



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

## THE CRITICAL FIRST 25%

The days before each semester begins are the proverbial calm before the storm. Soon the mornings are filled with packing lunches, getting family members to where they are supposed to be, beginning the morning commute—all before the 8:00 a.m. class you are teaching at the local community college. The classes finish for the day, and then the “other duties as assigned” begin—the committees, meetings, preparing for tomorrow’s classes, and on and on. The first few weeks after classes begin can be maddening; however, if we are not careful, we can miss a prime time to connect with students. The critical first 25%, as I label it (the first four weeks of a 16-week semester or two-and-one-half weeks of a 10-week summer session), lays the foundation for how the semester will proceed. A carefully crafted faculty-student connection can be the difference between a student completing the course successfully or becoming just another failed retention statistic.

I teach a cohort of technical education students who move through their core requirements as a group. Admittedly, this makes the task of developing relationships much easier than seeing a new crop of students each semester, but there are some strategies which have proven useful in establishing a classroom where students are connected and encouraged to participate and engage in the learning process.

### Strategies for Connecting Early

**Make the first day meaningful.** Students often are filled with anxiety on the first day of classes. What will be expected? How much time will be involved? Will I be able to work? What about my financial aid? The list of questions is considerably longer than the list of answers. Prior to passing out the syllabi and jumping straight into the instructional content, try breaking the class into small groups of three to five students; and after a short time, have each introduce himself and another member of the group to the class. This provides students with an opportunity to break the ice and quickly develop connections with others in the class. Do not be afraid

to throw yourself into the mix—it is a great way to illustrate that you value the time and getting to know people.

**Be accessible.** All teachers establish office hours in which students can come by and discuss their coursework, the midterm research paper, or whatever else happens to come up. Providing office phone numbers and email addresses is a common occurrence. However, communicating to the students that you are available on evenings and weekends sends a powerful message. I have found that letting the single parent, who works the remainder of the day immediately following class, know that I will make myself available when she most needs the assistance to be very reassuring. Most issues can be resolved with a quick phone call and minimal interruption to your day. Accessibility may mean going above and beyond what is required—what teachers do, anyway.

**Have social functions outside of class.** Social functions can provide the group with opportunities to more about their classmates and instructor in a casual setting—e.g., having a cookout at a local park for the entire group or small groups for lunch; planning and attending a school-sponsored event such as a concert, play, or basketball/baseball game. These are terrific opportunities to support school functions and be out of the classroom. Mandatory attendance is not a requirement, as some students’ work schedules or other obligations will make it difficult to attend. For those who can attend, it is a good social mixer that promotes interaction. Social functions can be fun ways for students to make friends early, build lasting relationships, and get connected.

**Utilize in-class work groups.** Academia focuses primarily on individual achievement, in contrast to the world of work, which relies on the contributions of teams. Take every opportunity early in the semester to put students into small work groups. These opportunities should focus on developing critical-thinking and problem-solving skills in which groups work collaboratively toward solutions. Arrange the teams differently throughout the first few weeks so that



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students have the opportunity to work with each of their classmates.

**Remember you were once a student.** Time seems to erase the negative memories of past events, and we tend to focus on and remember positive experiences. Student life can be filled with things to do, places to go, and people to see. We should take some time to reflect on our past educational experiences and how hard we worked during that time. The balancing act can be difficult as students juggle jobs, family, and school obligations. This is not advocating a “take-it-easy-on-them” approach because we know that students will meet high expectations when challenged. Just remember that we, too, were students once and that a little understanding can go a long way.

**Do what you say.** Whatever ground rules you set for your students, abide by those same rules. If your policy is that students are not to be late for class, make sure you are there early in advance of their arrival. If you insist on participation during class discussion, make sure you are asking questions when there is a guest lecturer. If you post office hours for a particular day of the week at a specific time, make sure you are available. Powerful things happen when we model the behavior we expect.

**Have high expectations.** Students want to be challenged. Set the bar high early on, and communicate to your students the importance of academic achievement. Assure them that support is in place to assist them along the way. High expectations are essential to high achievement. All of us remember someone who has pushed us beyond what we thought we were capable of achieving. We generally emerge from those situations with our boundaries stretched and with more self-confidence. Challenge your students with your high expectations, and watch them rise to meet them.

**Listen.** Henry David Thoreau wrote, “The greatest compliment that was ever paid to me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended my answer.” Listening has become a lost art in our culture. Everyone has something to say, but few individuals develop this most important dimension of the communication process.

Complicating this issue is the hierarchal relationship of teacher and student. Maintaining a professional relationship and demeanor does not mean one has to compromise the opportunity to reach out to students. As teachers, we must develop good listening skills and be approachable. Sometimes students will approach teachers with issues that are not necessarily school-related. This level of trust should always be treated with respect. These are prime opportunities to connect with students by showing you care. Be open to active listening.

**Have fun.** Make learning fun. Break out of the traditional class lecture format, and be creative with learning. Make students active participants in the learning process. Fun is limited only by your imagination and can be a powerful strategy to capture students’ interest and attention.

First impressions are crucial. The critical first 25% is that small window of time we have just after classes begin which can lay the foundation for the entire semester. Take care, and be vigilant with that time—it could make the difference between a successful student or a casualty. Community college students are the most vulnerable population in higher education. We must encourage success in our classrooms and help finish what our students start.

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