

## Making a Strong Start

The first weeks of a semester usually set the pattern for the entire semester. Students quickly analyze a teacher's attitude and style and, based on their previous experience and current observations, make judgments about their own role in the class and decisions about their level of engagement and participation. Establishing a positive attitude from the onset has clear advantages for both teacher and students. Making a strong start requires that teachers communicate their expectations to the class in an effective manner. What is said and done during the first weeks of a class may determine the outcome of the semester for many students.

On the most obvious level, students have a right to know what will be required of them during the semester: the number and kinds of papers and/or exams for which they will be responsible; the policies they must observe concerning attendance, late assignments, absenteeism, group work, etc.; the method of calculation for final grades; the level of class participation that is expected; and any other information a teacher is able to provide on how the class will be conducted. By first explaining and answering students' questions about all course requirements and then distributing a detailed syllabus to the class that restates this information, students will have a clear idea of where the class is going and what they have to do to keep up--and if they don't, they have no one to blame but themselves. If all has been carefully prepared and explained at the beginning of the semester, and teachers spring no surprises later on in the semester, students have no grounds for complaint.

Perhaps less obvious but equally important are the other messages that must be conveyed. Unless students get a sense that the teacher views them as capable adults on equal footing with all others in the class, they will almost certainly not respond to the class with active participation and enthusiasm. Students need to get the message from their teachers that they will be treated with honesty, respect, and fairness.

## Income Tax Workshops Scheduled

The Graduate School-New Brunswick has scheduled its annual Income Tax Workshop for Graduate Students for Monday February 22, 1993, from 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. The workshop will be held in the Center Hall, Busch Campus Center, Busch Campus, and will be conducted by David J. Retz, a Certified Public Accountant. This workshop offers students assistance in complying with current tax laws and should be of special interest to students holding teaching assistantships and fellowships. In addition, Mr. Retz will give students tips on where to look for income tax savings. This program is being co-sponsored by the Graduate Student Association.

The special tax situation of foreign TAs will be addressed in workshops offered by the Center for International Faculty and Students on February 26th, 10:00-12:00, and March 23rd, 1:30-3:30, in the Multipurpose Room of the Busch Campus Center. TAs should bring their W2 form and a pencil to the session.

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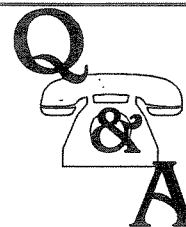
Treating students honestly does not mean being brutal or cruel. If, indeed, the truth sometimes hurts, it may be because the truth-sayer, in many cases, seeks to hurt rather than help. Every student has weaknesses in one area or another; rather than focusing on the students' weakness alone, look also at the students' strengths. Let all the students understand that you regard them as capable of succeeding in the course, especially those who are experiencing difficulties in the class. Don't portray a student's problem as a failure; transform it into an opportunity to approach a problem in a different way.

It is important, however, always to be open and honest with students about grades. Kindness doesn't mean glossing over a student's bad performance on a test or paper; such actions do not help the student in any way. Work with the student to set realistic goals and then determine what level

of work will be necessary to reach those goals.

Respecting students as individuals is another crucial element in creating an environment where students are able to learn. Encourage them to think independently and to express their ideas without fear of ridicule. Pay attention to students when they speak; for some undergraduates it is extremely difficult, almost painful, to speak up in class--an inattentive or joking response could inhibit that student from participating in the future [see page 3, "Shy Students"]. Furthermore, when students see that the teacher is taking the ideas of their classmates seriously, they will also begin to listen with respect to their peers.

Be fair to all students. Do not just teach to the three smartest students in the class or to the majors, ignoring all the rest. Avoid stereotyping students by race, gender, ethnicity, or any other equally arbitrary category and take care not to teach to just a single group. Set high expectations for all of your students. Research has shown that students work up (or down) to the expectations of the teacher. Give up on your students and they will give up on the class; inspire students to put forth their best efforts and they may surprise you and, even, themselves.



*What can a TA do with students' whose writing abilities are sub-standard?*

Students who do not have the writing skills needed to succeed in a course should be strongly encouraged by the TA to get the help they need. This means that TAs should assign at least a brief writing sample early in the semester so that students will be alerted to the fact that they have a problem and can seek help while they still have the time to improve sufficiently to pass the course.

