

In:

Teaching in the First-Year Seminar

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## Chapter 4 Special Considerations in Teaching

*It's the little details that are vital. Little things make big things happen.*  
—John Wooden

Throughout this text, an effort has been made to continually communicate the unique and exciting nature of the first-year seminar. A critical part of that process is to create a learning environment in which students can take risks; explore new areas of learning; and grow in their understanding of themselves, others, and course content. In this chapter, we will explore some of the key ingredients leading to accomplishment of those outcomes. We will consider

- » Building community in the classroom, including establishing standards of civility
- » Setting and enforcing attendance policies
- » Selecting and using textbooks
- » Facilitating out-of-class learning
- » Linking the first-year seminar to other classes and campus life

### Building Community in the Classroom

On the first day of class, students wait expectantly for the faculty member to arrive. They look around and see a collection of unfamiliar faces. What are they feeling and thinking? Some show their anticipation and sense of anxiety about the coming semester, a few hide those feelings behind laughter and idle conversation, others are preoccupied with a text message or the safety of a laptop computer screen. No one dares tip their hand in the game of classroom charades. A subtle sense of tension fills the room. The door opens and in walks the faculty member who will guide and direct the group's learning over the

next 15 weeks. Questions flood the students' minds as they try to gauge how they are feeling in expectation of the first words of wisdom of the semester.

The ceremonial first pitch of any semester is a recitation from the syllabus. In these first few minutes of the course, students begin to wonder about this person who speaks so eloquently about learning outcomes, due dates, and the importance of class attendance. These facts are all very important, yet the students find themselves wondering whether the faculty member is married, has children, has a favorite flavor of ice cream, and the names of his or her favorite books and movies. These questions all cluster around the theme, *Who is this person I will listen to and interact with over the next several months?*

Secondarily, there is a tendency to unconsciously assess the sense of whether or not this classroom will be a good place to learn—a place where class members can take risks in the learning process, make mistakes without fear of embarrassment, express opinions with the expectation of dialogue rather than reprisal, and ask questions about areas of confusion without hesitation. These elements create a learning environment where participants can flourish and a sense of community synergy begins to emerge.

To begin this process of community building, faculty members must first consider the following questions about the atmosphere, culture, and expectations for their classrooms:

- » What would students say about my willingness to engage in dialogue that invites a variety of opposing opinions and perspectives on issues about which I feel strongly?
- » Am I willing to listen rather than speak?
- » Are there times I have responded to a student's question or comment in a way that was unintentionally hurtful or minimizing? Did I make an effort to reconcile that relationship with a follow-up conversation?
- » Is my classroom a place where I take risks in learning and encourage my students to do the same? What are some ways this approach to learning is evidenced?
- » When the time comes to talk with a student about a classroom issue (e.g., excessive absences, plagiarism, poor overall performance), do I engage in the conversation in a manner that sends the message of concern while also respecting the student's personal dignity?
- » What are some of the other possible indicators and criteria for creating a community-oriented learning space?

McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk, and Schweitzer (2006) examined the level at which it is possible to create a sense of community within a classroom and the factors contributing to the achievement of that goal. Relying on the research from neighborhood and community development studies, six variables are considered critical to establishing a sense of community among groups of individuals: (a) connection, (b) participation, (c) safety, (d) support, (e) belonging, and (f) empowerment. In the classroom setting, these variables were defined in the following way:

- » Connection (e.g., promoting the manner in which students get to know one another from the first day of class)
- » Participation (e.g., required daily reflections that were considered to be an admission ticket for class)
- » Safety (e.g., ongoing opportunities for students to confer with those seated around them and build trust)
- » Support (e.g., pairing high-achieving students with those who need additional assistance and tutoring)
- » Belonging (e.g., casual, informal conversations before class between the faculty member and the students)
- » Empowerment (e.g., encouraging students to ask questions during class)

Faculty participating in this study made intentional efforts to promote the six variables identified as part of the community-building process. Students involved in the study were able to articulate and describe the differences they noted while members of this classroom community. Results revealed the ways in which small, intentional acts by a faculty member, and a thoughtful approach to building community as a goal for the semester, can positively impact student success (i.e., improved class performance, class satisfaction, and perception of learning). For each of us as faculty members, it is important to continually assess the levels at which we are helping students to connect, participate, feel safe, feel supported, belong, and sense their own empowerment.

