



Classroom Strategies for Improving Retention

*"Our best experiences in teaching are those where we connect with our learners and are of genuine assistance to them."
(Wlodkoski and Ginsberg, 1995, p. 1)*

Most students decide whether to continue enrollment within the first part of their first quarter. What happens on the first day of class sets the learning climate for the entire quarter and may help a student decide whether to stay or flee. On the first day you should:

- **Be enthusiastic.** If you act bored or lack passion for teaching or your subject matter, you will impart that attitude to your students. Why would students want to learn your subject in your class if you don't seem interested or interesting?
- **Begin building connections** with your students.
 - *Introduce yourself.* Tell students what you would like them to call you and how you can be reached outside of class. Tell them how you chose your field of study and your educational background. If you went to a community college, be sure to let them know that as well.
 - *Learn about your students.* Ask students to complete an information sheet listing name, address, phone number, e-mail address, major, work information, how many hours a week they work outside of class, why they are taking this class, what other courses they are taking, what grade they expect to earn, how much time they expect to study outside of class, strengths and weaknesses, previous related courses, etc. Respond to their information sheet by writing a short note to **each** student saying something positive as well as expressing concerns (e.g., "You're working a lot of hours and taking a lot of courses. I'm concerned that you may not be able to be as successful as you and I would like you to be" or "You indicated that you expect to spend 1 hour outside of class studying each week and expect to earn an A. Typically students who get A's report that they had to spend 8-10 hours a week outside of class time."). This helps take advantage of

the “teachable moment” as well as provides a way for you to begin a dialog with each student.

Learn student names as quickly as possible, and use them when addressing students in class (and out of class). The following suggestions may help you quickly learn names:

- Ask students to introduce themselves (a great way to take attendance without you worrying how to pronounce names!) and share something that will help you and the rest of the class learn their names. This can also be done as a paired-activity with students introducing each other.
- Take pictures and paste them on index cards. Use them as “flash cards” to help you learn names.
- Assign seats or use name tags. You can keep the tags and have students pick them up at the start of each class. They can be used for attendance purposes as well as to help you learn names.

Help students connect with classmates. Encourage students to have an in class buddy and have them exchange phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

- **Set a positive tone that focuses on student success.** When students see your syllabus and course requirements, they may feel overwhelmed. Be reassuring. Let students know that you believe they can succeed, and let them know you will help them. The purpose of the first class session should set up an expectation for success—not scare students away!
- **Involve students** and encourage participation in first-day activities so that they become active learners early in the course.
- **Don’t just read the syllabus.** Students find that as uninteresting as faculty do! Instead, design a group activity for students to understand both the syllabus and course policies. In this way students will get to know their classmates and begin to make connections as well as learn about the syllabus. When forming groups, use something class related. For example, in a computer programming class, you might ask students to line up according to their birthdays. You can then explain that they just demonstrated the process of “sorting” and as part of the course they will learn how to write programs so that the computer can automate such a task. You can also give a take-home quiz on the syllabus (a great

homework assignment for the first class and a great way for students who miss the first class to learn about the requirements!). Scoring the quiz will help you learn what students understand and don't understand about your expectations and allow you to focus on just those points of the syllabus in the second class session.

- **Determine students' goals and objectives** while discussing your goals and objectives. Let students know how your course can fit in with their personal or career goals and objectives.
- **Explore students' fears and apprehensions.** You may want to invite a panel of former students to answer student questions about the course. If you leave the room, students will feel less anxious about discussing whatever is on their minds.
- **Communicate what students can expect of you and what you expect of them.** This can be done orally or by writing students a short letter or memorandum.
- **Be respectful of students' other responsibilities.** Many of your students have obligations to family and jobs that will consume much of their out-of-class time. If possible, include exam and assignment due dates on your syllabus or give students considerable advance notice about important dates.
- **Help students understand the amount of work that goes into being successful.** Explain that being successful in college is less about "brains" and more about willingness to work hard and spend many hours outside of class reading, reviewing, doing assignments, and studying. Help students budget their time by informing them how much time they will need to devote to study outside of class.
- **Don't dismiss class early on the first day.** If there is time remaining after your syllabus activity, begin communicating the content of your course.
- **Require students who miss the first class** to meet with you in your office so that you can get to know them as well as answer any questions they have about the course or syllabus.

