
July - August 1998 University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

From the Office of Associate Dean

A LETTER TO NEW ADVISEES

Fall semester brings more than 600 new students to the College of ACES. Freshmen and transfer students are well-qualified to be a part of UIUC, but they can still benefit from a positive relationship with a faculty advisor.

The following article is adapted from The Teaching Professor, April 1997, and was originally written by Michael Mavrovouniotis of Northwestern University.

The purpose of this letter, which I send to new advisees, is to make advising more effective. A letter like this makes the advisor's approach clear from the beginning, puts students at ease, and assures students that their advisor takes the job seriously. It also asks students to think carefully about their education and career plans.

I invite you to adapt and change it depending on the circumstances of your advising situation.

Though addressed to students, the letter is a useful way for advisors to clarify their own thinking about advising. My letter reflects my philosophy; yours may be quite different.

Dear Sandy (I use names, as opposed to generic "dear student" greeting),

Nothing is given so profusely as advice and this university will make sure you are never short of it. I am your new advisor. I hope you will stop by my office at your first opportunity, but let me begin our acquaintance with this letter.

You've chosen a major that is not an easy one, and most people's interests and skills are not well-suited to it. Though I find it exciting and rewarding, it's not for everyone. Your choice of major is not final. I suggest you continue to evaluate your decision as you begin to take those classes that are required only

by our majors, and later on when you start taking classes from our department.

Some people find out it's not what they like after all, and college is definitely the time to make that discovery. We all have to seek carefully the path that will make the best use of our skills and give us a satisfying career. However, changing your major is not something that should be done on a whim. Think about it. When you stop by, I can give you a better idea of what kinds of challenges and opportunities await you.

This and other decisions to come are yours to make. There are requirements to be satisfied for the completion of this major. I hope you'll find time right away to study them, as well as think about the concentration areas and electives you may want to pursue. The specific decisions along the way, especially the courses you'll take each semester, are in your hands. I will point out alternatives; I will discuss the likely consequences of each path. I might write down on your class-selection sheet what these consequences are, so they are clear to both of us. But in the end I respect your right to choose your own educational path.

I hope you never face extracurricular obstacles, like problems with family, work, or your social circle. Because I respect your privacy, I will not probe for them, but I am quite willing to listen if you want to tell me. If you do, it may allow me to give you more useful suggestions or refer you to more knowledgeable people. I am always interested in discussing issues you're facing, academic or extracurricular.

Sometimes you may drop in with a question when I am in the middle of something else (meeting with somebody, writing, or reading something). If I ask you to come back later (and offer to make an appointment), please don't think that talking to you is less important. It's just that I have to take one thing at a time, and try to finish it before moving on to the next task. In that spirit, I will make sure that when I am meeting with you, I don't allow any interruptions.

On occasion I may send you to other people or places to get the information you need— not because I don't want to take the time, but because I don't know everything. Instead of misinforming you, I'd rather refer you to people with the right expertise.

I hope you will stop by my office in the next few days. I look forward to meeting you and finding out more about your interests and aspirations.

Your new advisor,

Mike Mavrovouniotis

(I sign each letter. I may add an individual note if I already know something about the student--such as participation in an honors program, double major, or athletic activities.)

FACULTY AWARD WINNERS

ACES faculty were recognized for their achievements during the Campus Instructional Awards Program this past spring. ACES recipients included:

Delta Sigma Omicron Distinguished Teaching Award

Brent A. McBride, Human and Community

Development

Campus Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching

Robert M. Skirvin, Natural Resources and

Environmental Sciences

Finalist for Graduate College Award for Outstanding Mentoring of Graduate Students

Cecil D. Nickell, Crop Sciences

Finalist for Campus Award for Excellence in Guiding Undergraduate Research

Michael J. Plewa, Crop Sciences

Finalist for Campus Award for Innovation in Undergraduate Instruction Using Educational Technologies

John M. Edgington, Natural Resources and

Environmental Sciences

Finalist for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching -- Teaching Associate

James S. Javenkoski, Food Science and Human

Nutrition

Instruction is effective to the degree that it succeeds in changing students in desired directions and not to undesired directions.

Robert F. Mager, 1984

TIME MANAGEMENT FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

One of the biggest challenges to face our students is managing their time. They have the new-found freedom of college students, and most have very little experience in dealing with it! Their lives have been structured for them for the past 18 years.

The following tips can help our new students adapt to a lifestyle that requires only 15-20 hours a week in class, with the rest of the time free to use as they please. Advisors and instructors should find the tips helpful as they deal with students. Perhaps advisors could include a copy in their letter to new advisees!

§ Use a calendar or planner. During the first week of class, mark down deadlines for each assignment, paper, project, and test you'll encounter that semester. Set daily and weekly goals for progressing through these obligations.

§ Plan to spend at least two nights studying for any major exam. Set aside even more time for writing papers, especially if research is required. Don't forget the time it will take to type and print the paper, especially if you need to schedule computer time. It's also a good idea to allow extra time for computer emergencies--today's version of "the dog ate my homework."

§ Don't get behind in your other classes while concentrating on one. Continue to work ahead in all your classes as much as possible.

§ Read the assignments before class—not right before the test. By reading ahead of time, the lectures will make more sense.

§ Go to class. Your own notes will be more helpful than a friend's. Get in the

habit of reading your lecture notes at the end of each day, or at least at the end of each week. This will eliminate a lot of cramming at semester's end.

