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ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

From the Office of Associate Dean and Director

Large Class vs. Small Class--Always a Debate

By R. Kirby Barrick, Associate Dean

Discussion regarding the effects of class size on instructional effectiveness is always important, especially at large universities like UIUC. There have been numerous research studies on the issue. The key point typically is, what do you mean by effectiveness? If the measure of effectiveness is student opportunity to develop critical thinking skills and practice those skills in the classroom, then the smaller the class the better. If effectiveness is measured solely on student performance on common exams, most research studies conclude that class size, by itself, contributes insignificantly.

Most of us realize that effectiveness must also be counterbalanced with efficiency. Society does not want to afford Plato's Academy or the Socratic method where students, literally, sit at the feet of the master. We do have, and will continue to have in the foreseeable future, classes that enroll 50, 100 or more students. The chosen method of teaching in most cases is the lecture. Therefore, the question becomes, how can we be effective while we are being economically efficient? Here are some tips in three key areas for effective lecturing.

1. Help the students take good notes. Remember, most did not learn this skill in high school!

- Provide an outline of the main points of the day's lecture.
- Include no more than four or five main points in a 50-minute lecture.
- Begin by posing a main question or presenting a clear example of the main point. See the January 1997 issue for tips on questions.
- Clearly state each of the main points. "The next point is..." Use non-verbal emphasis, such as gesturing, or always pausing and returning to the lectern for introducing a main point.
- Write out unfamiliar terms, names, references on some type of visual.
- Use examples when appropriate to illustrate and reinforce the main points.

- Summarize the main points at the end of the lecture.

Effective lecturing is just like effective speaking. Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them. Put another way, my seventh-grade English

teacher emphasized that good, strong writing meant that the reader could read the opening paragraph, the first sentence of each main paragraph, and the last (summary) paragraph and know the main points of the content. That is probably a good test for lecturing, too. Another test--when I supervised high school teachers, I always asked a student, at random, to let me see his/her class notes for the period. Did the notes "match" what the teacher thought he/she taught? Ask a student to share the notes taken during class to see how they reflect what you taught. You can discount any discrepancies by convincing yourself that the student is a poor note-taker. Or you can work on your lecturing to help the students become better note-takers!

2. Use variety. Even 50 minutes is a long time for the Sesame Street set in our college classrooms today. If you have not watched Sesame Street, try it--with a stop watch to record how long each segment lasts. We can't use all the bells and whistles that the Children's Television Network has, but we can add variety to our lectures.

- Plan each class session in two or three segments. For example, lecture for 35 minutes, have small group discussion (this could be simply each person turning to one or two people seated nearby) on a specific, key question for 7 minutes, generate major points from student discussion and present your summary of the session for 8 minutes.
- Insert a small film segment to illustrate a point. Remember that you need not shown an entire video tape, just like you probably do not use an entire book or research report. Eight to ten minutes of video tape on a main point can offer that needed change of pace in a lecture.
- Use poetry or song to raise an important point. For example, Frost's "Mending Wall" (1914) contains an important issue (...Good fences make good neighbors) and could be used to introduce a point about the legal aspect of property rights.
- Individual worksheets (in-class assignments or "seat work") can add variety. Ten minutes of reflecting and writing about a main point can help solidify students' thinking, with appropriate summary from the lecturer. Collecting the written responses can also be an efficient attendance check.

3. Make the class as personal as possible. Large classes need not be cold and unfriendly.

Thinking About Teaching

- Get to class early and wander around the room, chatting with students. No need to pretend that you know all their names; they won't be tricked into that kind of thinking anyway. You may be surprised at the questions the

students may ask about course content when you enter "their space!"

- If you use information sheets to collect names, etc. of the students, try adding one additional item such as a campus activity. Then use that information in class to call upon students when there is time for discussion.
- Help teaching assistants distribute handouts. Again, this shortens the distance between you and the students.
- Walk around the room while lecturing! It is okay to carry around your notes.

Surely the students realize that you do not memorize your lectures!

We cannot solve all the problems that are associated with teaching in a large university. But we can work toward balancing the appropriateness of the grouping of students with instructional strategies to help make our teaching more effective. Helping the students take good notes through organization of lecture, using variety, and personalizing the classroom should help all of us overcome the potentially negative aspects of large classes.

