

Kathleen F. Gabriel, *Teaching Unprepared Students: Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education*, (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2008).

Chapter 3: The First Week of Class: Sharing a Mission for Success

The first week is one of the most important weeks because it sets the tone and climate for the course.

“During the first few class meetings—not just the first day—we meet our students, share with them who we are, present course goals, reveal intended learning outcomes, spell out class expectations, and set up ground rules.” [25]

One of the most important ways to establish a positive learning climate is with a well-written, detailed syllabus.

“Syllabi should be provided for all students; however, for at-risk or unprepared students who may not be very good note takers or listeners, having a well-written syllabus that covers all course procedures, expectations, reading assignments, grading policies, and so on is crucial. It is the best preventive measure professors can have in the classroom.” [26]

“For at-risk students, a detailed and all-embracing written syllabus (that is made available as a class handout and not only on line) is absolutely essential. Many at-risk students have trouble making inferences about course requirements and expectations. If these students are the first members of their family to go to college, calling home for advice is not an option. If they have a learning disability or are unprepared, they may not be able to ascertain expectations that are merely implied (or not mentioned at all) in a syllabus. Asking for clarification can be challenging. If a professor appears cold or unapproachable in any way, most at-risk students may feel intimidated and likely will not go to that professor’s office for assistance.” [26]

Policy on No-Shows and Late Adds

Recommends very strict policy because all students need to be present from Day One. At-risk students are already at a disadvantage and may not be able to catch up.

“This is our class—not my class.”

Identifying At-Risk Students

1) Student records (SIS)

2) Informal Assignments

→Have students write a paragraph on why they are taking the class, what they hope to learn, and what background knowledge they may have on the topic.

→Give a short reading and questions about the content.

Preplanning: Course Goals and Teaching Philosophy

Complete a Teaching Goals Inventory for each class to clarify focus and determine assessable goals:

http://fm.iowa.uiowa.edu/fmi/xsl/tgi/data_entry.xml?-db=tgi_data&-lay=Layout01&-view

Identify goals then develop learning outcomes

→ Ask students to clarify their own goals for the course: give each student a 3x5 index card and ask them to write their contact information and why they signed up for the course and what their goals are.

Share your teaching philosophy/mission

→ Give guidance about expectations and how to learn and excel

→ Tell students about the availability of help and support systems and remind them that success requires hard work and use of support resources, and lots of time and effort.

Schedule Individual Office Meetings

→ Early interventions and sustained attention for at-risk students.

Preplanning: Write Intended Learning Outcomes

Consider goals for the end of the semester

→ What do I want my students to know, understand, and be able to do with their new knowledge as a result of taking my class?

Learning outcomes as what students should be able to do, not activities used in class

→ “You should be able to. . .”

→ Identify 4-6 outcomes on the syllabus that are general enough for the entire course.

Assessment and Grades

How do we want students to demonstrate what they have learned?

How will we measure/assess their performances and assign grades?

At-risk students frequently have unrealistic goals concerning grades that they will earn. Poor first grades lead to disengagement, and despair replaces naïve goals.

“[Professors] need to reduce stress but not eliminate it.”

1) Variety of activities to allow students with different learning styles and strategies to demonstrate what they’re learning (e.g., tests, presentations, journals, research papers)

2) Rubrics

→ Rubrics save time for professor, provide effective feedback, and promote student learning; very helpful for at-risk students.

3) Identify number of points and percentage of final grade of each project/class component

Introduce Learner-Centered Education

Learner-Centered Education focuses on how students are learning and applying what they’ve learned vs. professor-centered education that focuses on how professors present information.

Professors need to inform when using Learner-Centered education because many professors don’t use it.

Anticipate resistance and explain *why* you're using it.

University Resources, Support Centers, & Tips for Success

→ Need to remind students in private conversations throughout the semester to use resources.

→ Professors need to be proactive because at-risk students won't realize how far behind they are and what they need to do to catch up.

→ Suggest giving/using private tutorials for poor-performing students

Expectations of Behavior

Reach out to at-risk students on the syllabus:

→ Expect students with learning disabilities to bring letter from Student Services office

→ Encourage students who are unsure of their preparation for college to come to office hours

→ Be clear that you are not lowering standards or expectations but are talking about strategies for success.

→ Expect everyone to attend every class.

Syllabus Use and Follow-Up

→ Use the syllabus as a learning tool.

→ Suggests giving a quiz on the syllabus content.