



Student 1: “What are office hours? What am I supposed to talk to him/her about?”

Student 2: “Where do I need to meet you? Oh..... where’s your office?”

Faculty 1: “No one ever shows up. Most students just email me their questions.”

Faculty 2: “Office hours are outdated. I do virtual hours.”

Office hours are a necessary part of a faculty member’s responsibilities. Per our union contract (6.3.2), full-time faculty are supposed to be available for students up to 12 hours each week. At a minimum, four of these hours need to be held in our offices, labs, or other approved professional locations. See excerpt below.

6.3.2 Faculty recognize that being available for consultation with students is essential for student learning and hence an important responsibility. Faculty will be available for consultation with students via posted office hours, individually arranged consultations and electronic communications for one hour per week for each credit of teaching load up to 12. Faculty will be available for a minimum of one-third of these in their offices, laboratories or a professional location approved by the department head (AAUP & NMU, 2015.)

Faculty are required to post their availability for face-to-face office hours and also have other times ‘as arranged’ to meet with students. However, if your students are like mine, most of my office hours are pretty lonely. Honestly, I count on this ‘free’ time to get work done. But, I do wonder why students don’t meet with me. According to Li and Pitts (2009), the reasons students don’t show up for office hours are inconvenience, not being available during office hours due to other class or work conflicts, professors not being available during their posted office hours, difficulty scheduling meetings outside of office hours, and the need for evening appointments. Nadworny (2019) notes that many students are too intimidated to meet with faculty outside of class, and some students may not understand the purpose of office hours. In particular, freshman and first generation college students may need faculty to explain the purpose of office hours and to provide examples of typical activities such as answering questions, reviewing an exam, or getting feedback on a paper draft (Condis, 2016). To start this discussion with your students, you might find this comical video helpful (Arizona State University, 2015).

To decrease anxiety early in the semester, faculty could require each student to meet in their office for 5 minutes or assign a small group project with a mandatory office visit (Condis, 2016). Be sure to list your office location in your syllabus or course website and consider providing specific directions (Condis, 2016). For example, students often don’t understand that West Science and Weston are different buildings which can be confusing.



Additional strategies to encourage students to utilize office hours include scheduling them if possible at times and places most convenient for the students (Doyle, 2011). For example, I often meet with students at the hospital after a clinic day which maximizes time for both of us. Faculty might consider scheduling some virtual office hours using Skype, Zoom, or online chat in EduCat. Condis (2016) suggests offering an extra virtual office hour on the weekend before an exam. In one of my online courses, I use Q & A discussion forums to address student concerns before exams and hold virtual office hours. I've also found scheduled phone meetings very effective for students who can't meet in person.

When students do show up for an office appointment, faculty should be aware of the power dynamic and strive to make students feel welcome. For example, leaving the door open during office hours, inviting students to come in, telling them where to sit, and conveying that you are glad to see them will help make them feel more at ease (Condis, 2016). If possible, have students sit next to your desk rather than across from it. I keep an extra folding chair in my office in case two students show up requesting joint help. Be sure to have Kleenex available for the inevitable tears.

Besides providing specific course help, office hours are also useful for getting to know your students as individuals. Nadworny (2019) explains the "professor can transform into an adviser and ultimately a mentor." These interactions cultivate professional relationships which could lead to opportunities for research, scholarships, summer internships, and jobs. Last semester, I met with an advisee who commented about 'really needing a job' but had just transferred here to be closer to her home town. I pointed out that a campus job might provide more flexibility for going home especially during semester breaks, which she hadn't considered. I introduced her to our skill lab coordinator and within one hour she had a job! One of my greatest joys is helping senior students navigate career decisions and competing job offers which we discuss during office visits. Sometimes, I'm the one who needs the Kleenex.

References

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From the desk of the Teaching and Learning Scholar

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