It would be a mistake to talk about the classroom as a community for learning without invoking the wisdom of Parker Palmer (1999), who offers the following advice on what can emerge as teachers and students collaborate and learn from one another:

The gift we receive on the inner journey is the knowledge that ours is not the only act in town. Not only are there other acts out there, but some of

them are even better than ours, at least occasionally! We learn that we need not carry the whole load but that we can share it with others, liberating us and empowering them. We learn that sometimes we are free to lay the load down altogether. The great community asks us to do only what we are able and trust the rest to other hands. (p. 89)

This picture requires we rethink the dynamics of the classroom. Certainly the faculty member carries a major responsibility for creating a safe place for learning and for sharing his or her knowledge in the field of discussion. At the same time, however, the master teacher will create places and opportunities for students to step into a role of leadership, facilitation, and shared responsibility for what happens in the classroom.

Allowing students ownership of the classroom learning environment requires a willingness to engage in risk taking on the part of the instructor and students. For students, an essential part of the learning process is taking risks with new information, passions, and ideas. In a safe learning environment, students feel the freedom to share their dreams, talk about their fears, and propose extreme responses to the circumstances of our world. As teachers, we have the privilege to create learning experiences that help students focus their energies, refine their skills, and learn lessons making the next risk-taking opportunity seem less formidable.

### Creating a Civil Learning Environment

For community to thrive in the classroom, instructors and students must work together to create a civil learning environment. While this is frequently a challenging and sensitive question for faculty members, it is critically important we give thought to the types of acceptable behaviors, as well as those that may pose a threat or disruption to the learning process. Most often, the topic is discussed from the perspective of what bothers faculty about the behaviors of students. However, students have decided opinions about what is appropriate in the classroom and, thus, might be productively engaged in setting community standards for civility. Bjorklund and Rehling (2010) surveyed students and asked them to identify behaviors of their peers that they found to be uncivil. The 10 most frequently listed behaviors included (a) continuing to talk after being asked to stop, (b) coming to class under the influence of drugs or alcohol, (c) allowing a cell phone to ring, (d) conversing loudly with others, (e) swearing, (f) nonverbal disrespect, (g) sleeping, (h) making disparaging remarks,

(i) arriving late or leaving early, and (j) sending and receiving text messages. The authors conclude it is incumbent on faculty to identify those behaviors of concern, communicate them to students, and be prepared to enforce standards of behavior as necessary.

Colosimo (2004) suggests a more positive and affirming approach to fostering civility than creating a set of behavioral rules or standards. She suggests faculty embody five basic ideas that promote active student involvement and make them a priority for all classroom participants. These include (a) extending a welcome to students as members of the learning community (i.e., expressing an interest in their lives, knowing students by name), (b) being present in the moment (e.g., focusing attention on the activities of the classroom), (c) listening deeply (e.g., identifying and acknowledging the thoughts and feelings of others), (d) speaking kindly, and (e) guarding time (e.g., punctuality).

