this recommendation include the following:

- Hang a "students welcome" sign on the outside of your door. This could serve as an explicit verbal signal to students that you are ready and willing to interact with them. At the University of Arkansas, all faculty have been provided with such signs to promote out-of-class interaction with students Ferritor & Talburt, 1994)
- Post some cartoons on you office door. Humor can serve as an effective ice-breaker that may make students feel less intimidated by your professional status and conveys the message that you have a "lighter" side. (Also, students will often stop to read the cartoons which increases the likelihood they will come in contact with you when you enter or leave your office.)
- When you are in your office, keep your office door open. This should serve as a nonverbal cue which signals to students that you are "open" and eager to accommodate visitors. Dutifully being in your office during stipulated office hours may still not be perceived as accessibility by students, especially if the office door is fully or partially closed. This may be interpreted by a potential student visitor, particularly a passive or diffident student, as a subtle signal that you are busy and prefer not to be disturbed.
- If, during your scheduled office hours, you have to leave the office for some reason (e.g., to attend a meeting), post a note indicating why you are gone and when you expect to return. Consider tacking a permanent note pad on your door for students to leave messages in case they happen to come by at a time when you are not there. Perhaps nothing is more discouraging to a student seeking out-of-class contact with an instructor to be greeted by a closed door and a missing professor during scheduled office hours, with no information about her whereabouts.

It would also be useful to post your class schedule on

your office door, including information on when and where your classes meet during the week. This would enable students to make at least brief contact with you before or after class in case urgency dictates that they see you before your next "official" office hour.

**\* Arrange your office desk in a way that invites interaction.**

Specific strategies for implementing this recommendation include the following practices.

- Place your desk as close to the office door as possible. This will reduce the physical distance between you and students passing by in the hallway and will increase the probability of eye contact. Both of these nonverbal cues have are likely to increase the probability of interpersonal interaction.
- Place the visitor's chair in your office by the side of your desk chair, rather than on the opposite side of where you sit. This arrangement will reduce the physical, and perhaps social distance between the visiting student and yourself. Also, this side-by-side arrangement is conducive to collaboration and, indeed, has been found facilitate collaborative interaction between persons who are so seated.
- Decorate your desk with some non-academic items that alert students to the fact that you have a personal life in addition to your professional life. For example, pictures of your family, your travel experiences, or avocational endeavors are often noticed by students and should serve to increase their perception of you as an interesting and approachable human being.

While these recommendations regarding nonverbal communication may seem to be trivial and only remotely related to student success, keep in mind that student contact with faculty outside the classroom has been found repeatedly to be associated with many positive educational outcomes. Thus, no strategic stone should be left unturned in our attempts to promote student-faculty contact outside the classroom. Moreover, faculty accessibility to students is one instructional area in which there are large discrepancies between the perceptions of faculty and students, i.e., students perceive faculty to be less accessible than faculty perceive themselves to be (Centra, 1973). This suggests that instructors need to become more aware of the nonverbal signals they may be unconsciously sending to

students regarding their accessibility. Otherwise, the powerful success-promoting benefits of out-of-class contact with faculty may be lost, particularly to those passive or unassertive students for whom such contact may have the most dramatic impact.

**\* Try to arrange teaching your schedule so that you are available for interaction with students immediately after class.**

This may be a critical time for student-faculty interaction because it comes right after student interest, curiosity, or confusion may have been sparked by course material just covered in class. It is at this time that students are often likely to seek clarification on concepts presented during lecture or to engage in extended discussion of some provocative issue raised in class.

Course-related, student-faculty interaction immediately after class may also lead to greater willingness on the part of students to seek further contact with you outside the classroom (e.g., office visitation). Empirical support for this argument is provided by Terenzini (1986) who reports research indicating that not only is the quantity of student-faculty contact important for retention, but the quality of such contact is also critical. As for what constitutes "quality" contact, he concludes that "those interactions involving discussion of intellectual and course-related matters appear to be among the most powerful influences" (p. 12).

**\* Invite students to help you research answers to questions they have raised during class or after class.**

This practice serves not only to increase the quantity of student-faculty contact outside the classroom, it also enhances the quality of such contact because it involves interaction on substantive course-related issues. Empirical reinforcement for this recommendation is provided by the findings of research conducted by Astin (1977), who found that student involvement with faculty in independent research is positively associated with student retention.

