

# Want to Improve Your Teaching? Start With the Basics: Learn Students' Names

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Every semester I teach a journalism course at the University of Kansas on design basics for 80 to 100 students. One day I noticed that a student who attended every class had not been turning in his weekly journal assignment.

I asked him to see me after class. As we talked in my office, he began to cry and revealed he'd been under a lot of personal stress — taking classes while trying to work 30 hours a week at IHOP to help his mother and pay his own bills. His biggest need was money, and I managed to get him some immediate financial support from the university. But he was also enormously relieved just to tell me what was going on in his life — he had no idea, he said, that professors noticed students.

One of the key lessons I've learned in 28 years of teaching: Show students you are invested in them, and they will feel a lot more invested in the work they do for your course. It matters to them that you care, not just about their academic performance, but about their well-

being. Over the years, I've found that when students know you care, they will try harder and be more open to constructive criticism.

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My experience is supported by major studies, including the longitudinal, multi-institutional [Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education](#) and the [Gallup-Purdue Index Report](#). Both sought to identify the practices and conditions that influence student success. A key conclusion: While [inclusive-teaching methods](#) are important, students need a professor who makes a personal connection with them, [who cares about them](#) as people, and who encourages them.

Does that observation seem obvious? Maybe. But based on the results of both studies, students don't see it practiced much in the classrooms of many of their college professors.

In a journalism course I teach with a colleague, Peter Bobkowski, we annually (since 2017) survey our students about how their experience in college is different from high school. We're interested in what a college instructor can do — especially for first-year students — to help them adjust to college courses.

One thing students say repeatedly: They find it harder to connect and communicate with college professors than with their high-school teachers. College professors, as one undergraduate wrote, "aren't gonna just walk up to you and say, 'Hey, I noticed you're struggling with this.' [They] don't show as much care compared to high-school teachers. It's up to the students to build the relationships and get the help needed."

Some professors would agree with that, and students in our survey acknowledged that part of college is developing autonomy and learning to initiate communication.

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Still, the perception that it's *only* the responsibility of students to make connections — and not of faculty members — bothered me. So in another open-ended survey, I asked 80 students what made them feel that a professor was invested in them and in their academic success.

The No. 1 response? When the professor learned their names.

Students in the survey acknowledged that learning all of their names is very hard to do in a large class. But they said it was alienating when a professor could not call them by name even in small-sized classes, or did not seem to recognize them outside of class.

And they noticed when a professor *did* make the effort. As one student wrote: "One of my professors learned everyone's name in the first week and it made me feel really important and that she cared about me."

That professor was not me. Name recall is infuriatingly difficult for me. I'm one of those people who can remember that a student is, say, retrofitting a Ford van to make it livable, but the moment we run into each other on the campus, I will blank on the student's name.

It helps that I come clean with my students about that. But I also make a very visible effort to remember their names. In small classes, I go around the room and recite their names aloud. I study my photo roster, and I keep it in front of me in class so I can refer to it as needed.

There's no point trying to fake it. Students are onto us, anyway. A student in one of our surveys wrote that it doesn't bother her when professors don't know her name "as long as it seems like they're making an effort to learn it."

Another biggie, right behind remembering their names, was wanting the professor to reply to their emails. I understand students' frustration. Likewise I empathize with faculty members who are overwhelmed by email. I teach more than 100 students every semester, so my email inbox overflows on a daily basis.

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I sometimes miss the days when students had to come to your office or call to ask a question. One solution: Regard email as a teaching tool and a teaching moment.

Students have to be taught how to use email properly — and how to not overuse it. That's why I include an email protocol on my syllabus that tells students: Write the course number and the topic in the subject line and keep the message brief. I stress the importance of considering the recipient's time in deciding whether to fire off an email. If students have an issue that requires more than a five-minute response from me, I ask them to make an appointment or see me during office hours.

Which brings me to office hours. Professors like to complain that students never show up for scheduled office hours. But when I surveyed students about this subject, many expressed frustration at professors who were not in their offices at the appointed hour, or did not seem available outside of class. One student wrote that, while all of her professors held office hours, some acted "irritated" when she actually showed up.

On the other hand, students said they appreciated when a professor encouraged them, repeatedly, to drop by during office hours. I've had students — especially those in their first year of college — tell me that they feel afraid to approach a professor, especially in a large class.

Sometimes I have students lined up in the hall to see me during my office hours. I use that time to do a lot of teaching — mentoring, critiquing their work, answering questions about the material. I consider office hours to be an extension of my classroom.

Likewise, I usually try to hang around after class for 20 minutes or so, especially before assignments are due. I find I can solve a lot of common problems with students en masse.

They often stay after class to ask for a critique of a project they are working on (in one visual course I teach, they create résumés, photo layouts, and infographics, among other assignments). If several of them want a critique, we look at their work as a group and evaluate it together. Students learn a lot by seeing other students' work and hearing what I say about it. This also allows me, and the students, to gauge how well they understand the assignment.

Providing feedback, including real-time feedback, is good pedagogy. It's the kind of strategy that Andrea Greenhoot, a professor of psychology at the University of Kansas and director of its teaching center, says helps students feel "seen and understood."

Across academe, institutions are paying more attention to fascinating research and new strategies on teaching and learning. And that's all good. Yet when I asked what a professor can do to help students feel most engaged with a course, they pointed again and again to the basics: Learn our names, answer our emails promptly, show up for office hours, and seem happy to see us when we do.

Such seemingly intuitive interactions are foundational. They give students the sense of well-being they need to become engaged learners and the confidence to reach out and ask for help on the bigger issues.

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