"Effective Communication Procedures as Applied to Teaching" Adapted from article by Rodney F. Plimpton, former Professor of Animal Sciences, The Ohio State University

Major businesses continue to adopt a more open atmosphere in addressing the needs of their employees. In that regard, many have established better communications within the system. A major packing company president outlined what he saw as nine essential steps in the communication scheme to help make employees more effective. As I read those steps, it became obvious that, with slight modification, they are nine rather essential steps in good teaching. After all, our teaching process, in fact, does involve both communication and working effectively with people and their motivation. Here is my paraphrase of those nine communication steps. When you teach 1) make sense - explain your course's goals in terms that your students can relate to; 2) involve your students - develop subject matter, examples and exercises that are interesting and challenging;

A student is not a vessel to be filled but a lamp to be lighted. -- Author Unknown

3) prime the student - make sure that they have adequate resources, know what is expected of them and their chances of success, and acquaint them with the learning environment for this course in advance; 4) turn the students loose - have them set their educational and performance goals; 5) encourage openness - listen to the student's ideas as well as gripes; 6) delegate - give the students responsibility for part of their his own learning performance; 7) groom them - present challenges, make them stretch, make them reach beyond their own expectations; 8) recognize performance - reward the students in direct proportion to their achievement; and 9)

counsel the student - supply them with the information they need to do a better job.

The parallel is obvious. If we in our own teaching programs could set up systems of learning that are sound and reflect systems of performance expected by industry, the teaching-learning process would become far more meaningful for all concerned.

Where to Call to Get Help for Troubled and Troubling Students			
DEAN OF STUDENTS 333-0050	COUNSELING CENTER 333-3704 & MCKINLEY MENTAL HEALTH-333-2705	UNIVERSITY POLICE	STUDENT CONFLICT RESOLUTION 333-3680
- Emergency Dean	- Suicidal students	- Violent students/ others posing immediate danger	- Student behavior code violations
*general concerns	- Alcohol/drug Problems	* CALL 911	- Academic integrity questions
*excessive absences	- Psychotic students	- Violations of law (Non- emergency)	- Mediation services
*personal problems	*incoherent	*Call 333-8911	- Unwanted attention
*academic problems	*delusional	- Consultation with on-duty shift supervisor	- Disruptive student in class
- Harassment/ Discrimination	*catatonic		
Complaints	- Depressed students	*Call 3332216	
- Withdrawal from the University	- Eating disorders		
	*bulimia		
	*anorexia		

The Undervalued Task of Advising Students

Adapted from essay by Victor L. Cahn, Skidmore College

Of all the assignments a college teacher faces, none tends to be more casually discharged than advising students about their academic programs. At preregistration, as advisees roll in one after another, too many of us merely glance at their selections, toss off a general question or two, then sign, grateful for the absence of complication. Now, with electronic registration, we can even defend our aloofness because we no longer "control" the registration process!

But advising is too important not to be carried out more diligently. In fact, perhaps more than any other pedagogic task, it reflects a teacher's view of the value and purpose of a college education.

What does advising entail? On occasion, when students have an academic or personal problem, advisers may be a source of counsel; we may even serve as liaison between college and family. Such crises, however, are rare. Usually an adviser's sole chore is to "approve" programs. With older students we may also reflect on prospects for graduate or professional school as well as the current job market. Yet these procedures are not the limit of what there is to do.

Let's consider a hypothetical situation. The advisee is a sophomore majoring in English. (That happens to be my field, but I'm sure the principles involved may be applied elsewhere.) The student enters my office with her tentative schedule: four courses in 18th - and 19th- century literature. Do I simply sign and send her on her way? Sorry. In such cases I start advising, and fast.

First I ask about graduation requirements. If the college has none, my advisee is obviously absolved. But suppose, for instance, that all students must select three courses each from the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. If she has completed them, fine. But perhaps she has resolved to put some of them off until next year or the one following. If so, I propose that she finish them as soon as possible, so as to leave her options open.

