

From: Teaching Toolbox - Center For Faculty Innovation <TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU> **On Behalf Of** Center for Faculty Innovation
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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Learning Students' Names

Learning Students' Names
by Emily O. Gravett

Welcome to a new school year! We first want to say a big thanks to everyone who filled out our Toolbox assessment survey at the end of last year. (And, of course, this isn't the only time you can offer us feedback. Feel free to email me directly or use [the anonymous form](#)—though we always appreciate a conversation with context!) We are diligently working to incorporate many of the general suggestions (e.g., making the Toolboxes shorter) as well as specific topics (e.g., co-teaching).

Every semester I teach, students remark on the “community” feel that gets created in my classroom. A lot of work goes into creating this classroom community; like anything related to teaching, there isn't one single magical thing that I do to achieve this desired effect. But one strategy that helps is that I [learn all of my students' names](#).

When an instructor makes the effort to try to get to know and use students' names, it can make students feel more valued. It can make the instructor seem like they care and can help to foster instructor-student relationships. It can positively affect student behavior in the class. It can make students feel more invested in the course and more comfortable seeking help when they need it. It can foster a sense of belonging. It can build classroom community. (See, for example, [Cooper et al. 2017](#).) This all makes sense to me. Personally, I much prefer being addressed by “Emily” or “Dr. Gravett” in my day-to-day life than “hey...you there, with the Nutella.”

My first step in learning students' names is to go into MyMadison and—after taking way too long to remind myself how this website works and which buttons to click—print out my class roster with the photos attached. (I suppose you could use the Canvas “People” tab for this purpose too.) I use the MyMadison printout to take attendance the first few days of every course, verbally checking that what's on the roster is correct. (My [beginning-of-the-semester questionnaire](#) asks for this basic info too.)

What has worked well for me beyond the first few days is to have students create simple paper [name tents](#). I use these tents to call on students by name and ultimately to memorize their names. The name tents also allow students to use each other's names during in-class discussion. The paper versions are cheap, low-tech, and easy to create in the moment, but I know of other instructors who have made more professional-looking name cards for their students too.

For me, simply having the name reminders right there on the name tents, and then using those names regularly in class, helps me to eventually learn them all. But, in addition to name tents, there are lots of other ways for trying to remember students' names (see tips [here](#) and [here](#)). And, of course, you can keep using the tents for the duration of the semester.

Of course, if we choose to take this name-learning project on, we should be [using the names that the students prefer](#) and pronouncing them properly (is it “Ahn-na” or “Ann-na”?). This can be [especially important for international students, children of immigrants, and/or English language learners](#), for

whom “a mispronounced name is often the first of many slights they experience in classrooms; they’re already unlikely to see educators who are like them, teachers who speak their language, or a curriculum that reflects their culture.” (See this Toolbox on [linguistic justice](#) for further info.)

Now, learning student names is easy to do when you’re me, teaching mostly small, upper-level electives. But it’s possible to learn students’ names in larger courses too. (Name tents, for example, work in this case too.) Mark Piper, my friend and colleague in the Department of Philosophy and Religion, actually takes attendance every day in his large GenEd courses. Mark has students form a line as they come into the classroom and, after checking in with him, where he crosses their names off his roster, they find their seats in the auditorium. He eventually gets to know all the names this way. He uses them to call on students! It made his 100-person class feel like a small seminar to me when I was sitting in (for my own enjoyment). (Of course, Mark also employs other techniques, such as dialoguing with students, to create this small-class feel.)

[Research from a large-enrollment biology course](#) even found that “instructors do not have to know student names in order for students to perceive that their names are known”—and reap the positive effects of name knowing. Put another way, learning and using even a small portion of the students’ names in your classroom can still make a difference and create a positive environment. So, even if you’re not able to memorize all of the names—at the beginning of the semester or ever—your attempts at doing so can still go a long way.

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To offer feedback about this Toolbox or any others, feel free to use [this anonymous Google form](#) or contact Emily Gravett (graveteo@jmu.edu). For additional information about the CFI’s Teaching Toolboxes, including PDFs of past emails, please visit [our webpage](#).

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