Instructors must begin thinking about the expectations they place on students; the reasoning behind those expectations; the manner in which they are communicated; and strategies for enforcing them in a fair, reasonable, and humane manner. The following recommendations offer additional guidance for promoting civility in the classroom:

- » *Create a list of civility expectations for the classroom.* The list should include those things a faculty member considers to be most important along with some suggestion of why those items are important and whether he or she is willing to expend the effort necessary to enforce those identified expectations. Completing the Classroom Civility Inventory (Figure 4.1) can serve as a useful first step in developing this list.
- » *Confirm the validity and fairness of the list.* Trusted faculty colleagues can provide honest feedback on the behaviors identified.
- » *Communicate expectations to students in a variety of ways.* At a minimum, it is necessary to include the list of desired behaviors in the course syllabus and to talk with students about the rationale for these particular behaviors and the role of civility in their current and future lives.
- » *Consistently enforce the expectations communicated to students.* Students typically expect and respect fairness in the administration of classroom and school rules. If we set a standard for behavior, we should also be willing to do the hard work of enforcing it.

Place a checkmark by those items on the following list that you believe are inappropriate in your classroom and that you will enforce through your syllabi and classroom procedures:

- \_\_\_ Eating/drinking in class
- \_\_\_ Overtly sleeping in class (i.e., head down or propped up with eyes closed)
- \_\_\_ Using a laptop computer in class for purposes other than taking notes or participating in classroom activities (e.g., electronic games, email, Facebook, Google)
- \_\_\_ Reading a textbook or other material that is unrelated to course content or classroom activities
- \_\_\_ Talking out inappropriately to the extent that it is disruptive to the learning process
- \_\_\_ Arriving late to class
- \_\_\_ Leaving behind trash (e.g., cups, containers, wrappers)
- \_\_\_ Wearing a hat or hood in class
- \_\_\_ Talking with a neighbor during class to the extent that the volume of their voices becomes noticeably disruptive
- \_\_\_ Overt, ongoing demonstrations of affection toward another student
- \_\_\_ Text messaging or other forms of cell phone usage
- \_\_\_ Inappropriate or rude comments to classmates or faculty during class discussions
- \_\_\_ Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 4.1. The classroom civility inventory. Reprinted from *A Brief Guide for Teaching Millennial Learners* by J. B. Garner, 2007, p. 34. Copyright 2007 by Triangle Publishing. Used with permission.

In a 2006 keynote address at the National Conference on Students in Transition, Scott Evenbeck, former University College dean at Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis, made the following observation about one of the greatest ironies of higher education practice:

Behavior is a function of the person and the environment. So our entering students come to campus and we expect them to figure out our rules and our assumptions and our way of doing things.... On campus, our

philosophy is that students are adults. Children one day and miraculously transformed into adults the next. Really quite amazing.... But, we have this happy fiction that they will be adults who make choices and live with consequences and then will grow up and live happily ever after. (p. 4)

If we are serious about preparing our students for life after college, then we have a responsibility to define the parameters of acceptable behavior (e.g., coming to class, demonstrating appropriate classroom social skills, respect for self and others) and enforce those expectations in a fair, consistent, and reasonable manner. Being serious about civility, although just one more thing we have to do, is a valuable and important contribution faculty members can make to the lives of their students.

### Setting and Enforcing Attendance Policies

At first glance, the question of whether attendance should be taken in college classrooms seems to be a no-brainer. It would seem to make perfect sense that a person spending (or borrowing) tens of thousands of dollars per year for the privilege of attending college classes and earning a degree would logically choose to attend class on a regular basis. Further, it would also be logical to assume class attendance dramatically contributes to enhanced levels of learning. Finally, going out on a limb, we might also assume students, faculty members, and administrators would all agree these propositions are reasonable and rational. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. The flurry of discussion and activity around the issue of classroom attendance policies can be addressed from three different perspectives: (a) political, economic, and cultural arguments; (b) the empirical evidence regarding the value of classroom attendance; and (c) strategies for increasing student attendance patterns.

### Political, Economic, and Cultural Arguments

Ironically, or so it would seem, many faculty members, as well as students argue against the logic and necessity of attendance policies. Perress (1996) summarized some of the key arguments posed by these groups:

- » Students claim they are adults who should be given the freedom to decide whether or not they attend classes.
- » Students also see themselves as customers and call on university officials to ensure the college courses are solid enough to entice regular attendance (i.e., make classes worth attending).

