

## Sarah Anderegg

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**From:** Jonathan Eldridge  
**Sent:** Wednesday, August 30, 2023 12:16 PM  
**To:** Jonathan Eldridge  
**Subject:** Fall 2023 Faculty Information & Updates, Volume IV  
**Attachments:** The Missed Opportunity of Office Hours.pdf; COM Care Handout 2023.pdf

Dear College of Marin Faculty:

It's Welcome Week! There are a host of events happening this week. There will be music, swag, food, and fun! Please share on Canvas and direct students to the [Welcome Week webpage](#) for details for each day and come out to support.

Below you will find a number of student-focused resources and updates on them. Please share these with students. Speaking of sharing with students, this week's article addresses 'the missed opportunity of office hours' and includes ideas on how you can leverage office hours for your benefit as well as that of your students. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on it and what strategies you are using to encourage student use of office hours.

And here are those resources, with an attachment about COM Care for your reference....

### COM Cupboard Fresh Food Distribution – starts this week!

Wednesday, August 30<sup>th</sup> outside of AC 255 starting at 11:30am and until supplies last. This distribution will happen every Wednesday throughout the fall semester, except on holidays and closures. Students should bring their COM ID, if they have it.

### Laptops and Hotspots

Students are welcome to check out a laptop or hotspot through the Library lending program. Please send them directly to the Library page. The lending form link is: <https://library.marin.edu/blog/borrowing-technology-devices> It would be helpful to include this on your Canvas page for students to easily access.

### COM Care

The Office of Student Activities and Advocacy oversees the COM Care system and encourages you to submit a report if there is a concern for a student. The handout attachment is to provide you with basic guidance when assessing a situation. If you have questions or would like to consult with our Coordinator of Conduct and Community Standards/manager of COM Care, Marco Cantua-Alvarez, please call (415) 485-9509. We are here for you.

Thank you for all you do.

Jonathan



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# The Missed Opportunity of Office Hours

**Meeting with a professor can help students learn, or even change their lives. So why don't more students do it?**

## WHEN YOU THROW A PARTY AND NO ONE COMES

By [Beckie Supiano](#)

AUGUST 21, 2023

One conversation with a professor can change the trajectory of a student's life. Eduardo Gonzalez Niño knows that from experience. There were many aspects of college — and of his STEM courses in particular — that Gonzalez Niño, a first-generation student, didn't know how to navigate. He wasn't even clear on his own goals, beyond passing his classes — “and I didn't even know how to do that properly,” he recalls. Then, one of his professors pulled him aside and told him to come to office hours, where she could help him make sense of the system. That conversation helped Gonzalez Niño to believe that he could become a scientist. “Ultimately, it's about being validated,” he says.

Gonzalez Niño did become a scientist, and along the way he fell in love with teaching. He is now an associate teaching professor in the department of molecular, cellular, and developmental biology at the University of California at Santa Barbara, where he researches how to make STEM education more equitable.

Gonzalez Niño wants to support his students. But his office hours — the time he'd set aside to do just that — were often poorly attended. Worse, the students Gonzalez Niño thought he could do the most to help seemed the least likely to show up. For Gonzalez Niño, this was both a teaching problem and a research question.

Office hours, baked into just about every course, are probably the most universally available form of academic support. And they can be among the most powerful. They give students struggling with a concept a chance to receive help before getting left behind. And they allow professors and students to get to know each other, which can unlock all kinds of opportunities for students.

That can be especially true for first-generation and underrepresented students, for whom office hours are also a way to accrue social capital, says Pamela Cheek, associate provost for student success at the University of New Mexico. “Office hours are a conduit to jobs on campus, to research on campus, to community engagement on or off campus, to internships off campus, which can then lead to jobs,” she says, “and then the knowledge and savvy” about next steps, whether graduate school or a job.

But the potential of office hours often goes unrealized, because of how the time is used — or because students don't show up. A growing number of professors are trying to change that.