Most TAs won't have time to make extensive comments on each student's paper, and, for the most part, especially for students with numerous serious writing problems, this is not practical. A student who writes fairly well but has a single problem--misuse of possessives, incorrect pronoun reference, etc.--would benefit from a brief note explaining the problem and referring the student to a style guide.

Students with more serious problems, however, should not be allowed to slip through your course. Teachers are not doing students a favor when they overlook serious grammar and composition problems, paying

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TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School-New Brunswick. Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the editor:  
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## IN THE PROGRAMS

On November 13th, Janice Warner of the University Counseling Services, presented a talk on stress management to TAs in **Economics**. Her talk described the causes and symptoms of stress and suggested effective ways of dealing with it.

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On Wednesday, January 20th, TAP conducted a workshop for TAs in **Physics**. TAs viewed videotapes portraying typical classroom or lab situations and discussed ways of dealing with such incidents if they occur.

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On Friday, January 29th, TAP offered an afternoon workshop for TAs in **Engineering** entitled "Aspects of Communication: A Practical Workshop for TAs in Engineering." The program included a panel discussion that focused on ways to improve interaction among TAs and undergraduates in the classroom and lab, when designing tests and commenting on them, during office hours, and in other teaching situations.

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Students from the Graduate Program in **History** met with TAP staff members on Friday, January 29th, to discuss ways that TAP resources could be used by the program. A discussion on teaching strategies followed the viewing of TAP videotapes.

## NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADS

### Shy Students

Helping students to overcome shyness in the classroom is one service that a good teacher can provide. Many surveys have shown that for a majority of Americans speaking in front of a class or large group is one of the most anxiety-producing situations imaginable. Unless students face and overcome this common fear, they will be at a disadvantage throughout their lives. Although the success rate may not be 100%, TAs can assist some students in beginning to conquer a problem that might otherwise hinder them both academically and in the business world.

Teachers must first establish an environment where students feel free to express themselves. This alone will probably not motivate a shy student to participate voluntarily but will be laying the groundwork for future participation. Students must see that there is no serious risk attached to speaking out in class--i.e., they will not be penalized or humiliated for incorrect answers.

Be gentle with your students. If you see that certain students are loath to participate, don't grill them aggressively or call on them continuously--such behavior will only make them feel that they are under attack, which may cause them to

withdraw even more from the class. Try to pull them into the discussion with an open question; if they shake their head no or say they have no answer, you may either rephrase the question or go on to another student, depending on how you judge the student's anxiety level.

Assign brief class reports to all students so that they will have to face the entire class at least once a semester. Offer students assistance with these reports if needed and, after the report has been given, schedule all students for a conference in your office to discuss not only the content but also the presentation. Shy students need to hear how others perceive them: they are usually so overcome by anxiety that they miss the non-verbal cues that tell them an audience is responding positively to what they are saying. Be supportive and appreciative of their efforts.

Reassure students that you understand the anxieties they may be feeling and offer tips on how to deal with stage fright. Although they may never completely rid themselves of all anxiety, they should, with a little courage and a lot of practice, be able to perform when needed.

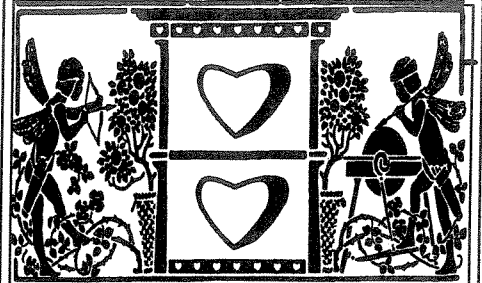
TA  
Helpline  
Call  
932-11TA

Monday-Friday  
between  
the hours  
of  
8:30-4:30



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attention only to the "good ideas" that they charitably discern through the layers of errors. Students should be held to a standard of writing that doesn't necessitate the teacher searching for the ideas. Every campus has its own writing center for students having difficulties. Don't just suggest that your student go there: insist that they do something about their writing skills if they wish to pass your course.



## February

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|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 13 | Graduate School<br>Language Exam                                                                                                              |
| 14 | Valentine's Day                                                                                                                               |
| 15 | Presidents' Day                                                                                                                               |
| 22 | Ramadan begins.<br>"Income Tax Workshop<br>for Graduate Students"<br>7:30 p.m. , Center Hall,<br>Busch Campus Center,<br>with David Retz, CPA |
| 24 | Ash Wednesday                                                                                                                                 |

### Teaching Assistant Project

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