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Office Hours: An Honors First-Year Experience Assignment

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Abstract: An assignment tasks students with scheduling, preparing for, and reflecting on the experience of meeting with a professor during office hours. Student expectations and experiences are presented.

Keywords: faculty-student interaction; reflective writing; academic support; role-play in education; University of Montevallo Honors Program

Sometimes the simplest assignments can be the most impactful in a student's collegiate success. Part of a professor's teaching requirement is to be available to our students, most evidently via office hours. My small, public, liberal arts university requires its faculty to hold ten office hours per week, but although faculty members put their hours on the syllabus, announce them in class, and encourage students to come, they spend most of these hours alone. Few students take advantage of this valuable resource that can improve grades, build relationships, and provide career guidance. Since our honors first-year experience class is an extended orientation course to transition our incoming students from high school to college, I have implemented an office hours assignment that was due in the first half of the semester.

The assignment is simple: make an appointment and attend one professor's office hours. Then write a brief summary of the experience describing their expectations before going to office hours and what they thought about the experience. Students are instructed to include the date, time, location of the meeting, and name of the professor within their written reflection.

To prepare first-year students for the assignment, several upper-class honors students come to class early in the semester to role-play various potential/

hypothetical office hours scenarios. They present skits to help prepare students and reduce anxiety. I have found honors students reticent to ask for help but so grade-focused that they complete the requirement. Because the office hours assignment is uncomfortable for most of them, the skits and role-playing are a way to mentally prepare themselves.

Students express a wide spectrum of emotions before attending a professor's office hours, ranging from uncertainty ("I wasn't sure what to expect") to apprehension ("I was really worried about bothering [the professor]") to dread ("I expected that he might be a little annoyed with me"). Many students hold professors in awe, as evidenced by one student: "Before going to office hours, I was a bit intimidated and thought it would be much more professional than it was." These expectations lead students to confess that they are "a little nervous going in," and because of their preconceptions of professors, most assume that the meeting will be "a rather formal event." One student wrote, "Before coming to her office hours, I expected it to be a very formal experience, however, I learned that it is not very formal, and the professor is truly there to help you."

Fortunately, their anxiousness quickly dissipates, and most students reflect on office hours as being both "a pretty pleasant experience" and a beneficial one. Faculty members spend time with these students, who have written that faculty "cleared up a lot of concerns" and "helped [them] to understand" course concepts. These meetings give students "a better understanding of [the faculty's] expectations." Additionally, faculty go above and beyond by using the time to give career advice: "I went in expecting a brief conversation about my major and my future, but I ended up opening up to him a lot more than I anticipated"; "What I did not expect was to get as much advice as I did. She gave me advice that I think will help me succeed"; "Talking with [the professor] helped me out a lot."

Showing that the professor is there to help and dispelling negative preconceptions helps precipitate future office visits. One student cites a grade benefit to the office hours visit: "Now that I have a good idea on what to do, I believe my current assignment (and possibly future ones) will become better." Others cite personal connections: "Overall, this office hour visit was extremely beneficial to me and I was glad to have gotten to know [the professor] a little better"; "My experience was a lot less stressful than I had made it out to be. I found out my professor was not as intimidating as I had previously believed. Overall, I had a very positive experience and feel more comfortable going to my math professor if I ever need help in the future." Since a key

purpose of the assignment is to help students become comfortable attending office hours, it is satisfying to read multiple reflections that echo this student: “Overall, it was a positive experience, and I will definitely utilize office hours more in the future”; this is exactly the intended student learning outcome.

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