- » Faculty members resist the responsibility of making distinctions between excused and unexcused absences.
- » Faculty frequently express concern about the procedural burden imposed by implementing a classroom attendance policy.
- » Faculty also raise the issue that mandatory attendance policies infringe on their academic freedom.

Issues related to attendance also play out rather dramatically in the worlds of culture and politics. Some universities, for example, have made a decision not to schedule classes on Fridays because those classes typically demonstrate poor attendance patterns. For students, this is a wonderful gift, as it results in an abundance of three-day weekends. Yet, Young (2003) reports many universities are beginning to see the folly in canceling classes on Fridays and are now making efforts to reclaim this important instructional time and insist on a five-day class week.

In the political arena, the former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani threatened to take away \$110 million dollars in money from the City University of New York because officials failed to enforce classroom attendance policies (Archibold, 1998). From a learning and accountability perspective, Giuliani believed the failure to take attendance sent a negative message about the quality of the classes being offered and the actual value of attendance and participation.

### **Empirical Evidence Regarding the Value of Attendance Policies**

Numerous research studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between the attendance patterns of college students and their levels of academic achievement and learning (e.g., Clump, Bauer, & Whiteleather, 2003). Some studies have demonstrated that students who attend classes are often those who have the discipline necessary to “take more and more control of their own learning” (VanBlerekom, 2001, p. 488). These are the intrinsically motivated students who not only feel an obligation to attend class but also to complete assigned readings, pursue excellence in assignments, and to accrue as much knowledge as possible from their college education.

One interesting study by Moore (2003) revealed students believe better class attendance is a contributing factor in receiving a higher grade (and hopefully more learning). Ironically, while students felt they should receive credit for attending class, they also wanted their final grade to be based on what they

knew rather than class attendance. Students also believed attending class in college is generally less important than attending classes in high school. One reason for this is in high school taking attendance is simply part of the standard operating procedure. Students know teachers take attendance and someone is monitoring their attendance patterns. In college, those patterns of behavior among faculty members are generally less consistent. This lack of consistency may lead students to conclude attendance is less important in college.

### **Strategies for Increasing Attendance**

With increasing concern about attendance has come efforts to develop strategies for encouraging students to attend class. While faculty members may debate whether the carrot or the stick is a better tool for facilitating regular class attendance patterns, a variety of strategies are available to promote attendance, including the following:

- » Spending time at the beginning of the semester discussing the value and rationale for the course attendance policy (Moore, 2003)
- » Giving in-class quizzes on a regular basis (Thompson, 2002)
- » Using exit cards, which require students to respond to a series of summative questions at the end of each class (Davies & Wavering, 1999). Sample questions could include, What was the big idea for today’s class? or How might you connect the theories from today’s class with others described in your textbook?
- » Making classes more engaging and interesting for the students (Gump, 2005)
- » Providing, and talking about, incentives and penalties for attendance (e.g., point deductions for class absences, requirements that students make up missed classes by listening to podcasts and the completion of writing assignments, additional points for perfect attendance)

### **Selecting and Using Textbooks**

To be sure, large, heavy textbooks are often considered to be part of the culture of a college campus—the calling card of a scholarly life. Yet, there are a number of faulty assumptions undergirding the use and selection of textbooks and their overall role in the learning process. While instructors should not be dissuaded from selecting a textbook and assigning readings from it in their courses, they should be consciously aware of the following assumptions as they engage in that process.

**Assumption 1: Textbooks are produced primarily with student learning in mind.** First and foremost, the people who publish and sell textbooks are in the business of generating profit. Their business is totally dependent upon attracting the attention of potential textbook adopters by college faculty members. This is accomplished by clever marketing, the plentiful availability of examination copies, website resources, and prefabricated test question banks. This observation is not intended to demean the textbook publishing industry; rather, it serves as a reminder to faculty members to be wise and careful consumers and textbook adopters. The latest edition or newest treatment may not represent the best available vehicle for student learning.