§ Plan your study time. One expert recommends studying for 50 minutes, then breaking for 10 minutes. Allow a cup of coffee or a quick visit with a friend down the hall for those 10 minutes; little incentives can keep you going. Rather than highlighting several passages in your reading assignments, write notes or questions to yourself in the margins. This will strengthen your retention.

§ Don't gorge on caffeinated beverages and foods in an effort to stay awake. You could end up jittery or nauseous--neither condition is conducive to effective learning.

§ Even if you're racing to start a paper, take a few extra minutes to prepare a workable outline. It will be easier to structure your paper when you start writing.

From Better Homes and Gardens, September 1997

Top 5 Lessons Professors Can Learn Immediately (and make a difference!)

Dr. Susie Whittington, faculty member in the College of Agricultural Sciences at Penn State, has spent 444 hours observing 58 different professors at three major universities. Her recommendations for lessons to be learned and immediate actions that can be taken to make positive difference in teaching and learning are described here.

#5 - The world was made in color!

Color overheads and colored chalk are easy to use and inexpensive to buy. Slides, posters and realia are usually colorful. These items will brighten classrooms and thereby enhance interest. Although a bit more cumbersome to use in some classrooms, the World Wide Web brings color and life to otherwise dull classrooms--and is becoming more interactive.

#4 - Embrace diversity.

The students enrolled in college of agriculture classrooms are no longer 18-24 year old, white, rural males. In a nation where diversity is celebrated, it is important that classes utilize the richness of the varied backgrounds and

interests of students to enhance the learning environment. Diversity is best embraced when students are given opportunities to “share and talk” as opposed to “sit and listen.”

#3 - Our most prized possession is our name.

It is human nature to want to hear our name used in a positive way. The time spent learning students’ names will pay dividends in the end in that students will appreciate the attention given to them individually when their name is used in class. Students who do not receive the top or the bottom test score can easily pass through class “unnamed and unnoticed,” yet these may be the students who need tremendous encouragement.

#2 - Interest is contagious.

Professors make great strides in motivation by using students needs and ideas when creating the class syllabus. The “interest nucleus” will continue to spread as students become a valued component in planning the course. Once one student becomes excited about a topic or concept, the interest “rubs- off” on other classmates.

#1 - Plug them in, turn them on, tune them in!

Choosing instructional materials that elicit student’s thinking, not just verbalization of information the student thinks the teacher desires, is critical for actively engaging students in the learning process. Since thinking is interesting while memorization is uninteresting, subject matter must be presented as a problem-solving process rather than simply as knowledge.

Will the radio work if it is plugged-in, but not turned on? Will the radio work its best if it is plugged-in and turned-on, but not tuned-in? Professors must engage in a three-step process with students: Plug them in by using their needs and interests as the nucleus from which to build the course. Then lay out the course with clear directions and expectations. Turn them on every class period with enthusiasm for the subject matter and a 2-4 minute interest approach or attention- getter at the beginning of each session. Tune them in by holding their attention through using variability. Changing deliver modes every 10-12 minutes will result in higher levels of attentive listening during class.

Adapted from an article by M. Susie Whittington in the NACTA Journal, March 1997

Good Reasons for Objectives

Stating objectives is an important part of teaching... so we've been told, but we don't usually greet the admonition with much enthusiasm. Actually, there are several good reasons for stating your course or assignment objectives clearly. Occasionally we need to be reminded of their importance.

First, imagine you are buying a car. Look at the window sticker— what does it tell you? All about the engine, brakes, tires, stereo, air conditioning... . You wouldn't buy a new car without looking at the window sticker, would you? "It looks good! Who cares about the features?" I don't think so. A more likely line of thought would be, "It looks good. Now let's see what it's got."

Now put yourself in the place of today's paying student. Even if you don't buy the "student as customer" metaphor, you still have to admit the student is paying for *something*. And the mature student especially wants to know *what* he or she is paying for. Objectives are like window stickers. They tell the student, "This is what you'll get if you invest your time and energy in this opportunity."

I've also found that writing the objectives for my course and for each assignment has helped me to design more effective learning experiences. I've been forced to consider the value of each and every homework assignment. How does it help the student to achieve the course objective? What, specifically, will the student gain by doing this assignment? If the gains don't justify the time required, how can the assignment be changed so that they do? In this way, I've cut much of the fluff and beefed up what was left. Students are now telling me that doing the homework really helps them learn useful ways of applying the content, including but not limited to preparing for the tests. Clearly stated objectives also contribute to the

students' perceptions of the teacher's commitment to student learning. The teacher who takes time to write out exactly what it is he or she expects the students to learn is likely to be considered better organized and more concerned than the teacher who simply assumes students already know whatever it is they are supposed to learn.

Well-written objectives do not promise grand things that the student must take on faith and wait to see realized. They assist the student decision makers, from the 18-year old who come to college with a lot of inaccurate expectations about what it takes to succeed, to the single mom who is juggling two part-time jobs with two classes and three kids.

When priorities need to be set and reset on a daily basis, solid information is your best guide. And well-written objectives are solid information.

Adapted from an article by Carolyn Buckley, Northampton Community College. In the May 1998 issue of The Teaching Professor.

Personally, I am always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught.

--Winston Churchill

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