

Sarah Anderegg

From: Jonathan Eldridge
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To: Jonathan Eldridge
Subject: Fall 2023 Faculty Information & Updates, Volume X
Attachments: No question No Problem--Office Hours with Impact.pdf; College of Marin Bookstore Benefits[62].pdf

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Dear College of Marin Faculty:

The attached article explores how student use of office hours is problematically tied to whether they have a particular question about course material—and how to shift that perspective to help students in myriad ways, just by being available and framing that availability differently. I hope you enjoy it.

Please also see the attached information item from the College Bookstore—and be on the lookout for more specific information from your area dean/director related to book orders for spring semester.

Thank you.

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No question? No problem.

It makes sense to go to a professor's office hours only if and when you have a specific question about the course. That's a narrow view of the purpose of office hours, but it's one that students have expressed [in surveys](#) — and one that came up over and over again as I reported my recent story on the unrealized potential of this designated time. ([Read it here](#) if you haven't already.)

Why do so many students have the impression that they should attend office hours only if they've got a question? Here's my hunch: Well-meaning, supportive professors mention their office hours at various points throughout the course: If you have questions about fill-in-the-blank, come to my office hours. The professors mean, "I am here to help! Come talk to me." Students hear: "If you have a question."

It's a frustrating misunderstanding, because it contributes to the big problem my article focuses on: Many students miss out on the support professors stand to provide.

That support can take many forms, with variables like discipline, class size, and professor personality playing into the design of office hours. Some office hours are designed to give students practice on course content — especially in content-heavy courses with a reputation for being difficult. But even then, showing up without a question can pay off. Some students, professors told me, made a point of attending what are essentially group practice sessions to hear other students' questions — and to give themselves more time on task with the material.

In other cases, professors have structured their office hours to provide very different kinds of support. Here are a couple of examples:

Hailey Sheets has created a snack station stocked with foods like granola bars, crackers, cookies, gum, fruit snacks, nuts, chocolate, hot cocoa, and popcorn in her office at Southwestern Michigan College, where she is a professor of English and communications-department chairperson. Many students at Southwestern, a rural community college, don't eat before class, because they face food insecurity or simply don't have time for a break, she said. Sheets is happy to chat with students about class, or anything else, when they come by for a snack, but she tells students they're also welcome to pop in and take a snack without speaking with her at all.

Sheets was tuned in to the problem of food insecurity among students because she is a faculty adviser for the honor society Phi Theta Kappa, which helps run the campus food pantry as a community service. She directs students to that resource, and also began bringing snacks — often leftover items from her family's Costco runs — to class on days when students were workshoping their writing. Then she started inviting any students who wanted a snack to her office after class. It has grown from there — because she's a department chair, Sheets works with more students than the ones in her own classes.

Sheets's snack station, she says, helps her build connections with students, many of whom come by repeatedly. Her colleagues sometimes partake, too, allowing Sheets to connect with them as well.

When students come to see Matt Bowers, program director and an associate professor of instruction in sport management at the University of Texas at Austin, it's not usually because they have questions about his courses. Bowers, who lets students book 15-minute appointments and finds they are in high demand, estimates that three-quarters of those appointments are used to talk about students' career aspirations and their lives more broadly.

How has he become a go-to instructor for such office-hour conversation — one that many professors want to have but that many students don't seem to know is a possibility? Some of it stems from context and approach: Bowers, who teaches both majors and nonmajors in everything from intro to capstone courses, thinks he's doing something wrong if his classes are so difficult that students need office hours to do well. And it makes sense that he'd be seen as a resource for career advice: Lots of students want to work in sports in some capacity, and he also teaches a large leadership course called "Building Winning Teams."

While he has too many students to build a strong connection with each one, Bowers strives to present himself in class in such a way that any student would feel comfortable setting up a 15-minute appointment with him. So another reason he gets those questions may be as simple as his orientation to students. When new acquaintances learn he's a professor, Bowers says, they often make some kind of dig at Gen Z. "And I'm like, 'Are you kidding? They're incredible. Yeah, they've got all these things that they're dealing with,'" which students didn't face in decades past — especially because many of his students are first-generation or students of color. "'But to a person, they're strong, they're fascinating — in many ways, they're hurting.'" It stands to reason that when a professor sees talking with students about their plans as an honor, more of them will want to do that.

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



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If the answer is yes to any of these, or you have additional questions, please feel free to contact me directly at m.raymond@follett.com or call 707-812-4566.

Warmest regards,

Mike Raymond

Market Leader – College of Marin Bookstore