**Assumption 2: Textbooks should be a vital and integral part of the learning process in the courses we teach.** Quite often, courses are designed and offered in deference to the content and organizational structures found in the textbooks chosen by faculty. The sequence of events that typically transpires is

1. Faculty members select a textbook (or textbooks) that provides the best coverage of the topics to be covered in the course.
2. The course schedule is created based upon the sequence of chapters as they appear in the textbook.
3. Lectures and tests are designed in accordance with the sequence of chapters found in the book.

The logical next question becomes whether these decisions about textbook selection impact student learning in the ways we might envision and hope to realize. Faculty are encouraged to critically examine the textbooks they choose and the degree to which they drive student learning experiences in the course rather than the desired learning outcomes.

**Assumption 3: Students actually read their textbooks.** The research available on the textbook reading habits of college students is remarkably scarce. What is available, however, is rather disturbing. A study by Connor-Greene (2000) revealed 72% of surveyed students never read their assignments by the due date. In another study, Sikorski et al. (2002) found as many as 30% of the students surveyed indicated they did not purchase a text for at least one of their scheduled courses. Clump, Bauer, and Bradley (2004) report many college students spend less than three hours per week reading assigned textbook materials. Faculty should be strongly encouraged to integrate textbook content into their teaching and to select reading materials that amplify course content and take students to deeper levels of knowledge and understanding about the course content.

**Assumption 4: The question, Will this be on the test?, is actually an indication of dedication and motivation on the part of the student as learner.** Although many students are committed to learning, there is also a sizeable group of students who are interested in doing only what is necessary to pass certain courses. One question to consider, however, is the source of the questions on the test. Do they come from class lectures, the text, or both? Instructors should provide students with guidance as to the most important concepts, skills, and principles to take away from the course. More specifically, they should help students discern what are the key elements and the intended outcomes of reading assignments. These critical concepts and outcomes must then be reflected in the tests or other assignments instructors design for the course.

**Assumption 5: There are no other options to consider.** We need textbooks in our courses. Textbooks and other reading materials are critically important to the learning process. Through these resources, students not only acquire new information but also learn the important skill of searching and seeking answers to the predominant questions in their field of study. Clearly, textbooks are an easily accessible source of information, but they are not the only valid source for course content. In an era when information changes rapidly, faculty should systematically engage students with other resources including blogs, journals, newspapers, digital presentations from experts around the world, and websites. Part of this process involves making students aware of these venues for learning. A second component, however, is teaching them the skills to discern between credible sources and only marginally accurate ones.

### Strategies to Encourage the Reading of Assigned Texts

As noted above, instructors should not be explicitly discouraged from using traditional textbooks in their courses. At the same time, they need to engage in strategies that will encourage students to read textbooks (and other assigned readings) and make better use of those texts in the course. They may also consider possible alternatives to traditional textbooks as a way of ensuring assigned readings support the intended learning outcomes rather than determining what the possible outcomes may be. The strategies below are designed to increase the likelihood students will take advantage of the reading materials included in their courses.

» *Assigning course-related point values to assigned readings.* Surprisingly, and quite often, the expectation that students are actually required to



read the assigned text is implied but not specifically stated. Students may, therefore, assume as long as they acquire the necessary material, reading the text is merely an optional experience. By stating course-related points are available for reading the textbook as assigned and in a timely manner, possible misunderstandings are eliminated. At the end of the semester, students are asked to sign a document on which they indicate the number of points (e.g., 80/100) they are entitled to receive. Interestingly, I have observed students downgrading the points they receive, based upon the level of work they have done, even at the cost of earning a lower grade.