Gonzalez Niño is collaborating with a group of biology-education researchers throughout Southern California to investigate the sources of the problem. Early findings from surveys he has conducted with his colleague Vanessa Woods, an associate teaching professor of psychological and brain sciences at UC-Santa Barbara, indicate that while first-generation, underrepresented minority students and low-income students are less likely to take advantage of office hours than their classmates, it's not because they don't see the value in attending them. It's because of time conflicts and, in particular, having to work.

## **Even when professors make an effort to roll out the welcome mat, students are often hesitant to seek support.**

When students do attend, the researchers have found, it's primarily to get academic support. Eventually, the researchers hope to develop a set of best practices for office hours, [similar to ones](#) for biology instruction that came out about a decade ago. While they are focused on large-enrollment courses in STEM, they expect their findings will apply to other disciplines and course sizes. After all, if a strategy works for 300 students, it will probably work for 30.

Taking a new approach to office hours may sound prosaic. But it can allow professors to make a more-meaningful impact on a larger number of students. And the change could be as simple as adjusting the way they describe and use time they've already blocked off on their calendars.

Shaun Vecera's approach to office hours used to be pretty passive. "I did the traditional thing: Here's my campus office; here are the office hours, or you can email me to set up an appointment," he recalls doing earlier in his career. At the time, his office was at the edge of campus, out of the way of student traffic, adds Vecera, a professor in the department of psychological and brain sciences at the University of Iowa.

The result: Almost none of Vecera's students came. He was teaching some 900 to 1,000 students a semester then in a large introductory course. Vecera doubts he ever saw as many as 20 of them come by in the course of a semester.

But about 15 years ago, he tried an idea that had come to him at a summit for instructors of large courses: He took his office hours to his students — specifically to a common area he reserved in a residence hall. As soon as he did, he started to see a steadier stream of students come by. Sometimes they would come with a friend. Before exams, a whole group would show up.

Was it all about the location? Vecera — who now directs the university's honors program and has a different office spot — says he also described his office hours to students differently after the switch. While running over the syllabus on the first day of class, he explained why he'd be holding office hours

in the dorm: “The reason that I do that is because that’s going to be more convenient for you, and you should have as easy access as possible.”

Even then, Vecera saw just a fraction of the students he was teaching. He suspects one reason was that regular business hours conflicted with students’ jobs. And while he told students he could meet them by appointment at other times, he realized that was asking them to take an additional step. Some of his students were missing out on help they could really have used.

Even when professors make an effort to roll out the welcome mat, students are often hesitant to seek support.

Madeleine R. Holland noticed the same reluctance among students taking a new required foundational course in the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin. The course was rolled out in the fall of 2020, the first fully remote semester, says Holland, an assistant professor of instruction in the department of communication studies and the college’s program manager for interdisciplinary-education initiatives. Once in-person instruction resumed, Holland says, “we again are beating the drum with our first-year students, and with all of our students: Really, really go to office hours, go to office hours, go to office hours. And it’s not landing.”

“You can say it to them as many times as you want,” Holland says, “but they’re not doing it.” So the college did some myth busting, asking professors about why students should come to office hours and putting the professors’ responses, along with tips for what to talk about with a professor during office hours, into an infographic, which was given to the 1,000 students in the foundational course. Another point they underscored: Office hours now mean recommendation letters later.

Many students arrive at college unsure of what help is available, or how to get it, or whether doing so is a sign of weakness. “It’s just not something that we’ve taught the students,” Holland says, “and we cannot be punishing them by saying, You should have come to office hours, or you should have just asked me. We can’t punish them for things that we don’t teach them how to do.”

One of the clearest findings from the research on office hours is that students and professors see them differently. Take the surveys conducted by Jeremy L. Hsu, one of the biology-education researchers collaborating with Gonzalez Niño, and his co-authors.

Hsu, an assistant professor at Chapman University, and his team surveyed students and instructors on his campus in the spring of 2021, just as the university was moving to optional in-person instruction. They heard back from most students with life-sciences majors and two-thirds of full-time instructors in the College of Science who were teaching undergraduates that semester.

While students and professors alike identified content clarification as the leading use for office hours, about 11 percent of instructors described discussing their students’ career goals and opportunities that could support them, like internships and conducting research, as a potential benefit. None of the

students provided that reason. And while about 20 percent of professors indicated one-on-one time or getting to know one another as a purpose of office hours, only about 6 percent of students did.