I've met a good many students who begin college unable to find any courses of interest and to whom the four years appear endless. By the end of the second year, though, they have discovered so many alluring subjects that the time remaining is not nearly long enough. Those who have delayed completing requirements then find them even more intrusive. Thus, the earlier requirements are finished, the more curricular freedom students have later on, when it will be most prized.

Such practical considerations are not the only reasons for this strategy. Most

entering freshmen, for example, know little about the diversity of the curriculum. They probably have never taken a course in anthropology, economics, philosophy, psychology, or sociology, and they may have no idea what these subjects are about. Their backgrounds in history, literature, music, and art might also be painfully thin.

One consequence of requirements, whether you're in favor of them or not, is that students are led into unfamiliar disciplines. Some they find of no interest. But others prove inspirational, and the sooner students encounter them, the more time remains for further investigation. It's natural for students to stick to well known territory. We advisers have the obligation to emphasize the value of their looking elsewhere and broadening their concerns.

Let's return to that English major sitting in my office, still waiting for me to sign. And let's assume that her requirements have been met. Is the prospective program of four modern literature courses now more desirable? I don't think so. For even those of us who oppose requirements and believe that course selection should be the student's private domain would probably advocate my advisee's seeking full intellectual development. Virtually all teachers want their charges to leave college with not just an accumulation of credits, but an education.

Thus to that English major I'd recommend several subjects that complement her field. History, for one. To examine the social and political events of an era in conjunction with its literary forces is invaluable. I often suggest literature courses in languages other than English. I don't push too hard for interests but I always urge students with a foundation in a language to build on it. Whatever career they eventually choose, linguistic fluency is sure to prove beneficial.

I regularly recommend courses in art and music, since cultural movements often cross artistic barriers. I'm also convinced that any college graduate should have some idea what Beethoven, Wagner, Michelangelo, and Rembrandt were up to.

My list of suggestions usually concludes with courses in anthropology, psychology, and philosophy - all subjects that dovetail with literature. They are also essential to anyone who desires a liberal education.

I recognize that I have omitted substantial portions of the curriculum that would aid English majors and all students. But since only a limited number of courses can be taken in four very short years, many worthy ones must be missed.

Now let's assume that I've finished recommending and that my probably weary student is willing to consider my advice. She may also be sufficiently intrigued to ask about courses in her major - are all equally valuable? How should she choose among them?

If the department does not impose a sequence, I would suggest that she work toward

acquiring a historical view of English and American literature, a familiarity with major trends and movements. I'd also strongly recommend a course or two in Shakespeare and, almost as strongly, one in classical literature. Then I'd keep quiet. Whatever else the student chooses is fine with me. Chaucer, Milton, the 18th-century novel, romantic poetry, Dickens, Yeats - all deserve her time and effort.

I know other advisers proceed differently on this question. For a pre-med or science major certain sequences are indispensable. For other concentrations, though, few courses are critical. Students in most majors, and surely those who go on to graduate work, will have abundant opportunities during their lives to study masterpieces. What they encounter as undergraduates they will revisit soon enough. And whatever they miss will be thrust upon them. Therefore the college years need not encompass everything. In fact, I regularly propose to English majors that they take the minimum number of English courses needed. The rest of their time would be best spent acquiring the liberal education so difficult to obtain outside the college.

Here I should acknowledge that all this wisdom is not always received as congenially as I have described. Advisees convinced that they know better than we do are often impatient and may even be antagonistic to any attempt at guidance. Nevertheless, if we have convictions about what education should entail, then at these private conferences we have the responsibility to say so. To do less is professional cowardice and a disservice to our students. A word of caution. A few dedicated advisers are so zealous that they refuse to approve programs they deem

inadequate. They "advise" until a student helplessly surrenders. We should bear in mind that we are only advisers - and not in the military sense. Unless a student has concocted a scheme that is against regulations, I never refuse to compromise. I'd even sign the original program offered by the now exhausted young woman in my office. After all, her career is the one at stake, and she should have the final word.

Happily, advising is a role we can enjoy fulfilling properly. In essence what we do is make recommendations on the basis of our own experience and expertise, and students are generally appreciative of advice offered kindly and unpretentiously. Finally, advising benefits us as well. For in the act of helping our students we reaffirm for ourselves the importance of the work we do.

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