

Teaching First-Generation Students



We are thrilled you are an Ichabod! Welcome to Washburn! We look forward to what you will bring to the classroom and to Washburn!

5 Tips for helping first-generation students to get the most out of your classroom.



Spend time planning

- Think of college “readiness” not as something that students have when they arrive, but rather as something that is developed over time while they are in college. Take an active role in contributing to this readiness through your pedagogy and interactions with students, and normalize this process with your students.
- Learn about the social identities of our students (race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, indigeneity, language use, nationality, age, etc.) and what they bring into your classroom when they walk through the door. Consider how you will build a community of learners in your classroom; how will you create an atmosphere that supports all of your students?
- Educate yourself about “codeswitching” and “code meshing”, which refer to the process of alternating between, or integrating together, two or more variations of language. Consider the role it has in your students’ lives and how it may impact their classroom experiences.



Manage expectations

- Discuss overall class norms and expectations at the beginning of each course. Don’t assume that students received this in prior courses, or that the expectations/norms for their prior courses are the same as for your course.
- Communicate explicitly to students what you are expecting them to demonstrate / document for each activity or assignment, why you are asking them to do it (e.g., connect to course objectives), and how you will evaluate their work. Rubrics can be helpful for communicating transparency for grading of assignments.
- Communicate often with timely reminders of resources (e.g. tutoring and counseling) and deadlines important for their success. Consider setting “Intelligent Agents” in D2L to automatically email students at various points throughout the semester and even before it begins.

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Model how to study and engage with content

- Discuss with students how they should study a particular concept, as well as how to study for specific tests/other activities.
- Discuss time management. Not all students will have had experience during high school with daily homework or consistent out-of-class expectations regarding their time.
- Provide suggested benchmarks for assignments that are to be worked on over a longer period of time (e.g., it is suggested that you find two initial articles by _____, it is suggested that you have a draft of your introduction written by_____).
- Breakdown what it means to “discuss” concepts/content in your class, and set expectations for in-class and online discussions. One idea is to have a “meta-discussion” about a classroom discussion where you ask the students to analyze a recent in-class discussion and reflect on speaking time, turn-taking, and evolving perspectives.
(see <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-first-generation-college-students/#in> for more info)
- Help students feel confident in active class participation by communicating the importance of attending class, asking questions, and engaging in discussions, including different methods of engagement that may best fit their comfort levels.



Break down Barriers

- Create short videos and/or “quick guide” documents/PowerPoints for really important aspects of your course (using technology for particular things, norms/expectations, review of key concepts from prior pre-requisite courses, etc.), and place them on D2L so students can easily access and revisit them as often as is needed.



Help students learn the culture of the institution

- Provide access to language and tools for success, and then encourage their use in a meaningful way.
- Provide insight into the hidden curriculum of higher education by deciphering institutional jargon. Hidden curriculum includes both formal and informal social rules of a university campus. First-generation scholars may arrive with limited knowledge of the college experience other than what they see in pop culture. Be ready to answer questions about established rules of academia you may take for granted, such as: What is a credit hour? How do I read a syllabus? What should I call my professor? What are office hours?
- Educate students on the meaning of “office hours”. Explain how they can be used and why they can be beneficial. An idea to consider is requiring or offering extra credit for student participation in office hours to increase their comfort with using them, and to help to build relationships with your students.
- Help students utilize D2L (e.g. “reading” grading rubrics, finding feedback on assignments, etc.) and other campus resources (e.g. the library, writing center, etc.) to their fullest.

- Find a balance between lecturing about a lot of specific details that require students to take copious notes (which they may not know how to do effectively) and presenting “big ideas” regarding the content.
- Present big ideas and ask students to make connections between these big ideas and their lives to promote critical thinking. Of course, some details are very important, so find those that are most important and focus the details and note-taking on those things.