Faculty Availability: Connecting With Students

A longstanding and well-researched connection exists in higher education between faculty-student interactions outside the classroom and improved student performance and learning (Kuh, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), but today this dynamic is changing dramatically. In recent years, faculty-student connections have expanded from classroom contact and office hours, which remain important, to digital venues and social media. With this transition, faculty need to re-examine all ways to build bridges to students and create multiple pathways to connect with them outside the classroom comfortably, effectively, and creatively. This issue of *The Toolbox* explores some strategies—from the traditional to cutting-edge—faculty can use to increase their availability to students.

Face-to-Face

To begin, faculty can start old school, meeting with each student outside the classroom for a brief conversation at least once during the semester. These sessions, scheduled for the office or a convenient campus location, can be as brief as 15-30 minutes but pay great dividends. This one-on-one time can foster the teacher-student relationship, giving students opportunities to tell their stories: where they grew up, why they chose this particular school, or how their major is going. Most importantly, these meetings should put students center stage to help instructors build a bond that carries into the classroom. Time is the obvious limitation, so faculty might start small, using the face-to-face approach in one course per semester. Through these personalized sessions, faculty and students learn more about one another, share thoughts and ideas about the course, resolve questions or concerns, and strengthen their relationships.

E-mail

While students might use e-mail less frequently than in the past (Kolowich, 2011; Richtel, 2010), sending electronic messages remains a convenient and efficient way to communicate. Student e-mail addresses commonly are part of institutional student profiles available to faculty. If e-mail is the preferred communication over the semester, instructors should consider two rules:

- Be selective. E-mails on every topic will overwhelm students, and repetitive e-mails invite the Delete key.

- Make every effort to respond to student e-mails within 24 hours. A timely response demonstrates caring and interest.

> "Social networking offers faculty the chance to change how much and how often students think about course content outside of class. Social networks are a chance to create communities, connect with students, integrate ideas, apply knowledge, influence student culture, and improve student learning."
>
> —José Antonio Bowen, Author

Discussion Boards

Most campus-based learning management systems feature a discussion board tool that can be used to generate conversations on course content and offer faculty another way to interact with students meaningfully outside the classroom. To start the discussion, instructors can post a prompt on the board and ask students to respond and also to comment on their classmates' responses. Faculty can engage in these conversations by moderating the discussion, asking provocative questions, encouraging high-quality responses, and correcting any misconceptions about course content. These online interactions can carry over to the classroom and build relationships among students and between students and faculty as they get to know one another.

Facebook Groups

Facebook, the Internet's most popular social networking service with more than one billion users, offers another platform for faculty-student interaction. Without crossing a line by making their students *friends*, faculty can create a group on Facebook and restrict membership to students in a particular class. Facebook is a good venue for making timely class announcements, initiating extended conversations, and soliciting students' opinions on topics related to course content and beyond, such as campus issues and emerging world events. Faculty can use the class Facebook page to teach the standards of behavior that should guide participation, such as using slang only when appropriate and all members of the group will understand, avoiding derogatory comments, and respecting divergent opinions.

Weekly Screencasts

Screencasts offer faculty members a venue for making themselves available to students through the web. A screencast is a digital video recording that captures actions taking place on a computer desktop enhanced with an audio narration that students access online. These screen recordings provide a link to live presentations of weekly class announcements, not only as another way to connect with students but also to emphasize the importance of upcoming readings, assignments, or learning experiences. Screencasts take only a few minutes—and clicks of the keyboard—to record and can be great fun. The technology, available to Mac and PC users, is easy to use, requires no downloaded software, and is free on sites such as www.screenr.com and www.screencastomatic.com, which also provide multiple examples.

Twitter

Twitter, possibly the second most popular online social networking service after Facebook, allows registered users to send and read text-based messages of up to 140 characters, known as *tweets*. Users can group posts together according to topic or type by using *hashtags* (i.e., words or phrases prefixed with a "#" sign). To initiate conversations and connect with students, faculty members can create a hashtag for a class and send and receive comments on topics related to course content. Twitter can provide instructors instant feedback in real-time with backchanneling. Backchannel communication is a secondary conversation that takes place at the same time as an instructor-led lecture or learning activity. This strategy allows students to post comments, ask questions, and discuss a lecture as it is happening (Foote, 2012), giving faculty, who are incredibly brave of heart, immediate reactions to the class.

