

Helping Our Students

Excellence in teaching entails more than knowledge of a subject and the ability to present that subject clearly to a class (although this is certainly essential). It also requires knowing yourself and understanding the ways you interact with others: how you present yourself and how you respond to different people and situations. Good teachers know that in order to succeed they have to work to establish a positive relationship with the students in their classes.

For any real learning to occur, students must first feel assured that the teacher is in command of the subject and the class. Equally important, however, is that they feel comfortable in approaching the teacher when they have questions or problems with course material. The ability to construct a genuinely supportive atmosphere while, at the same time, maintaining the necessary boundaries between teacher and student is one of the hallmarks of a good teacher. The overly-distant teacher may appear unapproachable, but the overly-friendly one often invites other problems. A fine balance must be preserved, establishing a level of formality that invites trust yet discourages over-familiarity.

Your success in establishing a relaxed classroom atmosphere may result in students feeling that they can come to you in your office for help with non-academic problems. Because students sometimes perceive teachers as people who have attained a degree of control over their lives, they look to them for answers to some of the difficult problems associated with adulthood and college life that are currently troubling them. Although specific problems are never really predictable, teachers would do well to consider in advance how they would handle certain kinds of non-academic problems because, mishandled, they can lead to difficult situations.

It is possible, with some forethought, to find ways to handle sensitive situations gracefully and effectively. Do not try to be all things to all students; being a good teacher is a demanding enough job. Recognize your own limitations, but be

Planning Ahead

With the spring semester quickly drawing to a close, now is the time to get organized so that the semester's end is not the end of you. Stress levels are high for both students and teachers, thus doubly high for TAs. Some of that stress can be prevented, or at least reduced, by taking care of a few details now. A little effort at this time can make a big difference in a few weeks.

•Make sure that your gradebook is in order. This should, of course, be an ongoing concern, but in case you have gotten behind, this is the time to catch up. If your students have papers or work outstanding, notify them; otherwise, many students wait until the final week of the semester to ask teachers if they owe them any work. Give your students fair and realistic deadlines and stick to them so that you will not be swamped with late assignments in a few weeks.

If you have fallen behind with your own coursework, do what you can to avoid taking incomplete in your courses or to minimize the number of incompletes.

Student Problems

Students come to teachers with a variety of personal problems, and the conscientious TA will want to assist their troubled students if they possibly can. TAs should bear in mind, however, that their primary responsibility to their students is academic. Although you may be asked to play a variety of roles by your students--teacher, counselor, friend, mentor, etc.--you must decide which of the roles are appropriate, and, even more important, which you are *qualified* to perform. It is important for teachers to understand and define these roles and then to remain within those limits which protect both students and teachers.

Of course, a teacher should still be sympathetic and listen to a student's problems. Often this will be enough--just talking to someone may relieve the immediate pressure. However, although you may be well-intentioned, you will probably do more harm than good to your students by attempting to assist them yourself rather than re-

ferring them to someone more experienced and qualified. TAs who try to provide psychological counseling to students are overstepping their bounds. TAs who try to help students with problems they are having in other classes or with the university bureaucracy often forget that policies vary according to the college and sometimes even the department; better to send the student to the appropriate dean or advisor rather than giving misinformation.

Many of the problems that students confide to you may seem trivial: disputes with boy-friends, roommates or parents, problems with another teacher, worries about a job. It is sometimes difficult to gauge how serious problems are, so you would never be remiss in referring students to one of the counseling centers. If a student seems severely depressed or agitated, you should do all you can to get the student to go to counseling as soon as possible.

If you are not sure how to handle a student, call the counseling service yourself to discuss ways of helping the student. The telephone numbers of all of the Rutgers-New Brunswick Counseling Services are listed below.

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COUNSELING	
<u>COLLEGE AVENUE CAMPUS:</u>	
50 COLLEGE AVE.	7884
14 COLLEGE AVENUE	8074
PEER COUNSELING	
56 PLACE	7812
<u>COOK COLLEGE CAMPUS:</u>	
ADMINSTRATION BLDs.	9150
<u>DOUGLASS:</u>	
FEDERATION HALL	9070
<u>LIVINGSTON:</u>	
TILLET HALL	4140
<u>COUNSEL LINE:</u>	8839

Helping

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aware of the abilities of others. Know where to turn for help when it is needed. To where should a troubled student be referred? Who can help a student with financial problems? In guiding your students to the proper person when they need help, you are strengthening the relationship you have worked to establish with them in class without becoming involved in areas outside of your area of expertise.