**\* Intentionally schedule an office meeting or conference with students during the early stages of the course.**

This personal conference or meeting could be designed to serve some specific academic function (e.g., to discuss selection of a term-paper topic or research project) but, perhaps more importantly, it could simply serve as an early "ice breaker" to make students feel more comfortable about

interacting with you outside of class. If anything, requiring this initial conference at least insures that each student will discover where your office is located on campus and guarantees that all students, not only the most socially assertive ones, make at least one office visit during the semester. To save yourself time, and to facilitate student-student interaction, you can schedule group conferences in which several students meet with you at the same time. For instance, appointments could be made with groups of 3-4 students for an office visit in order to conference with the instructor about their plans for an upcoming group project.

John Gardner points out that first-year college students may need to learn how to make office visits and capitalize on faculty office hours because, in high school, teachers usually do not have "office hours," and generally have less privacy to confer with students on a one-to-one, out-of-class basis. Moreover, in high school, visits to the "office" are often associated with disciplinary action rather than being seen as an opportunity for positive out-of-class interaction with faculty (Gardner, 1994). Gardner's contention is supported by national research on college freshmen which indicates that 85% of America's beginning college students report having worked on academic matters with other students outside of class, but less than 20% report having asked for assistance from an instructor outside of class time (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 1995). These findings suggest that college instructors may need to implement highly "intrusive" strategies (such as required students assignments) which are intentionally designed to bring students to their offices, rather than waiting passively for students to initiate these important out-of-class contacts on their own.

**\* Invite students to interact informally with you via e-mail.**

Such "computer conferencing" could involve having students ask you questions or providing you with feedback on how the class is going; with electronic technology, this feedback could be provided anonymously. Faculty who have invited students to discuss course-related issues via e-mail are reporting that it has increased the participation rate of students who have not shown high rates of participation during in-class discussions and that some students continue course-related interaction via e-mail even after the course has ended (Gilbert, 1996).

**\* Prior to major exams and due dates for assignments, remind students that you are available outside of class and are willing to provide help or assistance.**

Though office hours appear in print on the course syllabus

distributed to students on the first day of class, a timely verbal reminder at such critical points during the semester should serve to underscore the sincerity of your offer to work with students outside of class time.

**\* Attempt to increase your office hours prior to the dates of major exams and due dates for major assignments.**

Formal research supporting this suggestion is not available, but my personal experience strongly suggests that students' willingness to interact with instructors outside of class appears to increase dramatically just prior to the dates of major exams and assignments. Increased instructor availability at these times may serve to encourage students to seek your help, and positive student experiences with you at this time--albeit for the very utilitarian purpose of improving their course grade--may encourage them to seek future out-of-class contact with you--for less functional and more meaningful purposes.

**\* Schedule review sessions in an informal, out-of-class setting (e.g., your home; a scenic site on campus; a local restaurant; student lounge or study room in a campus dormitory).**

The prospect of improving their course grade via a pre-exam review should serve as a strong incentive for students to engage in this form of out-of-class interaction with you. It may also be a good idea to have students suggest what topics or concepts will be reviewed prior to this review session. This serves to give students some sense of personal control or ownership of the review session which, in turn, should increase their motivation to attend. Additionally, this practice provides students with some decision-making opportunity with respect to the course which is one way to increase their level of "academic involvement"--a factor found to be strongly associated with student retention and academic achievement (Astin, 1977, 1993).

**\* Write a personal note on student exams or papers (particularly to those students who are struggling) which invites, requests, or requires them to see you outside of class.**

This written note could be reinforced by a private verbal comment in class. The importance of taking such an assertive or "intrusive" approach to stimulating out-of-class interaction with low-achieving students is underscored by research indicating that those students who are in most need of learning assistance are often the least likely to seek it out on their own (Knapp & Karabenick, 1988).

- \* Occasionally, make yourself available to students on their "turf" or territory (e.g., coffee or lunch in the student union or student lounge).**

This practice sends a message to students that you do not consider it beneath yourself to associate to "hang out" and interact with them. Instead, it suggests that you may actually enjoy such interaction because you are electing to spend some of your "free" or discretionary time with students.

- \* Participate in co-curricular (extracurricular) activities with students (e.g., intramural sports, student elections, campus pep rallies).**

This practice enables students to see you in a different light--one in which the "prestigious" professor and the "subordinate" students are now on equal terms. Participating with students in such informal, non-threatening activities allows them to see you as a "regular guy." Students may then become less intimidated by your exalted professorial status and may become more willing to interact with you outside of class on issues that are educational or personal in nature.