Many of the above suggestions are not just for the first day. You may want to review these suggestions whenever you are starting a new topic, explaining a difficult assignment, or

periodically throughout the course. The following strategies and techniques can be used throughout your course:

- **Refer to your syllabus often** so that students understand its importance in communicating information critical to their success.
- **Be flexible and understanding of students' outside commitments.** Allow students to drop their lowest exam or assignment score and provide alternative activities for students who miss class. For example, in a speech course that requires attendance when classmates are giving speeches, you can arrange with colleagues for students to make up sessions by “becoming the audience” in one of their classes.

Get to know your students.

- *You should be the first to arrive and last to leave class.*
- *Socialize with your students* by attending their clubs or activities, having lunch with them, walking with them between classes, etc.
- *Visit with students before or after class.* Get to know a new student each class.
- **Let your students know that you care about them as individuals and as learners.**
 - *Provide an environment in which there is acceptance of diversity and respect for every individual.*
 - *Deal directly with student attitudes by explaining why certain materials are taught as well as why they are taught in particular ways.*
 - *Listen carefully to student comments.* Rather than dismissing their ideas, add to them to make the students feel that their ideas and opinions are worthwhile.
 - *Use instructional techniques and assignments to appeal to a wide range of learning styles, backgrounds, and skill levels.* Be creative in designing lessons, activities, assignments, and assessments. Research indicates that there is a close association between students' cultural background and their preferred learning styles. It is likely that your students' preferred learning styles are not the same as yours. According to Sanchez (2000) Hispanic/Latino students exhibit a high propensity for feedback, concrete learning experiences, cooperative situations (group work) and active experimentation (page 42). Palma-Rivas (2000) reports that African-American students'

achievement appears to be positively related to oral experiences and interpersonal relationships. Other students may prefer to learn by lecture and individual work.

- *Allow students to relate and apply personal, family, or cultural experiences or histories in class assignments, and affirm the validity of their experiences and histories.*
- *Select materials that reflect diverse opinions, authors, etc.*
- *Include practical, real-life examples from many cultures in course content.*
- *Provide timely feedback that encourages student learning and persistence.*
 - Provide positive reinforcement to student questions by giving respectful answers to questions.
 - Return materials as soon as possible with comments. Write something positive on each assignment or exam.
 - Use your imagination to devise ways to positively reinforce student accomplishments. Consider using stickers, certificates, and public praise.
 - Communicate course progress/grades frequently.

Encourage or require students to visit you in your office. Meeting one-on-one is an opportunity to learn about individual students and answer questions that they might not ask in class. In addition, students who may be timid about coming to your office with questions are more likely to seek your assistance after visiting your office the first time.

- *Put a sign on your door "Students are welcome here!"*
- *Encourage and praise students.* Stress a "you can do it" attitude and emphasize your willingness to provide help.
- *Tell success stories of past students.*
- *Share your struggles and successes with learning.*

Identify students who are headed for academic difficulty as early in the course as possible. Take the initiative to contact and meet with students who are doing poorly. Don't just write "see me" on a paper or exam. Approach the student before or after class to arrange a meeting. Be especially cautious with the passive student who comes to class, sits quietly, doesn't participate, and does poorly on evaluations. Other warning signs you should look for include (Seidman)

- Late or uncompleted assignments
- Repeatedly missing class, coming late, or leaving early
- Not participating in class discussions

- Not taking notes
 - Doing poorly on assignments, quizzes, and/or tests
 - Not attentive
 - Disruptive
 - Appears tired or hung over in class
- **Provide many opportunities for success.**
 - *Set high, but realistic expectations.* Research has shown that a teacher's expectations have a powerful effect on student's performance (Forsyth and McMillan, 1991). If you act as though you expect students to succeed, they are more likely to succeed.
 - *Provide early opportunities for success.* Increase the difficulty of the material as the semester progresses.
 - *Help students set achievable goals for themselves.* Encourage students to focus on their continued improvement, not just on their grade on any one test or assignment. Set up a grading system that provides the possibility for students to succeed if they mastered the learning objectives even if they struggled in the first part of the course.

