

Student Relationships

If you want to have good relations with students and keep them performing and giving effort, it is essential to continually take specific actions. First, keep students informed of both the purposes and strategies you employ in your classes. Second, teach the reason behind expectations, requirements, procedures, and changes. Third, reveal the connection between students' efforts and their achievement in the "big picture" of their lives. Fourth, tell students individually what they do well—and how they can reduce their errors and improve their efforts. Continuous action in these four areas will help increase students' value for you as a person and as a professor.

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Be careful how you end conversations with students. Because you are so busy and have only so much time you can devote to a conversation, you can go from being open and friendly to seeming cold and abrupt. This will send negative signals to students. A good technique for ending conversations is a concluding statement or question. For instance, say, "In a nutshell, the importance of what you said is..." Or you can say, "To wrap it up, what's our next step?" Be certain to listen and respond appropriately. As you use this technique, remember not to pose a new issue and then terminate the discussion.

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hen you make a mistake in the classroom, admit it. You'll find this easier to do if you can be truly honest with yourself when you err. This one action will keep you from making an even more serious mistake—deceiving yourself. Make no mistake: Students will find it almost impossible to ignore your self-deception. At the same time, they will find your open admission refreshing. Remember, self-deception can ruin good relationships with students. Open admission can establish good ones.

1. What do you say to students to assure them they will be successful in your class this year?
2. Is your ability to present instruction on a level with your command of content-related knowledge? If not, what can you do to become more proficient in instruction?
3. How can you streamline the necessary classroom-management tasks to leave more time for learning?
4. What techniques do you use to help students see the connection between their effort and their success in the "big picture" of life?

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It is our attitude at the beginning of a difficult undertaking which, more than anything else, will determine its successful outcome.

— William James

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Leadership Lane • P.O. Box 1207
Manhattan, Kansas 66505-1207
1-800-669-9633

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Author, Publisher, & Chairman of the Board, Robert L. DeBruyn; Contributing Author, James R. Fickelbach, Ph.D.; President & COO, Steven M. Rowley; CEO, Tracey H. DeBruyn; Executive Vice President, Richard T. Shultz; Vice President of Technology, Brad Roberts; Vice President of Manufacturing, Rollin Mensah; Director of Processing, Cynthia Rignelli; Director of Production, Sheri Spence; Editorial Advisors, Alice Campbell, Alice King.

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Your Major
Mission On
The First Day

FEATURE

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TIPS ON...

Student Relationships

Teaching and learning come first

We're all aware of the importance of beginnings of any kind. But the initial day of class, when professors and students first meet, has special significance. Not only is it paramount to the beginning of the class, but it can affect all the days that follow. That's why we should carefully develop a plan for the first class and carry it out smoothly without any negative incidents.

It's wise to make sure not to confuse your "tasks to do" with the "major mission" you should strive to achieve during the first class. Make no mistake: achieving the major mission is the most important part of having a good first day—and ensuring that good days will follow. Unfortunately, the actions we need to take on the first day may be counter to what we have been told about college teaching.

Housekeeping tasks need to get done, but they are not a part of our mission.

There are many tasks you may want and need to get done on the first day. You should get them done. But don't confuse classroom-management tasks with your first-day mission. For instance, you may want to check the roll and verify lab or exam schedules. That's fine. You should get these tasks done. But checking the roll and verifying schedules are not a part of your major first-day mission.

You may want to cover procedures, expectations, and requirements on the first day. If so, proceed according to your desires and get the job done. Just know these tasks, no matter how necessary, are not your first-day mission. You may also want to hand out your syllabus as students begin the new class. While these are issues that need to be handled, they are not your first-day mission.

Similarly, you may want to begin putting the names of students with the faces you see on the first

day so that you can address each student by name. While this is a worthwhile task that needs prompt attention, this is not your first-day mission. While all these tasks need to be addressed, they should not be done at the expense of your major first-day mission.

Our mission to teach and nurture learning must begin on the first day.

Without question, your first-day mission is to ready students for teaching and learning with you. If you want a good first day and a highly productive class, this mission is your most vital first-day action. Achieving this mission requires numerous actions—many of which you may have neglected in the past.

First, you must tell students that they can learn—and that they *will* learn with you. You must relate that no matter what has happened to them in college before, success can lie ahead for them in your class—without exception. Some students may not believe your words unless you also tell them you have planned carefully for their success—and relate that you will be helping them all along the way during their learning journey. In the process, you must be enthusiastic and optimistic for the learning experience students will have—and relate how important and beneficial what they are about to learn will be to them.

Second, a big part of your first-day mission is to do all you can to make students feel safe with you, themselves, their work, and others in the class. This includes giving students perspective regarding how to handle learning difficulty and recovering from learning mistakes. Remind students that much of what we learn as human beings comes from our problems and mistakes—and that as they work and learn they won't learn very much if they never falter or err. Students need to know that the college classroom is the one place in their lives where they are safe to seek, search, try, and even blunder in order to learn to their fullest. And students also need to be told that if they come to every class, do their assignments, bring the tools they need in class, and always do their best, they will learn. They will be successful. They will not fail.

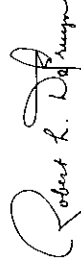
Third, one of the most important parts of your first-day mission is to lift students up. If you want high levels of focus, interest, effort, and learning, one of your major first-day objectives should be to actually inspire students. Your message must be designed to create the desire to learn, the motivation and resolve to persist, and the environment to improve students' spirits and morale. This part of your mission is vital to get students to believe they can and will learn with you.

To complete your mission, you need to teach a lesson before students leave class the first day. The more interesting, important, and useful the lesson, the better. But you must make sure each student learns your first-day lesson—even if you have to let students teach each other to make sure learning occurs. This action is a must—if you want to pull every student into your orbit of influence on the first day.

The effective professor knows a focus on instruction and learning shouldn't wait till the next class.

The effective professor knows the actions we take on the first day can build our relationships with students and set the stage for working with them. That's why our first-class mission is to prepare students for learning and following our instructional leadership. If students learn only our expectations and requirements on the first day, we have missed a huge opportunity to prepare them for learning.

The effective professor is well aware that we have many class management tasks we want and need to cover with students quickly. These tasks are both necessary and important. We should get these tasks done. But we can't forget the big issue on the first day. By addressing the mission of learning at the first meeting of the class, we leave no doubt that learning comes first in our classroom.



Robert L. DeBruyn