One reason students don't come to office hours could be that they don't see the value in doing so. Indeed, many of the surveyed students indicated that they didn't attend because they didn't have a specific question, suggesting they thought it only made sense to show up if they did.

## **You're one on one with someone who's in a position of authority over you, so it's very intimidating.**

Other findings pointed to the ways in which professors can misunderstand students: Forty percent of students cited a scheduling conflict, but only 16 percent of instructors thought that was the problem. More than a quarter of instructors said the reason students didn't attend was lack of effort.

But what professors perceive as lack of effort might really be deference to authority, a narrow view of what office hours can be, an overburdened schedule, or simply trepidation.

Three years into their college education, Jess Walter, who uses they/them pronouns, has been to office hours just twice. Office hours are "a last resort," says Walter, a sociology major at the University of Alabama at Huntsville, "because it's a very daunting prospect, right? You're one on one with someone who's in a position of authority over you, so it's very intimidating."

Professors are experts; professors are busy. Even Walter, a strong student hoping to go on to graduate school who understood that office hours were designated times for faculty members to speak with students, was still hesitant to interrupt them. The first time Walter went to office hours, in their junior year, was when a professor required every student who'd chosen a research paper for their term project to set an appointment to propose a topic. Walter recalls doing a lot of preparation ahead of the meeting in order to keep it as short as possible.

This concern about bothering professors while they're at work is common. So many students don't realize office hours are in fact intended for this kind of faculty-student conversation that some professors are taking pains to make it clear. A growing number are dropping the term "office hours" for something like "student hours."

Walter's second visit to a professor's office hours had a big impact. Walter was there to follow up on the offer of some data and planned also to ask for advice about graduate school. During the talk, the faculty member, Jennifer Sims, an associate professor of sociology, suggested that Walter try a summer research project. It turned out that the deadline to apply was that same day.

Walter went for it and spent 10 weeks this past summer in the lab with Sims. Walter felt awkward and intimidated at first but says they learned a lot about research methods and ended up having a great experience.

Looking back, that office-hours visit was a significant turning point in Walter's college journey: Up there, they said, with changing majors from biology to sociology in their sophomore year.

But it took a lot to work up the nerve to go.

The hesitation that Walter experienced is widespread and longstanding. But anecdotally, many professors believe that students' reluctance to come and see them has been exacerbated by the pandemic. For some, virtual office hours have helped sustain connections.

"Post-Covid, students just need more support in different ways," says Anya Galli Robertson, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Dayton, in Ohio. "Some of them are still dealing with the academic impacts of having done online learning." They're struggling with motivation or study skills or knowledge gaps.

Professors see students regularly in class, but, as happens in so many other settings, the people who need the most support are usually not the ones who ask for it. Some of this is about cultural capital, Galli Robertson says. For some students, going to the office recalls times when their parents advocated on their behalf to school officials. For others, it evokes fear.

Life circumstances matter, too. The students who struggled most in Galli Robertson's classes last year were managing health problems, working at least one job, had family members in poor health, and were living in multigenerational families. "Those are not the students who are going to leisurely walk down the halls of an academic building and just walk into a professor's office," she says.

The same students, Galli Robertson adds, aren't always responsive via email, either.

The big question, she says, is "how do we build the connection that these students need, to provide them with the support that they deserve?"

Zoom has provided her with a partial answer. In addition to being more convenient for students with competing responsibilities and complicated schedules, she says, it can reduce the power imbalance inherent in a student's coming to a professor's office. And for a student who's having a hard time talking themselves into a meeting, not having to physically get there is one less barrier to overcome.

But it's not a complete answer. When Zoom doesn't work, it's worth remembering that office hours are but one tool for building connections.

Regan A.R. Gurung, a professor of psychological science and associate vice provost and executive director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Oregon State University, has thought about those missing connections from several perspectives. He's a faculty developer, a social scientist, and an instructor teaching some 400 students, most of them in their first year of college. In his own teaching, Gurung starts communicating with his students before the course begins. He reaches out by email and shares his Instagram, offering several options for connecting.

