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Fast Five with the TFSC, September 2022

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Fast Five with the TFSC

A Newsletter for First Year Faculty at the University of Arkansas

SEPTEMBER 2022 THEME: PROFESSOR/STUDENT RAPPORT

This month we'll share information from top professors on campus about how they build rapport and relationships with students in their classes.

1. Jon Lezon, Adjunct Professor, Sam Walton College of Business, Department of Marketing:



Jon teaches large classes – classes that are in the range of 75-95 student enrollment and 250 – 275 student enrollments. This poses a challenge when confronted with how to engage the classroom and ensure that students feel empowered to “ask”, “engage”, and “feel that they are heard”.

A very simple thing that Jon does to put students at ease is to walk around every student desk prior to class starting each lecture. It is amazing how many students say that he engages with students, makes them feel at ease, and actually has their best interest at heart by asking them about their majors, where they're from, and what their goals are.

In addition to this, Lezon will also add humor into his lectures and humor into Ted Talks and other current real-world events that are happening that pertain to learning points for students. When lecturing, Lezon, oftentimes, will make sure to ask students questions, always giving positive responses to student's that ask questions and engage with him. As the semester progresses, without exception, the number of students that are asking, participating, and offering insights grows each class period.

2. Tiffany Murphy, Professor of Law, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs



As an attorney and professor, Murphy usually take a few minutes in each class to ask how everyone is doing and tell them a bit about herself. She'll share her hobbies and interests outside of teaching usually during the first class. Sometimes students are shocked, but she thinks it helps break down barriers. She finds asking about what's going on with her students soon results in greater engagement. Students will often stop by her office, request a virtual meeting, or stay after class to talk. Not every moment of class must be substantive material. Sometimes everyone needs a check in to make sure their instructor is interested a student's overall development.

3. Yan Huang, Assistant Professor, Animal Science and Director of the Experiment Station



A healthy student/professor rapport is like a symbiotic system, it benefits both the student and the professor. As an academic advisor for a handful of graduate students and a dozen undergraduate students, Huang think the most important principle is that every student has different backgrounds, abilities, goals, and needs. Huang recognizes that our students come from all different places, even different countries. If you treat all the students as if they are the same, you will probably miss their individual shining points or personal needs. Lastly, you may finish the advising job, still, the students lost their opportunities to be recognized or be offered help. Likewise, Huang feels we as professors must improve to fit the changing campus environment. Spending time talking to each student, understanding their thoughts, background, and point of the world, is a crucial way to equip you to be a good professor.

4. Hope Ballentine, Teaching Assistant Professor, Eleanor Mann School of Nursing, and Arkansas Alumni Association Rising Professor Award Winner:



Great teachers are passionate about their students and committed to their learning. As is said of their generation, the current college student highly values clear communication and expectations. While communicating through lecture is important, fostering rapport means clearly communicating regarding expectations for learning, use of technology, assignment deadlines, and policies and procedures of the course. Ballentine's goal in developing courses is that everything is so clearly communicated that another faculty member could walk in and teach the course without any questions. When communicating with students, she intentionally chooses language that is positive and encouraging. One of her mentors, Dr. Susan Patton, reminds faculty that "Students don't care what you know until they know that you care." She teaches a demanding and fast-paced junior level nursing course in which students are tested nearly every week. After testing concludes, Hope sends out an email recapping any key points the analysis revealed, the average score, and information on any test questions that were adjusted. She also reminds students of the upcoming topics to be covered. To end the email, she reminds them to take some time outside of school to use their brains in a different way (nursing students need this reminder). She includes a variety of strategies for self-care and reminds them to make it a priority. This may not seem like much, but she has received numerous student comments about how much they value this encouragement. Ballentine feels it is not only important to their personal growth that students know they have faculty who care about them, but it contributes to their professional growth by increasing confidence and self-efficacy. Students continually rise to high expectations when they feel supported in the pursuit.

5. John Gauch, Professor, Computer Science and Computer Engineering, College of Engineering Imhoff Teaching Award and member of the University of Arkansas Teaching Academy:



Building a strong rapport with students in large classes can be very challenging. The biggest issue is time. There just is not enough time to call out 100 or more names to take attendance, or to have everyone in class introduce themselves at the start of the semester. Gauch's solution is to have more group activities. For example, after introducing himself, he often asks the class if anyone has lived in any of 10 states that he has lived in. If so, he follows up with a comment about one of the sports teams in that state, or something else that might be in common. Another fun question is to ask students how many miles their hometown is from Fayetteville. If you do this using a Blackboard poll with different distances, you can estimate the average distance everyone will need to travel to go home over spring/fall break. During the semester, John uses polls almost every day to ask about something related to the class (e.g., their most recent homework assignment) and something outside class (e.g., the recent football/basketball game). By doing this, he is trying to let students know that he is not just a lecturing robot, and that he knows they are students with a wide range of interests and activities outside his class. Finally, at the end of every lecture, he makes a point to stay at the front of the class and say goodbye to everyone as they head off to their next class and answer any questions they have.

The second challenge in building rapport with large classes is space. Once we have more than 10 rows of students in a classroom, it is hard to see or hear the students in the back of the room, so getting these students to engage and participate in class is difficult. Gauch makes a point of showing up early for every class so he can walk to the back of the classroom and chat with these students as they come into class. His topics vary from mundane to technical, everything from the weather to how their recent projects or exams are going. During lecture, he likes to walk back to the back of the classroom to ask if they can still see/hear him, and if they have any questions on the most recent topic. He does find that students at the back of the classroom open up more after a few visits and take part in class more. His visits also give him a chance to see if students are watching YouTube videos or paying attention to class.

Communication outside class is also very important for building rapport with students. Gauch always encourage students to come to his office hours, so he can get to know students better and attach names to faces. With large classes, a lot of students may come to each office hour, so instead of having them line up outside your door, you may want to reserve a small conference room so the students can sit down, and you can walk around the room answering their questions. If several students are having similar problems, Gauch says you can even give a short explanation of the topic to the whole group. Electronic communication with students in large classes can get out of control very quickly unless you come up with effective ways to quickly share answers to common questions with the whole class. One approach that works well is to post summaries of email questions (with student names removed) and your answers to the class discussion board or announcements page. Another approach is to have students invite you to the

class GroupMe or Discord channel and answer student questions there. This also has the benefit that you can gauge the tone of the class and see if they are bored, frustrated, exhausted or excited. You can also use this as an opportunity to encourage teamwork (understanding concepts) while discouraging plagiarism (copying answers). Answering students in a few hours is infinitely more effective than waiting a few days, so budget at least an hour per day for student emails/discussions. Gauch says that if you can stay under an hour, you are doing far better than he is!