

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

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## The Phenomenon of Large Classes and Practical Suggestions for Teaching Them

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In these days of increased costs and competition institutions of higher education are very interested in extending limited resources. Offering more large classes is one way to do so; and classes with 100, 200, 300, or even larger numbers of students, are a common phenomenon in higher education. However, "large" does not preclude faculty from providing an effective teaching and learning environment.

The large class can be analyzed, good teaching can be modeled, and practical strategies can be identified. Since 1992 The University of Georgia has provided a forum where faculty can examine teaching and learning in large classes. What follows are some practical suggestions obtained from meetings of the Large Class Interest Group.

**Expect a climate of support** Instead of abandoning faculty to their own devices, institutions should take an active role in supporting effective teaching in large classes so that faculty can create exemplary learning environments. This climate should provide faculty with information about effective teaching practices; an adequate environment and infrastructure; and inspiration, recognition, and rewards for encouraging and documenting teaching excellence in large classes. Professional support staff and teaching assistants should be available to assist with tasks associated with conducting

large classes. Technical assistance and expertise should be free and readily available for using technology to produce instructional materials and to facilitate communication between faculty and students. There should be opportunities for collaboration, observation, and participation in mentoring relating to effective large class instruction; and methods should be developed to document and share promising new ideas and teaching approaches.

**Be organized and efficient** Large classes require more advance preparation and structure than small classes. Lapses in the flow of the class, while collecting thoughts or locating instructional materials, can result in a loss of student attention. Before the course begins, prepare or identify a variety of instructional aids, demonstrations, and activities to support each meeting of the class. Prepare a syllabus that includes outlines for each class meeting, all project and activity descriptions, and handouts for the entire course. Place course materials on a campus computer resource from which students can access and download materials as needed. Provide structure to the content, and use the structure to organize each lesson. Inform the students of that structure. Taking roll or distributing materials during class is not recommended for large class situations. Student materials or instructions needed for a specific class should be made available prior to class or located so that students may obtain them with as little disruption as possible.

**Connect with your students** It is important to appear approachable in large classes. Build rapport with your students, and recognize the individuality of each student. Move among them when talking. Increase student access to you by getting to class early to listen to their questions, comments, or complaints. Begin by inviting students to call out something they know or recall about a topic. Display the responses as an introduction to the day's activities. Address some of the anonymity students feel in large classes. Try to learn some names, and call on those you know by name. Learn something about as many students as possible. Have your students complete information cards about themselves--career goals, hometown, special skills or interests, expectations for the course, or previous experience with course content. Ask for a few volunteers each day to help with demonstrations and activities and through this process learn some student names. Employ seating charts, take pictures of small groups

of students in your classes, or make a videotape containing a brief auto-biographical sketch of each student.

**Provide a variety of experiences** It is appropriate to vary the type of instruction in large classes to encourage discussion, interaction, and involvement. Do not attempt to lecture the entire period. Actively involve students during at least a small part of every class meeting. Form groups of three or four to discuss a problem or work on a task for a few minutes. Have a question and answer period at the beginning or end of each class. Stop lecturing every fifteen minutes, and ask students to summarize major points with their neighbors. Present a question, and have students write their responses on an index card. Call on a few students to read what they have written. Collect all cards at the end of class to obtain information about the level of understanding of the total class.

**Encourage participation** Be aware that students are often reluctant to ask or respond to questions in large classes, and it is often very difficult to hear their comments in large lecture halls. Try to be accepting of all questions and responses from students, and paraphrase or repeat every question or response. Provide hand-held microphones if acoustics are poor. Invite students to write questions or comments on index cards and give them to you at the end of class. Increase the wait time after you ask a question. Encourage students to indicate in some way when the pace of the class is too fast or too slow.

**Obtain and use feedback** Students in large classes are often reluctant to communicate difficulties they are having with a course or the teaching strategies. Employ informal assessment techniques frequently to obtain student perceptions and suggestions. Use this information as a basis for making small changes in your teaching behavior before the course is completed. Inform your students if you make a change as a result of their suggestions. Hold weekly meetings with teaching assistants, or small groups of students, to discuss student reactions to your teaching and the course. Ask individual students after each class meeting how the course is progressing. Provide a suggestion box, or have an envelope attached to your office door where students may leave comments about you or the course.

**Use new technologies** Many large class facilities are equipped with the latest in instructional technology. It can provide an effective means to organize and present video, sound, text, and graphics to large numbers of students. Professors of large classes frequently use large screen video projection, computer displays, and other visualization techniques to present information, provide examples, and illustrate concepts for students. Some use instructional videos or computer simulations, both during and outside of class, to introduce or reinforce course content. Some professors also make available a variety of self-paced instructional materials that students may use outside the classroom. The successful use of instructional technology requires careful planning and attention to the preparation of materials. Thorough training and support should be provided to all faculty with large class assignments. As the professor of a large class you should also be concerned about the amount of time and effort you can spend responding to special requests from individual students. Traditional office hours may be inadequate, and you may want to employ electronic mail or class notes files as alternative ways to communicate or maintain contact with students in your large classes.

**Accept help** The tasks associated with teaching large classes are numerous. Common tasks for which assistance is needed include the location, preparation, production, and distribution of instructional materials; preparation of class rolls, lectures, and demonstrations; coordination of discussion sessions, study groups, or lab sections; construction of tests and project assignments; monitoring and administration of exams; calculation and reporting of grades; and maintenance of class records. Although no standards exist, many departments provide some type of support for faculty members assigned to teach large classes by providing a graduate assistant for every 50 or 100 students enrolled in a class or reducing the teaching load for faculty assigned to teach large classes. It is important to take advantage of any departmental or institutional support that may be available and to encourage your department or institution to provide you with support for your large classes.

With appropriate effort the large class can indeed be an effective teaching and learning environment.