- » *Using journal article collections as an alternative to published textbooks.* With the advent of electronic databases commonly available in college libraries, it is possible to create a customized, Internet-based reading collection of full-text articles from a variety of journals and authors. This practice provides a means for selecting reading assignments more current than textbooks, offers varied and opposing viewpoints on the topics of discussion, exposes students directly to the work of experts in the field, and provides a means for more in-depth investigations of key course issues. A single textbook cannot generally accomplish all of these outcomes.
- » *Ensuring lectures and other classroom learning experiences are only supplements to assigned reading.* Quite often, there is a high degree of overlap between the materials contained in assigned readings and the content of classroom lectures. Students are quick to realize this condition and draw the conclusion that listening in class (and perhaps taking notes) is a more efficient strategy than listening in class and reading the assigned materials. For faculty members, it is a good idea to conduct a periodic check to determine the level of overlap between lectures and readings.
- » *Referencing lectures to information and illustrations contained in the course texts.* During classroom discussions and lectures, faculty should make frequent references to the materials covered in assigned textbooks. This strategy provides a coherent and comprehensive picture of course content and subtly reinforces the faculty member's commitment to both sources of learning and information.

» *Resisting the temptation to use PowerPoint slides that mirror the textbook.* Textbook publishers have become very clever in providing additional resources to faculty designed to make textbook adoption and subsequent teaching quick and easy. One of the most common resources is a set of

PowerPoint slides. Unfortunately, those slides are often simply an outline version of the textbook. Students discover very quickly they do not really need to read the book because the PowerPoint slides have done the work of creating a Spark Notes version of the text.

- » *Offering occasional open-book tests.* There are times in every class and every discipline when application of course content is more critical than recognition or recall of facts and concepts. At these times, students can be given questions or scenarios to resolve with the information contained in their textbook. A study by Agarwal, Karpicke, Kang, Roediger, and McDermott (2008) revealed students can actually increase their overall levels of retaining information while preparing to participate in open-book tests. In a culture where information is so readily available, there is value to providing students with access to course-related materials and creating examinations focusing on the application of that data to presented scenarios.
- » *Giving quizzes on assigned reading materials.* One way of encouraging students to read the assigned course materials (e.g., text chapter, journal article, web-based information) is to schedule accountability procedures during class (e.g., group discussions on reading assignments, quizzes). In our first-year seminar, which is heavily oriented toward a body of academic content, we began requiring students to complete an online quiz each week covering the assigned readings and the content shared in class. The interesting byproduct of this strategy was a dramatic increase in the students' midterm examination grades. Through the use of online quizzes, they were forced to maintain pace with the readings and classroom materials.
- » *Providing written study guides that correspond with assigned course readings.* In every course there are key pieces of information, concepts, and facts that are crucial (and often form the core of examinations and evaluation procedures). Study guides provide students with a means for focusing their attention and effort. If a portion of the information contained in the study guide can only be found in the textbook, then students will need to explore and understand that information by using their textbook as a resource.
- » *Linking class participation to advanced preparation.* This strategy assumes a prerequisite to informed participation in class discussions is based, at least partially, on the completion of assigned readings. In a Read and Speak strategy, students are asked to sign in for class only if they have completed the assigned readings for the day's class and are prepared to contribute to the class discussion of those readings.

### Facilitating Out-of-Class Learning

A recurring dilemma in higher education is how to design and implement the most powerful and productive learning experiences for our students. Rhoads (1997) relates an exchange with a colleague who laments the apathy of the students in his classes, yet Rhoads found these same students to be particularly politically and socially engaged in his own community service work.

It later occurred to me that perhaps we were talking about two different groups of students. Then, on second thought, I realized we were talking about two different aspects of students' lives: the classroom and the world beyond the classroom. Perhaps where we have failed most in helping students make the connection between academic work and lived experience is that we have too narrowly defined the classroom as that place that has desks, walls, and a teacher. (p. 28)

Kuh, Douglas, Lund, and Ramin-Gyurnek (1994) suggest to expand the boundaries of learning beyond the classroom walls, college faculty should create instructional opportunities that "integrate in-class knowledge with their [students'] out-of-class lives" (p. 79). This recommendation supports the maxim that learning in higher education gains depth and significance based upon the degree to which students are invited to apply, process, personalize, and engage instructional content (Cox & Orehovec, 2007; Spence, 2001). We will address this topic from several perspectives: (a) facilitating informal faculty-student interactions outside the classroom, (b) linking the first-year seminar with other courses, and (c) finding ways to promote students' engagement with the college campus or culture.