Early and frequent evaluations through quizzes and/or short assignments will help students maintain focus and be successful. In addition, frequent evaluations will provide opportunities for you to make course adjustments if your students are struggling.

- **Use the entire class period at every class meeting** to let the students know they are important. Demonstrate to students that you value their time. Start on time and finish on time!
- **Don't allow the classroom to set up artificial barriers between you and your students.** Circulate around the class as you talk or ask questions rather than standing behind a lectern, desk, or computer for the entire period.
- **Help your students learn how to learn the content in your discipline.**

Ask the reading faculty to do a "readability study" of the texts you use in your classroom.

- *Preview the texts with your students.* Describe how you will use the texts and how you expect students to use the texts in your courses.
- *Explain time expectations and what students can do to master the content of your courses.*
- *Help students set up study groups.*
- *Integrate study skills.*
- *Don't be afraid to admit that you don't know all the answers, and model how you find answers.*
- *Explain the difference between legitimate collaboration and academic dishonesty, be clear when collaboration is wanted and when it is forbidden.*

- **Attendance matters.** Once a student gets into the habit of missing class, it is difficult to change the pattern.
 - *Tell students what your attendance policy is* and make them aware of your deep concern for attendance.
 - *Call or e-mail students when they are absent.*
 - *Have an attendance policy in which students are required to call when they are absent.*
 - *If you have to miss a class, explain why and what you will do to make up the time.*

- **Build a sense of community in and out of the classroom.**
 - *Provide opportunities for students to get to know and learn from other students in the class.* Integrating academics and social opportunities increases retention.
 - *Use collaborative/cooperative assignments* to foster social and academic integration
 - *Use service-learning* to create and emphasize community and to truly engage students.
 - *Require that students participate in online discussion groups with you and their classmates.*

- **Provide opportunities for students to give you feedback.**
 - *Create a safe environment in which your students feel free to comment on which teaching methods are effective and which ones aren't.*

- *Use classroom assessment techniques (CATS) such as one-minute papers, “the muddiest point” and background knowledge probes to get immediate feedback to help improve student learning (Angelo and Cross, 1993).*
- *Place a suggestion box outside your office.*
- **Provide academic advising in your classes and teach students about other campus resources.**
 - *Make sure that counselors and advisors have information to work with your students.*
 - *Have a counselor and representatives from various student support services visit your class.*
 - *If your syllabus is posted on the web, include links to various campus offices.*
 - *If a student needs help, walk him or her to the proper office and make an introduction.*

If you require a term paper or research paper

- *Arrange for a library orientation.* Librarians would be happy to help.
- *Have a draft of the paper due early in the term* and help students who may need writing or other tutoring obtain the assistance they need.

If you require computer use, schedule a session in the computer labs to familiarize students with the hardware and software on your campus.

- *Provide extra credit for participating in on-campus activities and discipline-related clubs.*
- **Check whether students satisfied the prerequisites of your course and explain their importance to your students.**
- **Work with other faculty, staff, and administrators to develop shared expectations that can be communicated to all students.**
- **Have discussions with colleagues to share “what works.”**
- **Do classroom research to learn more about what you do to enable student success.** Meet with students who did well despite having risk factors for not persisting. Ask them what difficulties they faced in your course and how they overcame them. Share this information

with other students as well as faculty and college employees so that you can work as a team to retain students.

Unfortunately, there is no magical formula that will help you retain 100% of your students. Some students should never have been in your class in the first place. Others withdraw for reasons that are not within your control. You can, however, increase student learning and improve the odds for retention and success by helping students become more connected and involved in their learning.

Source:

**Retaining Students in Classes:
Putting Theory into Everyday Practice**

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