

Teaching Time Savers: Encouraging Contact Early in the Semester

By Chad Westphal

Each semester I tend to have a total of 50 to 70 new students, most of whom I've never met before. The beginning of the semester is busy and hectic, but it's important to start out on a positive note. I want to quickly learn all of my students' names, but at first they all look the same in class. I also want to encourage them to ask questions and take advantage of my office hours, but some students can't muster the nerve to make a first contact outside class, and especially to admit they don't understand something. If a student falls behind or has a very weak background, it may take me weeks to catch on to this.

Even in a small class, it can take half of the semester to make sure I have all the names and faces matched up, unless I really work at it. It's embarrassing to have to ask a student's name after the second exam. I've found a nice way to deal with these issues at the beginning of the semester. Though it doesn't seem like a real time saver at first, it tends to pay off in the long run.

On the first day of class I hand out a questionnaire with the standard questions: what is your major, what other classes are you taking, what are your hobbies, etc. But instead of collecting it in class, I offer a few points of extra credit if they return it to me in my office sometime

during the first week of classes. It can be during office hours or any time my door is open, as long as they give it to me in person. They're usually very happy to do this — who wouldn't jump at the opportunity to start the course with over 100 percent?

When they come in, I glance over the questionnaire and ask a few questions: how do you like your classes, how long have you played the guitar, are you really going to work 30 hours per week this semester? These conversations usually last less than five minutes, but they accomplish several things.

I'm able to put a name with a face very early in the semester. A short personal chat shows that I'm interested in them as more than a number, and establishes me as a nice guy (for awhile at least). The weaker students are more likely to seek out friendly help before they get behind. And it assures me that they know where my office is, allowing me to easily ignore excuses along those lines later in the semester.

I find that in this way I can learn all of my students' names in the first two weeks. Knowing names early in the semester, I'm able to hand homework back more efficiently and to avoid some of those awkward moments where I can't associ-

ate names and faces. But the best part of it is actually sitting down with happy enthusiastic young people who will be working hard to do well in my class. This is the part of teaching I love.

For each class, I copy the forms on colored paper, making it easy to differentiate between students in different classes. I ask students I already know to tell me something about them that I don't already know. For larger classes, one could take a quick digital picture of each student during the visit for an additional aid. Of course, you can think of ways to make this work best for you.

I like to try to get to know my students at some point anyway. This scheme makes this intentional, and getting them one-on-one early in the semester tends to pay off over time.

Time Spent: 3-5 minutes of non-class time per student at the beginning of the semester.

Time Saved: It cuts the time to hand homework back in half (versus not knowing names), perhaps 5 minutes per class; perhaps hours of tutoring students behind; and many awkward moments throughout the semester.

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Teaching Time Savers are articles designed to share easy-to-implement activities for streamlining the day-to-day tasks of faculty members everywhere. If you would like to share your favorite time savers with the readers of FOCUS, then send a separate email description of each activity to Michael Orrison at orrison@hmc.edu. Make sure to include a comment on "time spent" and "time saved" for each activity, and to include pictures and/or figures if at all possible.