

# Building a Retention-Friendly Classroom

## Practical Tips for New Faculty

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# Retention Basics

- *Retention is a university's ability to keep its students enrolled until they graduate.*
- We care mostly about 1st-2nd year retention, because most students who drop out don't make it to year two.
- Retention is about connection: academic and social.
- Retention can't be directly addressed—it's a function of the student experience.

# The University/Student Relationship

Consider these three models for the university/student relationship:

Restaurant Server/Patron

“Our job is to keep you happy.”

Drill Sergeant/Military Recruit

“Our job is to put you through a difficult test.”

Personal Trainer/Client

“Our job is to help you grow.”

# An Overview

Retention is about doing little things well.

*Success is not about doing extraordinary things. It is about doing ordinary things extraordinarily well.*

– John W. Gardner

We're all doing some of these things already.

Pat yourself on the back! (And choose a new tactic to try.)

No one can do *everything* on this list.

But we can start doing any of them immediately.

# Take Attendance

- Students who attend class are more likely to persist to graduation.
- Simply pass around a piece of paper with the course number, section, and date.
- Record in Brightspace later (or don't).
- Just taking attendance sends a message: *I see you. Your presence matters to me.*

# Normalize Struggle

- In all human systems, growth requires stress.
- Many Truman students see stress as a sign of inadequacy (*fixed mindset*).
- Reiterate: struggling is normal, and failure leads to growth (*growth mindset*).
- Share your own difficulties, past or current.

# Build Community

## Get to Know Your Students

- Learn students' names and use them in class.
- Give each student an index card and ask them to record their name, their major, and something they'd like you to know.

## Help Them Get to Know You

- Tell them about your life—they are curious!
- Pick one aspect of your personal life to reference regularly.

## Help Them Get to Know Each Other

- Think/pair/share.
- Embrace group work.

# Embrace Clarity

- Give short daily assessments, even if not graded.
- Keep grades in Brightspace, or don't—but make it easy for students to learn their current grade.
- Be clear about:
  - how quickly you grade
  - you how use email.



# Set Expectations

Especially crucial with first- and second-year students.

- “This problem set should take an hour or so. If it takes more than two hours, come see me.”
- “This is the hardest unit in the course.”
- “The rest of the class builds on the concepts we covered in this chapter. If your understanding is still a bit shaky, come to my office hours this afternoon.”
- “You should start studying for the midterm this weekend.”
- “This final project will take 15-20 hours of real, focused work.”
- Consider creating a 1-2 page “course guide”

# Subvert Expectations

- Ask a student to stay after class, then compliment them on their work.
- Offer nominal extra credit for attending office hours.
- Let them teach *you*, occasionally—individually or as a class—on a subject where they're an expert and you're a novice.

# Teach Studentship

Truman freshmen have asked me whether their fall classes last the entire school year and whether they have to use capital letters when writing a paper.

- Break down big projects for them.
- Tell students how to address you.
- Talk about professional email etiquette.
- Walk them through the devastating math of taking a 0 on an assignment.

# Reach Out

- Email: “We’ve missed you in class lately, and I wanted to check in and ask how you’re doing.”
- TruView: Any-Time, Any-Student (ATAS) Notification.
- Students of Concern (<http://soc.truman.edu>).
- Send individual student names to me at [vieker@truman.edu](mailto:vieker@truman.edu).

# Teach Learning

- The productivity equation:  
 $productivity = \text{intensity of focus} \times \text{time spent}$
- Effortful recall builds durable memories.
  - e.g. replace re-reading with self-quizzing.
- Avoid illusions of knowing
  - If you followed along in lecture but can't execute on your own, you don't understand it yet.
  - Test yourself: can you do it from scratch, by yourself, most of the time?
- Test your recall by pretending to teach others (The Feynman Technique)

# Conclusion

- With first-year students, assume no familiarity with academic culture.
- Provide frequent, low-stakes feedback.
- Teach students how to learn.
- Students want to connect, though they don't always show it.

# References

- Brown, P. C., McDaniel, M. A., & Roediger, H. L. (2014). *Make it stick: the science of successful learning*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Newport, C. (2007). *How to become a straight-A student: the unconventional strategies real college students use to score high while studying less*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Pattengale, Jerry. (2010). *What Faculty Members Need to Know About Retention* [White paper]. Retrieved from Baylor University: <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/231350.pdf>

# Discussion

- These slides are available at <http://vieker.sites.truman.edu/talks>.
- What have your experiences been?