### Encouraging Informal Interactions With Faculty

Integrative out-of-class learning experiences can include a focus on building and enhancing relationships with faculty as well as enriching content-related knowledge and understanding. In the book *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocationalism* by Frederick Buechner (1983) describes his experiences as a seminary student and the lasting impact of many of his teachers:

In the last analysis, I have always believed, it is not so much their subjects that the great teachers teach as it is themselves.... Though much of what these teachers said remains with me still and has become so much a part of my own way of thinking and speaking that often I sound like them without realizing it, it is they themselves who left the deeper mark. (p. 12)

If Buechner's observations are correct, what are the factors that contribute to being the kind of teacher who leaves a deeper mark in the lives of students? Three basic ingredients include (a) transparency, (b) demonstrating care, and (c) sharing with students. Teachers who are transparent allow their students to see and feel the course content through their own enthusiasm and passion for the materials and strategies they are sharing and using. Second, it is important that instructors let students know they care about them as individuals and as learners. Not only do exemplary teachers value acquisition of new and important content material, but they also strongly value students' growth as people.

As a means of organizing our thoughts around the importance of faculty-student interactions, we consider the typology proposed by Cox and Orehovec (2007) who envision a continuum of interactive possibilities ranging from the most removed (and most frequent) to the most involved (and least frequent). These include

- » Disengagement (i.e., faculty and students do not interact outside the classroom)
- » Incidental contact (i.e., unintentional, perfunctory contact, including polite greetings)
- » Functional interaction (i.e., contacts directly related to academic questions, activities, and concerns)
- » Personal interaction (i.e., purposeful interactions centering around personal interests of the faculty member and the student)
- » Mentoring (i.e., direct assistance with career development, assistance in resolving personal challenges, serving as a role model).

As faculty, it is helpful to periodically take the time to assess the ways we are engaging with our students and the strategies we are employing to making connections and build relationships. The following strategies are suggestions for building faculty-student relationships:

- » *Assessing connections between faculty and students.* In our first-year seminar, we have a breakout group component often taught by a variety of faculty and staff members (e.g., student affairs professionals, residential life staff, others from the campus community). One of the informal strategies I employ to assess the level at which faculty and staff are connecting with students is to ask students to name their breakout leader. My theory is students who can name their breakout leader have made personal connections. I do the same with faculty and staff by strongly encouraging them



to learn and then use their students' names during class and in out-of-class conversations. Taking the time and effort to learn something about students (e.g., hometown, academic major, favorite sports teams, their participation in campus activities) pays great dividends and demonstrates an interest in their lives.

» *Encouraging informal interactions between faculty and staff.* As part of our first-year seminar, we provide extra credit for students who make arrangements to have coffee or share a meal with faculty members (i.e., either first-year seminar faculty or faculty from other classes they are taking that semester). Yet, students may be uncomfortable taking the initiative to invite an instructor to lunch. One way to help students break the ice and encourage them to interact with first-year seminar faculty is the Hello My Name Is... strategy. Here, instructors encourage students to walk up to them and introduce themselves if they see them on campus or in the community. Such an invitation provides the impetus many students need to make informal contact with a faculty member.

» *Disclosing deeply held beliefs and values to students.* Our personal commitments are central to who we are as people and as teachers. Palmer (1997) suggests an integral part of the process and experience of being a teacher is having the courage to share our lives with our students, both inside and outside of the classroom. We invite them to learn about the values, beliefs, and character traits that are not only a part of our conversations but that also play a central role in determining our actions, decisions, and choices. This level of engagement adds credibility and power to our roles as both teachers and mentors.

