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*As a reminder, you can find previous Toolbox emails on the website [here](#).*

## **How to Get Students to Office Hours**

**by Emily O. Gravett**

Instructors have various experiences with office hours. Some of us may find ourselves managing long lines—often, not so coincidentally, right before an exam or a major project is due—feeling rushed and struggling to give students tailored help. But others may not have any visitors at all. (Just yesterday, I sat in my office for two hours, with not a student in sight.) Indeed, much has been written (for example, in [AAUP's Academe](#)) about how underutilized office hours are.

Many instructors have experimented with supplementing or even replacing traditional, face-to-face office hours with other ways of connecting with students. My colleague Andreas Broscheid (CFI and Political Science) routinely uses [WebEx](#) (for which JMU has a site license) to hold off-site office hours, especially when a commute to Harrisonburg may be undesirable or even impossible (I'm thinking of winter weather delays and cancellations). Even long ago, some instructors were trying to use email instead ([Atamian & DeMerville, 1988](#)), though others preferred to “wean” students off of email and encourage them to hold important conversations in person, during office hours ([Jackson & Knopsky, 2015](#)). More recently, I read about one professor who holds “walking office hours” ([Rawle, 2017](#)) on top of her regular times, where she finds students tend to have more interesting and personal conversations.

If you do want to hold in-person office hours, and you do want students to come, though, what are some ways to make it happen? Recommendations abound; below are some suggestions (most of which are lightly adapted from [the Berkeley Center for Teaching & Learning](#)):

- **Make them known:** Make sure your office hours are showcased, first on your syllabus, but then perhaps also on the board, in your email signature, or in any reminders you may send students. If you give frequent quizzes in your classes, as I do, you can always include questions about office hours, to ensure students are not only reviewing the syllabus, but identifying important information too. The more you talk about office hours in your course, the more they will be on students' minds.
- **Require them as (part of) an assignment:** On my syllabus, for example, I list as the first item under “Requirements of the Course” that students must come “meet with me,” at least once within the first three weeks of the semester (at minimum), to help us get to know one another, break the ice for office hours, and lay a strong foundation for classroom community.
- **Hold office hours in alternative settings:** Some instructors, like the one above who meets with students while walking around campus, choose to hold office hours in more informal,

less academic settings, such as coffee shops, dining halls, libraries, dorms, or other commonly frequented student areas. Be sure these alternatives are regularly available, easily accessible, and announced in advance, as it's important for students to know when and where they can meet you.

- **Stagger office hour days/times to increase access:** Many of us schedule office hours at times that are most convenient to us (mine, for example, are one day a week, from 10am-12pm, right after a class and right before a departmental meeting). But what about students who stack their courses all on the same days of the week? They will miss out. I have read about some instructors who hold office hours in the early evening or who even survey their students for their schedules to determine the best days/times. And, we can always remind students that they may make appointments with us, if their schedules don't fit with our stated office hour days/times.
- **Tell students how to use office hours:** Do students understand the purpose of office hours? Have you articulated, for yourself, what the purpose is? Many students only think to come to office hours when there is a problem or right before a high-stakes assessment. But many instructors also view office hours as an opportunity to get to know each other better, share potential research opportunities, clarify confusions or misunderstandings, have meaningful discussions, and so forth. Lay out, clearly, ideas and expectations for this time together.
- **Teach students how to start a conversation in office hours:** Students may want to use office hours for purposes other than the last-minute exam review, but they simply may not know how. Many of us have trouble making small-talk or starting conversations with people we don't know well. Consider giving students ideas, examples, or even templates of ways they could initiate conversations during office hours—with you or any other instructor. This is a skill that will serve them well, beyond office hours and in-class exchanges.
- **Set a welcoming tone:** Students sometimes report that approaching instructors can be intimidating (which is funny, given the widespread prevalence of [imposter syndrome among academics](#)). Be sure you are conveying—for instance, through [the friendly tone of your syllabus](#) or your [immediacy behaviors](#) and [emotional expressions](#) in class—that you are approachable and that you care about your students, as people. Students may not seek you out during office hours, even when they may desperately need help, otherwise.

Best of luck at the start of your spring semester!

*About the author: Dr. Emily O. Gravett is an assistant director in the [Center for Faculty Innovation](#) and an assistant professor in the [Philosophy & Religion department](#). She can be reached at [graveteo@jmu.edu](mailto:graveteo@jmu.edu).*