

THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

TEACHING

Teaching Newsletter: How One University Seeks to Shore Up the Sophomore Year

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Welcome to Teaching, a weekly newsletter from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. This week, Dan will be your guide. First, Beckie describes an effort to improve the student experience for sophomores, then we point you to some recent research and let you know about a new teaching kit you can buy.

Sidestepping the Sophomore Slump

When freshmen arrive on Ohio State University's campus for move-in day, they're greeted by cheering students who cart their belongings up to their dorm rooms. But then, "you come back your sophomore year and it's like, 'Oh, hi, you're back, good luck,'" says Vicki Pitstick, an administrator there.

That contrast is part of a bigger problem, Pitstick says. Lots of colleges have "great" programs for first-year students, she says, like freshman seminars and living-learning communities. Sophomores, however, are often overlooked. Ohio State is working to change that: Pitstick runs the university's Second-Year Transformational Experience Program, known as STEP, which started as a pilot five years ago and seeks to improve the experience — and success — of these students.

The university had decided to require sophomores to live on campus, and was looking for a way to make that a distinctive experience. And they saw STEP as an opportunity to solve another problem, too: According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, 80 percent of Ohio State seniors said they had little or no faculty contact outside of the classroom.

So STEP, which is optional and not for credit, revolves around weekly meetings between faculty mentors and cohorts of 15 sophomores held in residence halls. In the spring, each student works with the professor to write a proposal for engaging in a high-impact practice, like an internship or undergraduate research. The proposals include a budget, and if they're approved, students can get up to \$2,000 to fund them.

The directive to do more for sophomores came from Ohio State's president at the time, E. Gordon Gee, who had pushed for them to live on campus, Pitstick says. Not every college will have such an impetus to build a comprehensive program. Still, Pitstick says, colleges can make smaller adjustments to better serve sophomores, like tailoring existing workshops to meet their needs.

By sophomore year, students have learned their way around campus geographically. But that doesn't mean they've found their way academically or emotionally. Many still struggle, Pitstick says, with choosing a major, building relationships, or finding a community. If colleges can find a way to let sophomores know they matter — without talking down to them — it can go a long way.

Pitstick's observations got us thinking about the curricular challenges of sophomore year, which can be a kind of no man's land between intro courses and upper-level work. Does your college's curriculum address the specific needs of sophomore year? Has your campus found a good way to engage sophomores? Have you? Share it with me at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com and it may appear in a future newsletter.

Get the Teaching Newsletter

Changing a Department

Helping one professor change how he or she teaches can be a puzzle. When the goal involves shifting how a large group of faculty members teach, the challenge can be formidable. Five years ago, the 62-member biology department at San Francisco State University tried an unusual strategy: a comprehensive professional-development effort

called Faculty Explorations in Scientific Teaching, or FEST. It included 100 hours of training, as well as workshops, a five-day institute, follow-up discussions and observations, and research on how it all worked.

"Scientists are trained to be fabulous researchers, and then the vast majority of them are drop-kicked into a college or university classroom and told to teach, with no training in how to teach effectively the science they know," Kimberly Tanner, a professor at SF State and principal investigator of a study of FEST that was funded by \$1.5 million from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, said in 2012.

The results have been significant, as described in "Collectively Improving Our Teaching," which appears in the latest issue of *CBE-Life Sciences Education*. Faculty participants reported that the effort had improved their relationships with colleagues and had a positive effect on their teaching; student feedback and a decibel analysis of audio recorded in classrooms confirmed that instructors used active-learning techniques in their courses. And strikingly, more than 60 percent of respondents said the program had no effect on their research — and nearly a third said their participation had “positively” or “strongly positively” affected their scholarship.

“Overall,” a team of nearly 70 authors wrote, “our results indicate that biology department-wide collaborative efforts to develop scientific teaching skills can indeed attract large numbers of faculty, spark widespread change in teaching practices, and improve departmental relations.” Have you and your colleagues ever undertaken a similar department-wide effort to improve teaching? How did it work? What lessons might apply to departments at other institutions? Email me at dan.berrett@chronicle.com and I may include your response in a future newsletter.

Bias and Online Teaching

Instructors in online courses were nearly twice as likely to respond to comments from white male students as those from any other race-gender combination, a new Stanford University study finds. A team of researchers sifted through several hundred actual student comments in massive open online courses to come up with a list of 32 generic comments. These comments were assigned names of students that suggested their

gender and race or nationality — white, black, Indian, or Chinese — and then randomly placed in the discussion boards of 124 MOOCs. The researchers found that instructors were far more likely to respond to questions if the name suggested the student was a white man than if it suggested any of the other race-gender combinations. To read more about the study, check out this story by *The Chronicle's* Emma Kerr.

Speaking of Bias...

Students' course evaluations can reflect a bias against female instructors. A new study appearing in *PS: Political Science & Politics* conducted a content analysis of the language students use in their evaluations and a quantitative analysis of their scoring. The findings? The language students use to describe their male faculty members is "significantly different" from that used for females. When a man and woman administered identical online courses, the man received higher ordinal scores — even when the questions weren't specific to the instructor.

On colleges' official evaluations, the study found, women were over three times more likely to be judged by their personality than men were, and twice as likely to be scored according to how entertaining they were. Men, in turn, were more than twice as likely to be referred to as "professor" rather than "teacher," which was seen as an indicator of students' differing levels of professional respect.

A New Tool for New Instructors

Walking into a college classroom to teach for the first time can be daunting. A sea of student faces, a syllabus to cover, a room to command. How can you prepare? *The Chronicle* has put together a Starter Kit of articles and essays to help. It offers lessons for those new to college teaching, whether you're a doctoral student with your first teaching-assistant gig or someone transitioning into an academic career. The 38-page booklet, which is for sale here, may also be a resource for department chairs to hand out to new faculty.

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us at dan.berrett@chronicle.com, beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com, or beckie.supiano@chronicle.com. If you have been forwarded this newsletter and would like to sign up to receive your own copy, you can do so [here](#).

— Dan and Beckie

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