### Linking the First-Year Seminar to Other Classes

George Kuh, perhaps the leading advocate for the creation of higher education environments that welcome, value, and engage students, has coined the term *involving colleges* to describe schools that “provide environments that seem to encourage student out-of-class learning” (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991, p. 4). At such institutions, “the blending of curricular and out-of-class learning experiences is acknowledged and valued; everyone is held to high, clearly communicated standards; [and they] value undergraduate learning wherever it occurs” (Kuh et al., 1991, p. 4). As we think about the first-year seminar, it too should be a place that welcomes students to the campus and

creates a link to out-of-class learning experiences. One of the strategies that colleges and universities use to accomplish the goal of involving their students is the creation of learning communities. Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick (2004) define a *learning community* as “a variety of curricular approaches that intentionally link or cluster two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll a common cohort of students” (p. 20). Two common ways to organize learning communities are the interest group and the linked course format.

Interest groups often focus on topics connected with student preferences or in association with particular academic majors (e.g., The Writings of Edgar Allan Poe, The Film Genre of Science Fiction, Issues in Social Justice, a topic of common interest chosen for particular academic majors). Quite often, in this arrangement, faculty members are also teaching on topics about which they are particularly passionate. This combination of a student’s topical interest and the faculty member’s passion about the subject can be a powerful way to begin the first semester on campus.

Linking the first-year seminar with a content-based course (e.g., gateway course in a specific discipline), general education course, or skill-based course (e.g., composition, public speaking) (Galles & Olson, 2008) is another way to facilitate student engagement within the context of a learning community. In these scenarios, a cohort of students enroll in two or more courses that share learning outcomes, syllabi, assignments, and other experiences. By definition, these classes are taught by two or more faculty members, often representing differing academic disciplines. The result, it is hoped, is an interdisciplinary experience where faculty actively engage one another in teaching and dialogue that highlights the similarities and differences that exist between disciplines in relation to study in a particular area of exploration.

For example, a first-year seminar class may be paired with an introductory general education composition class. The faculty members assigned to these classes share the teaching load and the enrolled students, and they create a common syllabus that outlines the course learning outcomes, schedule of learning experiences, readings, assignments, and general classroom policies. The discussions, readings, and assignments are planned and implemented by faculty in each of the two courses. In this way, students are part of a learning community that benefits from the diverse perspectives of faculty members from varied disciplines.

### ***Connecting Students With the Campus at Large***

One important function of the first-year seminar is to connect students with the culture and milieu of the college and to acquaint students with the variety of social, cultural, and academic resources that can enhance the quality of their overall learning experience. A strategy to facilitate first-year student interactions with the campus at-large, and the resources and activities available, is the Personalized Learning Experience Portfolio. Over the course of the first semester, as part of the first-year seminar, students are asked to accumulate 100 points by attending and participating in a variety of campus events. A selected sample of events is listed on the portfolio in a variety of categories: athletics, music and drama, residence hall, and lecture or demonstrations (and others fitting into the culture and activities of a particular campus). Students earn 20 points for each of the events they attend and must select one activity from each of the categories. This structure forces (i.e., facilitates, encourages, helps) students to move out of their comfort zones and engage with the various activities and opportunities available during their first semester on campus.

### **Connecting Points**

Effective teaching, particularly in the first-year seminar, requires attention to a variety of details. The more time and effort spent in advance thinking about the total picture of the semester and the ways learning experiences can be structured and organized, the greater the benefit for students. Additionally, advance planning reduces the number of surprises that will need attention and resolution over the course of the semester.

The planning process applies most powerfully to expectations related to student performance (e.g., assignments, readings, civility). Giving students intentional access to the information that will help them plan for success during the semester will increase their chances for success.