

## Guide to Interacting with Students

***Always implement the instructor's policies.*** Remember. You are not the instructor for the course. The professor you are working with delineated the course requirements/policies, and your role is to be consistent with them. So know the policies outlined in the syllabus and refer to them often. If a student asks for an exception, politely respond that you need to be consistent with the professor's policies and encourage them to contact the professor directly about any exceptions.

***Avoid an authoritarian style.*** Being a teaching assistant can be challenging because in many situations, you are relatively close in age to your students. Given this, it may be tempting to project a demeanor of authority and/or rigidity in effort to gain students' respect. This strategy tends to backfire. The key to gaining students' respect is 1) to respect the students, and 2) to be consistent with the course policies.

***Learn students' names.*** There are over 30,000 undergraduates at University Park. Students often say that they feel like "a number." By learning students' names, you provide a more personal experience in the classroom, and it shows students that you care about them. As students arrive on the first day of class, introduce yourself as they come in, and ask them their names. Even if you need to ask again in the coming weeks, students will appreciate your effort!

***Be friendly, but do not be their friend.*** A friendly attitude makes for an approachable learning environment. But it is important not to confuse friendliness with leniency. For example, although it may appear that students will like you more if you end a lab section early, are overly lenient with grading, or make frequent exceptions to course policies, the end result is that students will be frustrated by your inconsistencies. Also, be friendly but maintain professional boundaries. Do not see your students socially, do not accept and/or buy drinks from them at bars, and do not date your students! This is a conflict of interests with your role as a teaching assistant.

***Be appropriately timely with correspondence.*** Email is by far the most common channel of correspondence with students. Therefore, respond to emails from students in a timely manner. Ignoring emails from students is disrespectful. However, you are not expected to provide instantaneous responses. For example, it is unreasonable for a student to expect you to respond to emails within a couple of hours. This often happens when students have questions on assignments with a rapidly approaching deadline. A good rule of thumb is to respond to emails within 24 hours on weekdays and 48 hours for weekends. It is a good idea to tell students this at the beginning of the semester.

***Attend your own office hours!*** Office hours are an extension of the classroom. The extent students attend your office hours will vary over the course of the semester, but you should always be present for them. Do not schedule meetings during this time under the expectation that students will not attend, because often times they will! Students often juggle demanding work schedules, other courses, and family responsibilities in efforts to attend your office hours. Therefore, it can be quite frustrating to arrive and find that you are not there. If a scheduling conflict does arise (such as a thesis defense), simply notify your students early in the week and have them contact you by appointment.

***Refer struggling students to appropriate resources.*** Students may find you more approachable than the course instructor, and in some cases may come to you with academic or personal problems. In these instances, try to help by referring them to appropriate resources (such as Counseling and Psychological Services). You may wish to refer to this LIST of resources [http://www.schreyerinstitutione.psu.edu/pdf/TA\\_Student\\_Resources.pdf](http://www.schreyerinstitutione.psu.edu/pdf/TA_Student_Resources.pdf).