10 Ideas for Starting the Semester

UCLA - Center for Teaching and Learning

The first days and weeks of a course are crucial in establishing the tone and the attitudes that will pervade the entire quarter. The following suggestions are aimed at creating an environment in which students feel motivated, focused, and ready to learn from the first day.

1. **Provide structure for the course**
   In the syllabus and at the first class meetings, help students see the class as having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Show how the various topics of the semester work together to create a bigger picture. Refer back to this structure periodically as the semester progresses.

2. **Clarify expectations**
   State learning objectives in concrete terms; specify what students will need to do to be successful in your course; describe the level of commitment (study time, attendance) you expect; provide grading rubrics for assignments, encouraging students to self-evaluate as they complete work.

3. **Encourage students to get to know one another**
   Studies show that an important factor in college students’ academic success (as well as retention) is their sense of belonging, of having connections to other students. Help students make connections in your course by building in introductory and ice-breaker activities at the beginning of the semester, encouraging students to exchange email addresses with classmates, setting up in-person or on-line study groups, incorporating small group activities during class time.

4. **Create an inclusive environment**
   In an inclusive classroom, students of all backgrounds feel that they are welcome and that their contributions will be valued. Building such an environment can begin with encouraging all students to participate, being equitable in your responses to student effort (e.g., encouragement, constructive criticism), inviting students with special needs to communicate them to you, ensuring that your selection of reading materials is as inclusive as possible, and establishing ground rules for civil exchange of views in the classroom.

5. **Give students a reason to be there**
   You can make a course interesting and attractive to students by conveying your own interest in the subject, by showing how it may connect to students’ lives, by bringing in real-world examples or applications, by starting the semester with a fascinating problem in the field.

6. **Help students understand the learning process**
By communicating to students what you know about the learning process, you will help them develop the study skills necessary for success. This is particularly important for beginning college students, but may be just as helpful as students progress to higher-level courses that require more complex skills.

7. **Understand your students’ prior learning**
   Knowing where your students are starting from can have a profound effect on how you present material in your course. Rather than making assumptions about prior learning, it is a good idea to find out first-hand. A few ways to assess prior learning: give an ungraded pre-test; have students complete a survey; ask students to write a paragraph or more about their prior experiences with the subject and their expectations for this course; ask them about their learning styles in this subject area.

8. **Provide opportunities for early success**
   Resist the temptation to “weed out” less capable students by giving a killer first assignment. Instead, help students develop a positive sense of their own capabilities by giving a first assignment appropriate to the expected level of prior learning, by providing extra guidance on the first assignment, and by giving prompt feedback geared toward improvement. Consider allowing students to revise their first assignment (or retake a first exam) to improve their performance.

9. **Communicate your interest in students’ learning**
   Students believe their teachers care about whether they learn when teachers are available and approachable for assistance outside of class, when they take time to address student questions, when they ask students how things are going, and when they convey a belief in their students’ capabilities.

10. **Model the kinds of thinking you want to promote**
    From the very first day, your “thinking out loud” and asking questions send a message about what kinds of thinking you value. For example, if you want students to ask higher-level questions, ask such questions of them during class; reveal (and cite) the research you have done in preparing lectures; demonstrate problem-solving or application of theory; show how you evaluate evidence to arrive at a conclusion.

**References**

Nilson, Linda B., Teaching at Its Best (1998, Anker).
Chapter 7: Your First Day of Class
Chapter 11: Motivating Your Students

Chapter 3: The First Day of Class
Chapters 4-7: Responding to a Diverse Student Body