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## Instructional Strategies for Teaching CSUN Freshmen: Gum and Glory

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Here's my bottom line: *The best thing you can do for your first-year students, pedagogically speaking? CONNECT THEM—to each other, to you, to your course, to your discipline, to our campus, and to their own pursuit of learning.* The rest of what I have to offer are some suggestions about why and how. But first, a cautionary tale:

It was fresh. It was green. It was gross. It was gum. And it had very recently been moved from mouth to desktop by a CSUN freshman.

Used chewing gum is beyond words. Teaching freshmen, however, is not.

We can call them freshmen, or first-year students, or new students.

We can joke about their freshness, as in:

**Q.** “What’s the difference between a college freshman and a high school senior?”

**A.** “June, July, and August.”

Some of us can even assert (more or less wryly) that in our department/program/option, the tenure-track faculty do not teach freshmen.

But if the gum appears on a desk in your classroom, and you're teaching the chewer and some dozens of her classmates, you clearly want to find a more constructive way to connect that student to the university.

Why make engagement, involvement, and connection your goal? Recent data from Institutional Research show that over each of the last four years, about one-quarter of brand-new CSUN freshmen end their first term on academic probation. Faculty teaching University 100, the Freshman Seminar, can tell you why: although our first-year students are academically capable, they spend untold hours glued to their television sets (and web-browsers and Instant Messaging and cell phones and friends and family back home). They need multiple opportunities and invitations if they are going to make a successful transition to college—and we should not leave that transition to chance. As faculty, we have the power and the responsibility to bring these students into the university community.

How? Start by trying some of the suggestions below. After that, you can read some of the resources listed at the end of this article. If you succeed in capturing the imagination and interest of your students, you and they have everything to gain.

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- Learn and use student names. Take attendance. Let students know you miss them when they miss class—and remind them that they also have missed something important.
- Require students to visit your office during office hours. If necessary, give them a pretext: “to discuss the upcoming (or just-graded) test (or paper or other assignment).”
- Come early to class and/or stay late: give students an informal chance to converse with you and ask questions.
- Include an icebreaker activity in your first or second class meeting. (The theory here: get students to participate and to talk in your class early in the term. Once you’ve got their attention, they’ll be more likely to think and work with you and with each other.)
- Give and get feedback frequently: use one-minute papers to test student understanding of a new concept; collect sets of 3 X 5 cards on which students describe “the most important thing I learned in class today” and/or “what I didn’t understand in class today.” Use the cards to shape the next class meeting.
- Pique your students’ interest at the start of class: read or project a multiple-choice question drawn from new material you are about to cover and then ask for a show of hands in response to each choice. Students will then be invested in learning the right answer(s) to the question you asked.
- Offer students time in class to reflect, to question, and to speak—with each other and with you. Note-taking can be a good learning strategy, but active thinking, talking, and writing can be better.
- Use HyperNews (or WebCT or BlackBoard or an email listserv or weekly 3 X 5 cards) so even the shy, quiet, insecure students get a chance to participate.
- Ask students to work in teams of two to five. Let them teach and question each other during part of a class.
- Go all out—literally: take your class on a field trip linked to the subject matter of your course. If you don’t know about CSUN’s wonderful DIG LA program, find out! Email Vicki Allen at [vicki.allen@csun.edu](mailto:vicki.allen@csun.edu) or call her at X2393.

This list is hardly exhaustive, but I hope it will persuade you to join me in guiding first-year students from gum to glory. Do it for yourself, for your students, and for the greater glory of Northridge.

#### Further Reading

1. *The C.E.L.T. Letter* includes very useful bibliographical references as well as articles by colleagues who share your interest in teaching and learning. It is one of my favorite resources.
2. “Thriving in Academe,” the pedagogy section of the *NEA Advocate*, offers highly condensed (i.e., short and to the point) and extremely readable discussions of proven successes and usable advances in the art of teaching. Don’t skip the suggestions for further reading that accompany each of these pieces. Available online at <http://www.nea.org/he/advo-new/thriving.html>

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3. *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. The eleventh and most recent edition (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002) offers just under 400 pages packed with cogent descriptions of things you can do in your classroom, backed up by a wealth of research (available in the 20-page bibliography) and suggestions for implementing each teaching strategy. The book is clearly organized; the writing is conversational and communicative; and best of all, you can check out the 10<sup>th</sup> edition from Oviatt Library (LB1738 .M35 1999) or borrow the 9<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> edition from the CELT library (call Kelly at X6536 or come by the CELT office in Sierra Hall 438 and see Kelly in person).
4. In *Helping College Students Succeed: A Model for Effective Intervention* (Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis/Brunner-Routledge, 2001), Glenn Hirsch offers expert advice on working with students outside the traditional classroom. Particularly comforting is his emphasis on student readiness, which he calls the “flashpoint” for change: there is a limit to what we can do for students who are not willing partners in their own success.
5. Richard J. Light offers instructive anecdotes drawn from interviews with an impressively diverse array of undergraduate students at Harvard University in *Making the Most of College: Students Speak their Minds* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001). His work offers additional evidence that students learn most deeply and most memorably when they connect classroom learning to their extracurricular lives (their work, their residential interactions, their communities, and so on).

*Note: C.E.L.T. was the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at Cal State Northridge until 2006 when it was renamed CIELO, the Center for Innovative and Engaged Learning Opportunities.*