

Teaching First Year Students:
Student Expectations & Strategies to Meet Them

Teaching first year students can be both incredibly rewarding and very challenging. First year students are experiencing something very new, there are many personal challenges and changes in their lives that often distract them and make them ‘less than ideal’ students. They do not know the culture of the College or expectations of faculty. They are also learning how to learn in a new environment. We have to remind ourselves that this is all new to them! In this resource piece, we’ve tried to frame in general principles what new students want & expect, along with some strategies that you may find useful. The Student Voices are from focus groups that have taken place with first year students over the past several years.

Principle: Clear Communication

<i>Student Voice</i>	<i>Strategies from the Literature</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It was helpful to know what teachers’ practices were ▪ I got no answers from professors during the summer ▪ I was not encouraged to ask questions by my professors ▪ Students really need to be directed ▪ I don’t want general emails, I want something specific to the course ▪ I want to know more course-specific information in advance, things like textbooks and course materials ▪ I liked having my high school teachers on me to complete assignments ▪ I want to be told in class what’s important—I don’t check email ▪ Things were unknown. It would have helped to know things ahead of time ▪ We need to be more aware of college’s expectations in high school ▪ I had the wrong expectation of what I was getting from the program ▪ Enforce to students that passing is a must 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assist new students in understanding what your school (faculty/discipline) values, how it communicates and how it expects students to think and write. Relate this to industry standards/expectations and to potential careers. Reinforce this throughout the semester. ▪ Clearly articulate expectations. Students should be spending their time striving to meet standards and expectations, not struggling to figure out what those are. ▪ Provide rubrics/guidelines when handing out assignments. This gives students a clear picture of your expectations, helping them produce better work and making your grading easier. ▪ Discuss how the textbook will be used throughout the course. ▪ Discuss expectations for mid-terms and exams, particularly what skills will need to be demonstrated. ▪ Touch base with your course schedule/ timeline frequently throughout the semester. ▪ Discuss the careers, industry and the reality of where the program leads.

Principle: Creating a Sense of Community

<i>Student Voice</i>	<i>Strategies from the Literature</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It is very overwhelming to be told by a professor during the first week, that if this class/program is not what I want, to get out ▪ It was very welcoming to have my professor put us into groups to get to know other students in the first class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ During your first classes, take some time to facilitate community building through some icebreakers or experiential exercises. This allows students to get to know who is in their class which will facilitate ease in group work later on during your course.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ My professor put down our confidence level right off the start with stats of the percentage of students who are going to pass/fail the course ▪ Teachers create an environment in the classroom with students either getting to know each other or not 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Discuss with your class the kind of learning community that you hope everyone will actively participate in and experience. ▪ Speak to students from a positive perspective. Talk about what it takes to pass the course and to graduate, and what it feels like to accomplish those goals rather than focusing on the rates of failure or what people do wrong in the course.
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Principle: Be Learning-Focused (not content driven)

<i>Student Voice</i>	<i>Strategies from the Literature</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It was a good experience when my professor provided a tutor to the class for help in writing essays ▪ My first semester was a disaster - I needed help to get back on track ▪ My first week was slow, then everything was thrown at me at once ▪ I had a lot of difficulty reading books and writing essays ▪ Getting back to my studies was very overwhelming ▪ I had so much work - I felt saturated ▪ Need a class mentor or coach to help students apply themselves more ▪ My professor should announce services that students need to be aware of ▪ I was unprepared for college and university ▪ Stress importance of how important all their choices are going to be ▪ Make sure students are aware that they can't procrastinate and to never miss a class ▪ Lectures on stress releasers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Build into your curriculum ways to teach new students learning skills (time management, critical thinking, writing, etc) as well as content. Reinforce these skill-building exercises throughout the semester. ▪ Create feedback loops. Give students a chance to practice things you want them to do, outside of a grading situation. ▪ Help students learn what to look for when reading a textbook, article or other material in your field by reading through parts of it with them. Remember that reading texts critically is a skill that needs to be learned & practiced; first year students do not come with this skill fully developed. ▪ Give examples of what you consider good work (papers, projects, etc) that are annotated to demonstrate what makes it a strong example. Students will then know what they should strive to produce as "A" material. ▪ Use multiple types of representations of key concepts/information (i.e. graphs, charts, diagrams, video, text). This not only reinforces concepts, but also reaches out to students with different learning styles.

Principle: Engaging Students

<i>Student Voice</i>	<i>Strategies from the Literature</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I found the professors really helpful at the beginning of the semester, then they had no time as the semester went on ▪ Being in College requires more responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Give students some responsibility for their learning. This may mean being selective with lecture material (don't lecture from the textbook) or asking them to teach concepts to their classmates.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Incentives will increase students wanting to obtain more information ▪ If a professor tells us it's important/gives us a quiz (e.g. services) and then get a prize, it's more motivating ▪ It should be more social to help students feel comfortable. If you feel more confident, you will make more friends and do well ▪ Professors need to extend office hours and be more available ▪ Timelines when activities are offered don't work for students ▪ Show students the benefits of what they're doing ▪ Host social event with students and teachers before classes start—students would be more comfortable going into first class if already met professor and classmates ▪ I want a place to go and talk with classmates and to read ▪ Provide more time with professors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide opportunities for students to give feedback to each other. This many mean peer-reviewing drafts of assignments (with a list of guiding questions from you) or providing feedback on a presentation. Whatever format, learning how to critically examine someone else's work can help someone critically look at their own work and see things they wouldn't have seen otherwise. These kinds of exercises foster reflection and self-assessment. ▪ Structure time in class for interactive methods of instruction. Help students prepare for this by asking them to work on specific problems or questions individually or by working in small groups. ▪ Learning activities should challenge first year students to think beyond a dualistic (right/wrong) level so that they are encouraged to use evidence to consider a variety of possibilities. ▪ Design instruction to prevent passive learning. Students actively engaged in the learning process retain the content post-class better than those passively receiving information. Examples include: group work; debate; role plays; authentic projects; small scale research & observation; requiring the completion of flow-charts, concept maps & glossaries throughout class; etc. ▪ Ask students lots of questions during class. Not only does this increase active engagement in course material, it provides you with an understanding of the range of student knowledge and comprehension.
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Do you have examples of any of these or other techniques you use and would like to share on our faculty website? Email us your stories, tips and examples and we'll post them.

Sources:

Best Practices for Teaching First Year Undergraduates: Strategies from experienced faculty (1997). Carnegie Mellon. Available at: www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/PublicationsArchives/InternalReports/BestPractices-1stYears.pdf

Teaching First Year Students. Flinders University. Available at: www.flinders.edu.au/teach/t41/teaching/firstindex.php

Working With Students: Teaching First Year Students. George Mason University. Available at: www.gmu.edu/cte/Working_with_students/firstyearstudents.html

What Helps Students Learn? University of Washington. Available at: <http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/Bulletin/Learning.html>

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