Office hours offer one more. He's chosen to use the traditional term, thinking that some students will be looking for information about office hours, and that it can be confusing when different professors call them by different names. On his syllabus, office hours are listed as one option under the heading "Let's Talk!" and he describes why students might want to under a heading that says "Why?": "Introduce yourself, get to know me better, help me get to know you, develop or sharpen your study skills, go deeper with the material, get help with content or assignments, or talk about ways to cope with college and life. Especially useful if you are curious about psych topics not covered in class or want more."

Gurung figures he might have 10 or so half-hour appointments with students in a week. Sure, that's a small handful. But Gurung doesn't think the number of students who attend office hours is the right metric to track. What matters is that, one way or another, his students get the support they need.

So, how does Gurung know that he is reaching the students who need him most? He's dug into that a bit. After the first exam, Gurung emails the students who failed and invites them to follow up with him. The message, which usually goes out to about 14 to 20 students a term, is meant to be welcoming and warm — he doesn't order students to come by. For every five such emails he sends, Gurung says, there are usually two students who reply and self-diagnose the problem: They just didn't study enough. Two more might come talk to him. One won't respond, and he tries to keep an eye on that student.

Gurung is committed to reaching the students who need him, and he's built up a system that seems to catch nearly all of them. But not every instructor has the time, background knowledge, or support to do all of this — nor should they have to reinvent the wheel. Professors need other avenues for learning about effective ways to support their students, he says. Not every instructor has access to a good teaching center, Gurung notes; this is a place where department chairs, for instance, can play an important role in spreading good ideas.

Colleges, of course, provide other forms of academic support, and those can be great, says Vecera, the Iowa professor. "But, you know, my hesitation as an instructor is always I'm the bottom line in the class," he says.

"Just because you can go a lot of places to ask questions doesn't mean that you're always going to get the best answer," Vecera says. "And sometimes what's going to happen is you might get the answer to the question that you have, but you might not get that added little piece that is, 'Oh, this is going to connect to this other topic that we're going to talk about in a couple of weeks.'"

And professors' importance to students doesn't end there, either. A conversation that starts squarely about academic concerns can turn in the direction of mentorship.

Connecting with supportive professors is integral to student success, not only in the narrow sense of completing a degree, but in the broader one of creating the kind of meaningful college experience a graduate can draw on for years to come.

Forging those connections often comes down to the gumption of undergraduates or the goodwill of individual instructors. But it doesn't have to. College leaders can help create a culture where seeking support is seen as something successful students — not just struggling ones — do as a matter of course. They can better support faculty — especially the ones they've given the task of teaching hundreds of students. They can talk up the educational necessity of human connection.

Indeed, if colleges are going to succeed in educating the students they enroll now — students whose lives were disrupted by Covid, who have responsibilities beyond their academics, who don't show up on campus with everything already going their way — they will have to.

*Beckie Supiano writes about teaching, learning, and the human interactions that shape them.*





# DO YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO IN AN EMERGENCY?

## DOES THE PERSON NEED IMMEDIATE ASSISTANCE?

When in doubt, reach out and refer...

### YES

The person's behavior is clearly reckless, disorderly, dangerous or threatening and is suggestive of imminent harm to self or others in the community.

### CALL

911 or Campus Police:  
415.485.9696

### NOT SURE

The person shows signs of distress, but I am unsure how serious it is. My interaction has left me feeling uneasy or concerned.

### CONSULT

with COM CARE Team  
by calling 415.485.9509;  
after business hours,  
contact Campus Police

### NO

Does the person need immediate assistance?  
No concern for the person's immediate safety, but they are having academic, personal, professional, financial issues, etc

### SUBMIT

a COM CARE report



Severe

### Campus Resources:

**Campus Police**  
415.485.9696

**Health Services**  
415.485.9458

**COM CARE Team**  
415.485.9509

**Student Accessibility Services**  
415.485.9406

**Psychological Services**  
415.485.9350  
(by appointment only)

For questions, please contact  
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information:



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