

College faculty insider's guide to the first day of class

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“The first class meeting of any course is more important than many faculty realize. It sets the tone for what is to follow and can greatly influence students’ opinions about the course and the instructor for the remainder of the semester” (Perlman & McCann, 1999, p. 277).

Introduction

The first day of class is one of the most crucial classes you will have during the semester. This class can also be the most challenging. Some instructors use an icebreaker and briefly go over the syllabus before dismissing their students 30 minutes early. Others feel the need to cover everything to the point where students are overloaded with information. A research study by Perlman and McCann (1999) found both approaches to be counterproductive.

Students do not have high expectations for the first day of class. This is due in part to previous classes that ended early and a student’s desire to use the first week of classes to “shop” for the right set of courses. They want to know what is in the syllabus, how much work to expect, and what the instructor’s policies on attendance are.

The first day of class is the time to introduce the course, gain the students’ interest, and start the semester on a positive note. This guide is meant to help faculty in establishing goals for the first day of class and strategies to meet these goals. A sample lesson plan for a 50 minute class is provided and can be replicated as needed.

Goal 1 – Foster instructor-student rapport

Research on the first day of class by Knefelkamp (1985) showed there was a desire from students and teachers for connectedness, but neither group realized the other shared that desire. Planning some specific activities not only reduces the anxiety of meeting strangers, but can get students to share in the sense of purpose you hold for the class.

One activity that has been shown to foster instructor-student rapport is a group activity that allows the student to interview the instructor (Hermann & Foster, 2011). This activity gives students an opportunity to think about what is important to themselves and their peers. It also creates an environment where meaningful questions about the course are not only wanted but expected.

Goal 2 – Communicate key elements and expectations for the course

Fun but relatively meaningless icebreaker activities are not viewed positively by students on the first day of class (Henslee, Burges & Buskist, 2006). However, using icebreakers that draw the students into the course content is viewed as beneficial to the instructor and student (Anderson, McGuire & Cory, 2010). For example, one of the key elements in First Year Experience is to understand and improve the teaching/learning process. Designing a discussion around the roles/responsibilities of the instructor and

student would not only introduce a core concept in the course, but would also start to relate expectations.

Goal 3 – Promote desired student behaviors

In addition to relating the expectations of the course, students also want to know the preferred student behaviors. Promoting important behaviors is one technique (Nilson, 2003). For example, a desired behavior of First Year Experience Students is self-regulated learning. Providing an opportunity for students to reflect at the end of the class relays the importance of self-regulated learning.

Goal 4 – Actively involve the students

Building an atmosphere that actively involves all students builds a community of learners. There are many ways to actively involve students on the first day (Provitera-McGlynn, 1996):

- Make eye contact with all students and not just those that have responded
- After asking a question, wait 5-10 seconds instead of responding to the first person who raises their hand
- Have students write down their answers first
- Take a poll for certain questions
- Show enthusiasm
- Move around the room

Strategies to create a welcoming environment

Strategy 1 – Greet the students

Greeting students can range from simply smiling and saying “hi” as they enter the classroom to informal conversations before the class starts.

Strategy 2 – Share information about yourself

While you do not want to discuss personal information such as a divorce, there are some things you would want to share about yourself.

- How you would like to be called (first name, Ms, Professor, etc)
- Why you are enthusiastic about the course
- Your educational background

Providing information that shows students you are competent in the subject matter can instill a sense of optimism in students (Hayward, 2001).

Strategy 3 – Addressing the students

Do students prefer if you call them by their first, last, or nickname? For the most part students will want to be addressed by their first name but asking them shows respect for the student.

Strategy 4 – Learning the student’s name

Learning the names of your students as quickly as possible is an effective way to establish early instructor-student rapport and to lay the foundation for a classroom environment in which students feel comfortable interacting with their instructor and becoming actively involved in class. Below are strategies for the effective and expeditious learning of student names (Cuseo, 2010).

- Review and practice the names of students on your course roster before the first day of class
- Make shorthand comments next to student names when calling roll or when they introduce themselves on the first day of class. For example, record memory-triggering comments referring to the student’s distinctive physical characteristics or seating location
- Take a photograph of the class and have students sign their names by (or on) their respective faces
- Use short icebreaker activities to help you learn student names and to help students learn the names of their classmates
- Rehearse student names during non-lecture times such as small-group discussions and diagnostic exams
- Don’t be afraid to ask a student for their name if you forget.
- Continually refer to students by name after initially learning their names

Strategy 5 – Share (appropriate) personal experiences

It may be news to some students but instructors are people too. Not only can sharing personal experiences and struggles make the instructor seem like a real person, it can help students relate to the instructor if they have been through a similar experience. For example, I share my challenges entering college as a first-generation student that commuted to school while working over 20 hours a week.

Sample introductory lesson plan

Introduction (5 mins)

Introduce yourself to the class:

- Preference on how to address you
- Your educational background
- Why you enjoy the class
- What you hope to get out of today
- Something interesting about you

Overview of syllabus (10 mins)

- Contact information, office location, best time/way to get a hold of you
- Explanation of outcomes/objectives
- College policies (plagiarism, disabilities, weather cancellations)
- Class policies (attendance, texting, class cancellations)

- How much work to expect (homework, papers, projects)

Student introductions (5 mins)

- Name
- Major
- Where they are from
- Something we would not know just by looking at you

Student Discussion (5 mins)

Randomly assign groups of 4-5 students. The group will pick a spokesperson to interview the instructor. The group will come up with three questions to ask the instructor that they feel is important to know and is course related (e.g. aspects of the syllabus, assignments, text, exams, etc). The group will also be given one guided question to help spark discussion. Examples of guided questions are:

- What does the instructor hope to accomplish for the semester?
- What is the instructor's theory of learning?
- What is the instructor's approach to evaluating student's learning in the course?
- What are the instructor's expectations for the student?
- What are the responsibilities of the instructor?

Interview (20 mins)

Each group spokesperson will name the members of the group and will then proceed in asking the instructor their four questions (one guided and three developed). If students want to ask follow up questions, have them write it down and begin the next class with their questions.

Reflection/ contact info (5 mins)

Have the students write the following information and turn into the instructor:

- Name
- Best way to contact them
- What is your educational goal at Three Rivers?
- Based on your experience, how has an instructor helped you achieve your goals?

References

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