

INTERVIEWER: John, what's your advice to instructors and administrators for making the first year seminar more effective?

JOHN: Well, first of all, you need to recruit instructors who really want to do this. The worst possible thing you could do would be to force people to teach this course if they don't want to do it.

Secondly, how you design the course, obviously, and how much time you allocate it. There is very good evidence that the amount of credit we award for these courses does make a difference in student outcomes. So one thing we know from our research is that more credit, more learning. Three credit hours, more effective than two. Two more effective than one. Approximately half of the college success class courses offered in the United States now carry three hours credit or the comparable amount of credit quarter hours.

How do you grade. Letter grading is more powerful as a motivator for students than pass/fail grading. And it's also more demanding of faculty instructors. So letter grading is very important.

A hugely significant intervention in college success course development over the past going on 50 years is the role of what are called peer leaders, peer assistance, student leaders. We highly recommend that you have an undergraduate outstanding student as a co-leader of this course. Students give us wonderful feedback about the power of these peer leaders. And it's also an important developmental experience for the peers.

Another very important component is-- Betsy mentioned earlier-- the use of SLOs, Student Learning Outcomes. And to learn what you're producing in terms of outcomes, you have to do assessment. And one key way to get a stronger course is to rigorously assess your course outcomes and to use what you learn from the assessment to make decisions about how you're going to improve the course.

I would also recommend that you integrate academic advisement with a college success course, so that the instructor of the course also serves as the academic advisor. And that's being done now in about a third of these college success courses.

Another recommendation would be to link this course with at least one other college course so that the students in college success are also co-enrolled for at least one other course. We call that a learning community.

In a phrase, we would make it a real course. It's got to look like a real college course. It has to have significant expectations of students, which means that a real college course should be asking the students to write, and to read, and to do research, but also to have fun, to get engaged on campus, to be active in their learning strategies, to interact with other students.

Another key to this course is you've got to have faculty instructor development. You have to prepare and support the people who are doing this kind of teaching.

Finally, you've got to have fun. You've got to want to be there. You have to want to do this. Recognizing that the students need it and they value it.

We've come across-- we've been accumulating some very disturbing data. We know that nearly 30% of the students that take this course in associate degree [INAUDIBLE] it's just under 30% of students of community colleges that take this course receive a DWFI in this course. Now that's very concerning, because if you get a DWFI, you're much less likely to stay in college, let alone finish college.

We know that in baccalaureate institutions, the rate is 16% of the students there are not receiving a satisfactory grade. And that says that we have a lot of work to do yet to bring this course to its full potential to improve student success. And that's why Betsy and I, as authors in this company, are working on high quality first year seminar courses. We want students to be more successful.

INTERVIEWER: Betsy, same question, what is your advice for making this course more effective at institutions?

BETSY: Well, initially, my advice to instructors is to build relationships with their students. And I think that is the single most important idea behind an effective seminar. And you can't build a relationship if you, as the instructor, do all the talking. So you've got to find ways to get your students interacting with you and interacting with each other.

Another strategy is to not let students perceive that you're wasting their time. Now, I say perceive because I know that you would never waste their time, but sometimes students believe that certain activities are busy work or totally unnecessary. And so whatever you do, whether it's in a class or an out of class assignment, make sure that your students understand the purpose behind what you're asking them to do.

And we've said this before, but this course is not only about cognitive variables, but about

those non-cognitive barrier variables that make such a difference in students' abilities to be successful.

But again, back to the bottom line, build those relationships. This is easier, by the way, for some instructors than for others. And my hope for you is that you are teaching because you want to be there and not because somebody is making you be there.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Since relationships are such a huge part of the course, how would you suggest instructors better connect with students?

BETSY: Well, I think one way to connect is to know more about your students and know more about their lives. And so it's important to figure out what you do need to know, and then to develop a way to gather that information. But first, get them talking and listen to them. Observe their personalities and their body language. Are they slouching? Are they sitting up? Are they hiding behind a baseball cap?

I remember one of my male students some years ago almost always wore his baseball cap to class. And then he came in once to class without it, and I honestly did not know who he was.

And so to get those students away from hiding behind whatever device they use, of course there is no substitute for one-to-one connection, and I would suggest that all instructors try to meet one-to-one with their students at least once a term and preferably twice a term before mid-term and at the end of the term.

One strategy that I used when I was teaching is to give just a little short paper survey to ask students if they were excited about being on campus, what their expectations were of the course. I remember one of my students said I expect to get an A. So we had a little discussion about that. Put together some information on the first day that will help you understand your students and better relate to them.

INTERVIEWER: Great. John, do you have any additional suggestions?

JOHN: Yes, I would suggest that-- this is so simple, but profound-- in this kind of teaching, every student needs an identity in this class. And one of the most essential elements of our identities are our names. So its very important to learn the names of your students, and to use those names, and to have them use those names when they address each other.

And another simple thing, come to class early. Students observe us very carefully. And when

they find we are predictable characters, they come to count on the way they think we're going to behave. So they see us coming to class early, some of them are going to come to class early. And talk with students individually before classes start. Stay after class. Hang around. Some of them will hang around and talk to you.

One of the most powerful ways to develop a relationship with anybody is to write them, is to provide a structure and a medium for students to share certain thoughts, ideas, interests on a regular basis through writing. So we recommend the use of weekly email, weekly text, anything that fosters direct, personal, private communication between the instructor and the student.

Another way you develop a relationship is when you get communication from students, you give them prompt, immediate, and personal direct feedback. Feedback is powerful. It's affirming.

If you have a student that you know was absent one day, they come back the next time, tell them you noted that they've returned and you're glad to see them. People want to be noticed.

Another way to personalize all of this is to ensure that every student in the first term of college has found at least one person they respect, they want to spend time with. That is what we call a mentor. I have a wonderful assignment in my course where I teach the students how to select a mentor, someone that they will have a relationship with after the class is over. Now I tell my students that if they want to have a relationship with me that continues after the class, I will do that. But they've got to work on that too. They need to stay in touch with me. And I tell them that this will make a big difference for them three, four, five years later when they need a reference for a job or graduate school or whatever.

And I think to use the word Betsy used, which was relationships, we need to tell these students that this course is about the establishment of relationships. It's about a lot of other things, but it is about relationships. People learn in relationships. We don't learn alone. It's basic to being human. We learn in groups.

So this personalized, supportive, nurturing, both the combination of a cognitive and the affective is essential for understanding the dynamics of this course.