Summary

From one-on-one meetings to Twitter feeds, faculty members have more ways than ever to make themselves easily available to their students. Bowen (2012) also suggests that faculty use one of the most traditional of all classroom tools, the course syllabus, to inform students of their accessibility—but with a 21st-century twist, delivered electronically, of course.

Make connections with students every day and in many ways!

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What's Happening at The National Resource Center

Conferences and Continuing Education

Online Courses

The National Resource Center offers online courses on topics of interest in higher education. The courses provide participants the same content and opportunities for interaction with peers and with the instructor as traditional (i.e., classroom-based) learning environments while taking advantage of pedagogy and teaching techniques that are not possible or common in those settings. The courses use tools such as e-mail, threaded discussions/forums, listservs, and blogs. Enrollment is limited to 25 participants. For more information, visit www.sc.edu/fye/oc.

Online Course Offerings:

April 9-May 11, 2013

Strategic Planning for Your First-Year Experience Program—facilitated by Bernard Sevarese, Associate Director in Undergraduate Admissions and First-Year Experience, and Julie Schultz, Senior Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions and First-Year Experience, at The Ohio State University

May 21-June 22, 2013

Models and Methods of Student Advising: Promoting Career and Academic Success and Transition—facilitated by Paul A. Gore, Jr., Associate Professor of Educational Psychology, at the University of Utah, and Editor, *Journal of The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*

Conferences and Institutes

Save the Dates

26th International Conference on The First-Year Experience
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Waikoloa, Hawaii's Big Island
www.sc.edu/fye/ifye

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October 19-21, 2013
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33rd Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience
February 14-18, 2014
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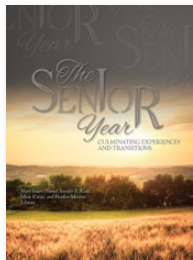Price per individual: $645
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Mary Stuart Hunter, Jennifer R. Keup, Jillian Kinzie, & Heather Maietta, Editors

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The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition currently is accepting proposals for book-length manuscripts examining the transition experiences of college student populations that have been historically underserved or given limited consideration in the design of higher education contexts. Each volume will explore the experiences of a specific population in depth and draw on the theoretical, research, and practice literature to examine critically some of the fundamental assumptions underlying student success initiatives in higher education with an eye toward reshaping campus culture, policies, and practices to support the learning and development of the population under study. For more information, contact Tracy L. Skipper, Assistant Director for Publications, at (803) 777-6226 or via e-mail at tlskippe@mailbox.sc.edu. Or download the complete call for proposals at http://www.sc.edu/fye/publications/development.html. Proposal Deadline: June 1, 2013

Research, Grants, and Assessment

Paul P. Fidler Research Grant

The Paul P. Fidler Research Grant is designed to encourage the development and dissemination of knowledge that has the potential to improve the experiences of college students in transition. The grant is named in memory of Paul P. Fidler, a faculty member at the University of South Carolina, whose pioneering research on student learning and success had a vital impact on work being done to promote the success of all students in transition. The grant award includes a cash stipend, travel to two national conferences, a presentation at a national conference, and priority consideration for publication. The online proposal system will be available beginning April 1, 2013. Completed proposals must be received by the National Resource Center by midnight Eastern Time, July 1, 2013. To learn about the grant, visit www.sc.edu/fye/fidler

Access to National Resource Center Datasets

The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition provides access to data files whose embargo has been removed to support research on students in transition into and through higher education. The dataset for the 2006 National Survey of First-Year Seminars is available for researchers to conduct their own analyses. More datasets will be added to the list as embargoes lift and datasets are prepared for access. For more information about the new data access policy and procedures, visit http://www.sc.edu/fye/research/data_access/index.html

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