Demystifying Office Hours for Your Students

Summary
Teach your students how to go to office hours. Once they know what to expect from an office hour visit, they're far more likely to take you up on the invitation to come by.

Strategies for Teaching Students How to Go to Office Hours
1. In your syllabus, require a brief office-hour visit from each student. Pick a week and cancel class if need be (students can work on other assignments). Have students sign up for a ten-minute slot. Tell students to bring along at least one graded assignment you’ve returned to them; it will serve you both as a starting-point for discussion.
2. Talk about office hours during class. Explain what they are, what happens, where you are, who comes, how long a typical visit lasts.
3. In class, consider hosting a brief role-play exercise with student volunteers acting out at least these scenarios:
   a. The entrance: what do you say when you arrive at the faculty member’s office? How do you start?
   b. The middle: aside from discussing the course, what might you see or ask about once you’re in a faculty office? (Family photos; books; posters or other artwork; the office door which often has posters or artwork.)
   c. The exit: when you would like to leave, what do you say? What are some graceful ways to end the appointment? (Such as: “Thanks so much; I need to study for my _________ class now” or “I’m meeting my study group at the library in a few minutes so I have to go now, but thank you” etc.)

   To extend the role play: have students work in groups to script a short-short office encounter drama. Get them to play both parts (student and prof). Ask them to vary the character of the prof (welcoming; super-busy & brusque; on the phone; stern…) and perhaps the character of the student (shy; nervous; confident and ready to talk about all kinds of things…)

4. If you have peer mentors or teaching assistants or graduate assistants in your classroom, by all means invite them to participate in the scenarios or even to model with you (if you enjoy role plays) what it’s like to go to office hours. These more advanced students can sometimes also share real-life stories of their own past successful or positive visits to a faculty office hour.
5. Bring something from your own office into class such as an engaging photo (pet pictures are great for this) or an art object. Let students know that they will see this object when they visit you. If you have candy on your desk, or bookmarks, etc., tell them to expect that, too.
One More Thing: Don’t Forget to Practice Ways to Welcome Students

If you Google “office hours,” you’ll find many resources geared towards helping faculty learn how to welcome students into their offices. Many faculty have already mastered the fine points of this advice; others might need a refresher.

Background: Why We Do This in University 100—and Why You Should in Your Classes

In spring 2014, April Taylor (ataylor@csun.edu) and Cheryl Spector (cheryl.spector@csun.edu) hosted a one-hour focus group with former University 100 students. Among other things, the students said they wished the course had included information on how to “do” office hours. Here are excerpts from the transcript of their comments:

**Student 1:** In COMS 452, it’s work, work, work, and you don’t get to see your professor. You know they have hours. You don’t approach that because you’re never told to do that. And a lot of professors like—well, like Political Science 472 that I’m taking right now, she’s always asking us to visit her in office hours and get to know her more personally and to get to express yourself more because it’s going to help with the class.

**Student 2:** It’s a learning experience to know what to say--to know how to act, how to approach them.... Do I bring an apple? Do I bring coffee?

**Student 3:** My professor told me, “Come see me in office hours.” But there’s really no reassurance for us because some [students] may have never even been to a professor’s office. So for the professor to tell us to go see our professor it’s like, “Okay, I will,” but we really won’t. We need to be put on a more--how do I say this? I guess-- introduced to more professors so that we feel comfortable confronting someone that we think is a superior. For me, if I go to a professor I feel like I have to keep up a certain professionalism. I’m talking to you about my grades and it’s everything that will help me succeed but there’s a little fear and there’s a little shyness and it’s probably a lot easier than we think it is; only, we just don’t know what to think.

Additional Reading


Matador Momentum: Re-imagining the First Year of College at CSUN. Website. 6 May 2016. [http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/academic-first-year-experiences/matador-momentum-re-imagining-first-year](http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/academic-first-year-experiences/matador-momentum-re-imagining-first-year)