

## Interacting with Students One-on-One

### Reasons for having office hours

- clarify course expectations
- clarify what is being asked in homework questions
- clarify purpose of homework assignments
- clarify answers to homework, quizzes, or exams
- clarify concepts or operations
- clarify grading
- answer questions
- help prepare for exams
- help students problem solve
- help debug code
- help write (lab reports)
- help prepare for lab experiments
- help finish lab experiments
- hint at approaches to take
- answer questions on experiments
- motivate students
- establish rapport with students
- increase self-confidence of students
- teach studying techniques
- teach time management techniques
- provide feedback
- diagnose reasons for students mistakes
- hold group sessions
- link current materials with previously-learned materials
- ensure understanding
- provide suggestions for further reading
- discuss other topics related to the course or the field

### Strategies for planning and running office hours

- Ask about your department's or supervisor's policy
  - If no policy, start by holding them for two to four hours per week
- Ensure coverage for the students in the class
  - Vary the days and times that you hold office hours
  - Stagger your times with those of the professor and other TAs for the course

- Communicate

#### How should office hours be communicated?

- Have your office hours included in the syllabus and on myWPI site (if using)
- Mention them on the first day of class and at important times during the term
- Post them on the outside of your office door
- Tell the department's Administrative Assistant

#### What is the purpose of your office hours?

- Students need to know what your expectations are
- Show up!
  - If you can't be there, let students know in advance or ask department assistant to post a note on your door
  - Students may get upset if you are not there, and this can impair motivation
- Make office hours productive
  - Remind students that office hours are not time for a recap of a class lecture they missed
  - Group students with similar concerns or questions
  - Perhaps identify special topics for your office hours
  - Advise students to prepare
    - Come to the office with specific written questions
    - Bring any reading or materials for discussion, with the appropriate sections marked

- Be prepared to argue ideas, not scores, when discussing exam or HW grades
- Make office hours effective by making them student-oriented rather than teacher-oriented (example: avoid the temptation of just showing a student how to do problem #2)
  - Get students to do the thinking and help them modify their thinking as necessary
    - Ask students to “think out loud” while working on a problem
    - Have them talk about what they are doing and why.
  - Ask questions such as the following, which help students clarify their thinking:
    - What are some possible ways you might go about solving this problem?
    - Would you tell me what you know about the problem?
    - How might you break the problem into smaller steps?
    - Can you tell me how you got from step one to step two?
    - What are you thinking right now?
    - I don’t understand your reasoning behind that step. Would you please explain?
  - If you find it necessary to model good problem solving techniques, think out loud for the student, explaining strategies as you go. After modeling the process, require students to work through a similar problem to make sure they understand the process.
- Refer students for additional help if they need it
  - Professor for the course
  - Counseling Center – West Street House: x 5540
  - Disability Services Office: x 5235
  - Health Services: x 5520

### **Encouraging students to attend**

- Be friendly and accessible, and stay after class
- Make at least one office visit a course requirement (if professor allows it); students will be more comfortable seeking you out in the future.
- Return student work with a comment of “Please see me during office hours”
- Post answers to quizzes or homework by your office door
- Consider scheduling appointments during your office hours
- Contact students who fail to show up for scheduled appointments
- Hold office hours someplace public other than your office, like the Campus Center or library

### **Setting a positive tone**

- Create a relaxed mood and atmosphere
  - make students feel welcome
  - you might sit in front of or to the side of your desk
  - keep door open
- Let the student tell you the purpose of your visit (Say something like, “What can I do for you?”)
- Try to give your students your undivided attention
- If more than one student is in your office at a time, introduce them to each other
- If no other students are waiting, ask students how they feel about the course in general

## **On-line Interactions with Students**

- On-line interactions differ from face-to-face interactions:
  - Convenient – interactions not restricted to a certain time or location
  - The answer to a common question can be provided once, and be available to all students
  - TA can be in the process of responding to different questions “simultaneously”, i.e. on-line communications are episodic, unfolding over time
- Potential problems with on-line interactions
  - Context switching is expensive – set aside a specific time for dealing with online questions rather than immediately responding to each email or IM
  - Students may expect immediate answers to their questions unless expectations about TA availability are made clear
  - It is more difficult to gauge student understanding in the absence of body language cues (nodding, furrowing of brow, etc.)
  - Care must be taken not to inadvertently violate student confidentiality
  - Unless the on-line forum is effectively moderated, use of the forum can become uncivil or inappropriate

## **Sources**

Davis, B. G. (2001). Tools for teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (1998). A Guidebook for University of Michigan Graduate Student Instructors.