

# TALK ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Almanac, University of Pennsylvania

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## Teaching First-Generation College Students

*Annette Lareau*

President Gutmann and a number of Penn faculty were the first in their families to attend college, and, currently, one in eight undergraduate students (12.5%) at Penn are first-generation (what we call at Penn FGLI) or First-Generation Low-Income. These first-generation students, even those with high grades, sometimes struggle to feel a sense of belonging at the University. In the last year, doctoral student Sherelle Ferguson and I have conducted 40 in-depth interviews with first-generation college students at two different universities. This ongoing research has led me to think about how I teach so that I can encourage the success of all students.

### *Seeing the Positive*

My research has illuminated how first-generation students have a set of valuable abilities that can be scarce in other college students: They are independent “self-starters” who have excellent life-management skills. They report feeling surprised by how “helpless” other college students can seem or how they can get flustered finding their way across town, having a budget, or doing their laundry. In class and throughout my interactions with students, I presume that all students have strengths and weaknesses. In class, I acknowledge the varying experiences of my students—some have held full-time jobs in the summer and some have not—as well as stress the positives that come from both volunteer work and employment. Furthermore, even if students (e.g., those from under-resourced schools) do not have the academic background of other students, I remember the other skills they do have. Yet, I also continue to hold high expectations that these students meet the established goals of the course. I couple these high expectations, however, with smiles and warmth that it is completely “do-able” for the students to make significant progress during the semester. I also provide scaffolding for their progress with a schedule of regular “check-ins” and milestones.

### *Clarify Expectations and the “Rules”*

College has formal as well as informal arenas of knowledge accumulation—particularly about how to “do” college—and FGLI students often don’t have access to relatives who can explain the nuances of college. For example, some do not know that it is reasonable to ask for an extension on a paper or a make-up exam if there is a very serious situation such as a parent having a serious surgery, hospitalization, or court date. I share this information with them via announcements or the syllabus so it is not just middle- and upper-class students who feel entitled to ask for needed accommodations.

Alongside those special situations, I clarify what tutors can do or when they might ask for help with a draft. It is valuable to explain very early in the semester (before the add/drop date) what concepts they should understand and what the signs are that they are registered for the correct or incorrect level of the course. I also communicate regularly about the support systems available to them and when they might take advantage of these supports.

In addition, I’ve seen that FGLI students have not been introduced to some academic terms such as “literature review,” “graduate school,” or “analytic memo.” In my assignments I provide brief but clear definitions of any terms as well as expectations such as length, how to prepare for the assignment, and elements of outstanding work. I also post sample “A” answers of a related assignment so students can see what I am looking for in their work. Every semester during office hours or via email, a student—often from an affluent background—asks me questions to find out additional details about an assignment. Even when I think my instructions are perfectly clear, sometimes students ask me things that I had not thought about. In previous years, this private exchange was the end of it. Now, however, I always post the question and the answer on Canvas to make available to all students the special pieces of advice we give to some students.

### *Creating a Welcoming Atmosphere*

Going to office hours can provoke sleepless nights for some FGLI students. Yet, if faculty require all students to go to office hours, FGLI students display much less angst, relieving their fears that they are “bothering” the professor. In my seminars I require all students to attend office hours for a 10-minute meeting in the first month of the semester. I’ve also done this in my large lecture classes. Usually the three teaching assistants and I can meet everyone in a course of 150 students by spending around two hours per week on this in the first four or five weeks of the semester (i.e., 10 students per week in 10-minute meetings). In these brief meetings, we discuss the students’ intellectual interests, assessment of the readings, extra-curricular activities, or career goals as well as other interesting classes or activities for students. These brief meetings can help students develop valuable skills for the future, such as how to talk comfortably with professors and other supervisors. It also helps me learn more of the students’ names, which is helpful for classroom dynamics.

At Penn, some FGLI students have families who struggle to pay bills; a number had food scarcities as children. The wealth of some students at Penn can be intimidating and FGLI students fear that they don’t belong. One student told me that a professor, as an aside, said, “students at Penn have not grown up in neighborhoods with gang activities and drive-by shootings.” My student tearfully told me that since she had grown up in just that sort of neighborhood this professor’s comment made her feel that she did not belong at Penn. Despite her extremely high grades, she perceived the professor’s comment as yet another indicator that she did not fit in. Since little comments in class can reverberate in unexpected ways, I try to be careful to acknowledge in class that students have a range of experiences and provide a variety of examples.

### *Closing Thoughts*

In his thoughtful essay, “How to Get the Most Out of College,” Frank Bruni stresses the importance of students forming ties with faculty (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/17/opinion/college-students.html>). But many first-generation college students are hesitant about reaching out to faculty, and they deeply appreciate it when faculty make the first move. There are no easy answers, but recognizing this difficulty is the first step. Not everyone has someone who can explain how college works. The more we can make explicit those subtle rules, norms and expectations that shape college life, the more likely it is that all of our students will be successful.

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### **Steps to Consider**

- Mandatory office hours
  - Explain all terms
  - Share samples of outstanding work
  - Provide study tips
  - Offer dos and don’ts for assignments
  - Invite small groups of students to lunch, meet for coffee or tea, or a walk around campus
  - “Take your Professor to Lunch” provides a free lunch for students and their faculty member at the University Club; professors can also “Host Your Class” through the program <https://www.nso.upenn.edu/take-your-professormentor-program-students>
  - Invite two FGLI students to your home for Thanksgiving
  - Offer to loan books to students who have tight budgets
  - Reach out to students who are struggling
  - Have high expectations with warmth and encouragement
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*This essay continues the series that began in the fall of 1994 as the joint creation of the College of Arts and Sciences, the Center for Teaching and Learning and the Lindback Society for Distinguished Teaching. See <https://almanac.upenn.edu/talk-about-teaching-and-learning-archive> for previous essays.*