

MAKING EFFECTIVE USE OF OFFICE HOURS IN FOUNDATIONS COURSES

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Students tend to under-utilize the office hours of tutorial leaders, using them only in a crisis or around the dates assignments are due. This is unfortunate given that many course directors allocate around an hour a week to TA office hours, so often about 24-25 of the 270 hours available for Unit One TAs - almost 10%.

This document encourages a pro-active use of office hours. Office hours offer a ready vehicle to engage with students on an individual level or in small groups.

IN SEPTEMBER

Early in the first semester, the TA can schedule an appointment with each student during her office hours. At this meeting, the TA can have a general discussion with the student about the course, her goals, difficulties in the transition to university etc. Having this personal contact encourages the student to use the TA's office hours again, and improves her comfort level in the tutorial, thereby making teaching easier for the TA.

USING AN INFORMATION SHEET

To facilitate this process, the TA might have students fill out an information sheet in the first tutorial. See below for an example. The TA might then organize the discussion with each student using the Information Sheet. Given that university records are notoriously unreliable, this information is also useful should the TA need to contact the student.

IN JANUARY

In January, the TA should schedule a second set of meetings, individually or in small groups. If in groups, these should be already established and functioning work or study groups.

Here are some possible other areas for discussion:

1. Review marks and attendance to make sure that the student's record matches that of the TA. Discuss goals for final grades.

If a student is in danger of failing, this meeting offers an opportunity to develop a strategy to prevent this, and to encourage students to use campus services such as CAW and FCAP

2. Discuss general feelings about the course, and specifically about lectures, tutorials, assignments, and readings.

3. Ask students to assess their critical skills and identify areas of strength and those which need improvement. Help students develop a plan for improvement.

4. Discuss the student's tutorial participation. The TA might ask student if she likes to be called on during discussions. Research shows that only some students respond to this strategy, and often will not contribute without being called on. Other students do not want to be called on if they do not offer to participate.

5. Discuss progress on upcoming assignments.

6. Request feedback on tutorial and suggestions for activities.

Following these meetings, the tutorial leader can bring general feedback to the tutorial as a whole.

A COMMENT

Rachel Hurst, Teaching Development Graduate Assistant [TDGA] for the Foundations Program, Social Science; Tutorial Leader, Social Science 1185

"Meeting with students during office hours addresses two issues: encouraging students to be more comfortable coming to

office hours and having an opportunity to talk with students individually, which is impossible during tutorial and lecture time. This approach to office hours uses this time more effectively, and these two scheduled meetings with students over the academic year serve different purposes and have different impacts.

In the first meeting, students have a chance to ask questions that they may be shy or embarrassed to ask in tutorial. Many students are coming to university directly from high school, and like to talk about this transition period. As high school students, they likely had a more established relationship with their teachers (due to seeing them several times a week), so this meeting helps them make a more concrete connection with their TA. As the TA, you have an opportunity to talk to students about individual matters, such as their expectations of the course, how they are feeling about the course and managing the workload and participation. With regards to participation, you can ask the student if she would like to participate more, and what strategies (for example, calling on her in class) would be most effective for her. Student participation in class often changes after these meetings, from speaking up in large discussions to taking part in small group work to eye contact, indicating that students are generally more engaged after this initial meeting. Finally, a very simple (but useful) effect of these meetings is that it helps put a name and a story to the faces in your tutorial.

The second meeting addresses different issues than the first meeting. First, students like receiving a breakdown of their marks and attendance to date, and this clarifies some potential disagreements over marks and attendance prior to the rush and stress of compiling final marks. This is a good moment to mention your concerns with the student's academic performance, and suggest university services that they may find valuable to address these concerns (e-tutor, for example). It is also very useful to discuss second term goals with the students and generate strategies for improvement together. Students appreciate having a chance to voice their concerns, praises, and critiques of the course, and specifically the tutorial. In the middle of the academic year, students are often more comfortable with their TA and will voice these comments openly, offering valuable feedback for the TA. Students will often suggest solutions to any problems they raise, and this second meeting demonstrates that they have an investment in the course and have agency to make changes to the tutorial. An alternative way of holding this meeting is providing the option of meeting in pairs or with their study groups, which may encourage quieter students to share their concerns more openly as they have peer support.”