

# Teaching First Year Students

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With anticipation each fall, we look forward to a new year on campus: new courses to teach, new teaching strategies to try, and a whole new group of students. In addition to the returning students whom we have not met, many of the new faces we see each new semester are college freshmen, otherwise known as *first-year students*. Although first-year students differ in age, experiences, traditions and backgrounds, the majority of them are between 18 and 22 years old.

According to 2009 *Beloit College Mindset* (Nief & McBride, 2009), students today are different than those of just a decade ago and include some of the following demographics. More students:

- are older than 25
- are working while taking classes
- are veterans
- need remedial classes
- are part-time students
- are from single-parent or step-parent homes
- have a minority or immigrant background
- have English as a second language
- have a learning or physical disability
- have taken college courses while in high school

## Connect with First-Year Students

Make connections with students despite age, values and experiential differences. When discussing new or controversial course content, bring in examples to which students can relate. For example, use a reverse-debate format in which students take opposing side to what they believe. Here are a few tips for interacting with first-year students in the classroom from Carnegie Mellon University (1997):

*As part of the non-instructional course objectives, teach first-year students how to prepare for assignments and exams.*

1. Ask lots of questions in class that stretch students' thinking. For example, begin with simple recall questions such as, "List the" and "Who did" and increase the complexity of the question to those that challenge students' higher order thinking such as "Which \_\_\_\_\_ is the best? Why do you think so?" and "Give and justify your opinion on \_\_\_\_\_."
2. Mingle with students as they work in groups to encourage dialogue and interaction.
3. Toss a Koosh ball to students. The student who catches the ball is expected to answer the question. Students can then toss the ball to another student, and so on. This interactive nature of questions and answers can lead to more engaged learning. The activity can also relieve stress, especially at the beginning of the semester.
4. Have students write responses to questions on flip chart paper or white board using colorful markers.

*Sprinkle in a bit of humor now and then to reduce the formal nature of class.*

5. Use games and simulations to help students “visualize complex systems” such as simulating an environment otherwise not possible in the classroom. For example, provide color-enhanced images of the inside of a cell or show a video of chemical reaction. Each of these strategies can help students better understand the environment (Oblinger, 2004).
6. Learn students’ names. Students are more likely to interact when called upon by name.
7. Relate required reading to lectures and course discussions. Ensure course assessments (quizzes, exams, and assignments) include material from required readings.
8. Arrange students to work in groups to encourage out-of-class interactions.
9. As part of the *non-instructional course objectives*, teach first-year students how to prepare for assignments and exams. Provide previous exams and samples of graded papers so students get a feel for how course work is graded.

### **Be Personable**

Share some personal experiences, such as how your interest in the subject started or stories from your college days. You can let students know that you can be trusted and that students can share feelings and questions. This is especially helpful for first-year students seeking to establish a place in the university community. Sprinkle in a bit of humor now and then to reduce the formal nature of class.

### **Make the Course Content Relevant**

Relate what may be new course content to many first year students, to their knowledge and interests. Show students the importance of the content, how content relates to required readings, and how content can actually be used.

*Give meaningful and timely feedback and solicit feedback to add credibility to your teaching approaches.*

### **Give and Receive Feedback**

Provide ways to give and receive feedback throughout the semester and use rubrics to help students understand expectations and methods of assessment. Grade assignments and exams quickly so students can use feedback to prepare for new content and future assessments. Give meaningful and timely feedback and solicit feedback to add credibility to your teaching approaches. Some examples are:

1. Give frequent quizzes – Blackboard is an easy-to-use venue for low-stakes assessments.
2. Use email to set up appointments, clarify course expectations and communicate with students. Establish email protocols such as how quickly questions will be responded to, if questions will be responded to over the weekend, how you would like to be addressed and if using complete sentences and proper punctuation (instead of “texting” language) is expected.
3. Give short assignments that increase in complexity to measure comprehension of course content.

*Begin each semester with the assumption that all first-year students come to class eager to learn.*

4. Use “One-minute-papers” to get a snapshot of student comprehension of ongoing content. These papers allow students to quickly reflect on content just covered in class and will help identify areas that might need further review.
5. Ask questions such as, “What was the clearest point in today’s class?” and “What the muddiest point was in today’s class?” Ask students to write their responses on note cards and submit before leaving the room. Incorporate student responses in the next lecture or address them directly in class.

### **Believe in Students**

Begin each semester with the assumption that all first-year students come to class eager to learn. Although it is expected that you are an expert in the discipline, students should be allowed to express their points of view. Listen to what first-year students have to say, allow discussions that diverge from the planned lecture and invite students to help devise course policies and rules related to projects and assignments. Students who have a voice in their own learning will find a more rewarding learning experience.

### **Summary**

It is essential that you help first-year students successfully adjust to new living and learning environments. By understanding what it means to be a first-year college student and recognizing the demands first-year students face while transitioning to the university community, you can provide engaging, challenging and supportive learning environments.

### **References**

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