Problem Students

One fact should be faced at the outset: not all Rutgers students will behave as maturely as you have a right to expect. Although, as a matter of course, you should consider and treat all of your students as adults, some, in fact, will not act very maturely. These students may be few in number, but they have the potential for upsetting an entire class. The natural reaction, anger, is the least productive one. A quick but thoughtful and measured reaction can stop these problems before they get out of control, so it is useful to think about ways of dealing with these situations *before* they occur. The two most common problem students that TAs face are discussed below.

*Students who talk, laugh, and generally disturb the class are fairly easy to control if standards of behavior are established from the very beginning of the semester. These students often travel in groups and are usually found in the back of the classroom. Many TAs feel uncomfortable in assuming the role of disciplinarian, but ignoring chattering students will only make matters worse. Often a sharp word or significant stare will be enough to quiet them. If, however, the students persist, you will have to speak to them more directly, perhaps individually after class. Insisting that they sit apart is one of your options. If the

students disregard your warnings, you might suggest that they leave your class until they feel able to conform to the set standards of conduct.

*Students have a right to question grades or assignments, but they sometimes do so in a hostile fashion. If a student is angry, be sure not to respond in kind. Rather than reacting defensively, listen carefully to the student. If the complaint is valid, you must, of course, do whatever you can to remedy it. If not, you must explain the nature of the problem as carefully and *calmly* as you can. Let the student know that his or her behavior is unacceptable, but do not get drawn into an argument. Try to calm the student down. Offer to refer the matter to the faculty member in charge of the course or the department chair.

If a TA is unable to handle a difficult student, he or she should never hesitate to go to a higher authority, either the course supervisor, the department chair, or even the dean of the student's college. You should, of course, attempt to resolve the problem with the student yourself, but if you fail to reach an understanding within a reasonable amount of time, get some help.

Notes From the Field

What is the best way to deal with disruptive students?

From what I've observed in class, you must get in at the beginning and let them know you're not going to compete with them--when you hand out your syllabus at the beginning of the semester, explain that once the lecture begins you expect them to pay attention.

Beth Griech
History Department

I work in a lab and our biggest concerns in this area are safety concerns. I find that it is definitely useful to tell the students at the beginning of the semester about basic safety procedures so they realize what is expected of them. I keep going around the room every few minutes checking so I can catch things *before* they happen.

Pamela Donofrio
Home Economics

ATTENTION ALL TAs

VIDEO EQUIPMENT AVAILABLE
TO TAPE CLASSES.

CALL THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
TO MAKE AN APPOINTMENT.
932-7034

EQUIPMENT WILL ALSO BE AVAILABLE
FOR THOSE TEACHING IN SUMMER
SESSION.

Planning Ahead

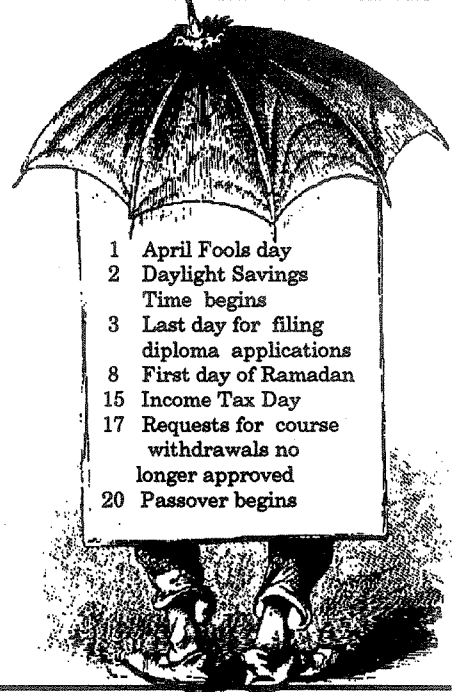
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•Know the policy on incompletes for all of the undergraduate colleges in which you teach and also for your own graduate program. Every student who fails to finish your course should not be given an incomplete automatically. Although it may seem kinder and easier to give a grade of incomplete rather than an "F," a student who has demonstrated no effort over the semester does not deserve this chance, and, in any event, probably would not complete the make-up work.

•Know the college policies on withdrawals. Students cannot withdraw from a course after a certain date. Be of aware of these deadlines.

•Take some time to relax, because if you don't do it now, you won't be able to do it in a few weeks. Go to a movie or a baseball game. Read a novel. Visit some friends. You will perform better in the long run if you allow yourself a little breathing space now.

DATES TO REMEMBER



- 1 April Fools day
- 2 Daylight Savings Time begins
- 3 Last day for filing diploma applications
- 8 First day of Ramadan
- 15 Income Tax Day
- 17 Requests for course withdrawals no longer approved
- 20 Passover begins

Teaching Assistant Project

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