

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: Rethinking Office Hours

Rethinking Office Hours by Kayla Yurco

The middle of the semester is here, and it's...busy. There are midterms, there's (a lot of) grading, and there might be spring break plans to plan. It all makes for a good time to take stock of your students' progress, your own energy, and what you might want to reconsider, [reinvigorate](#), or [revise](#) for your teaching the rest of the term. And while it might be too late to significantly restructure your course, it's definitely not too late for some low-stakes, high-impact shifts to things you are probably already doing—like holding office hours.

Some recent headlines suggest that office hours are being [underutilized](#), despite their long-recognized [importance](#) as part of holistic student support. We've previously written about [how to get students to office hours](#), and those suggestions still apply, all semester long. This Toolbox introduces additional ideas for shifting *how* you hold office hours—and how you communicate their value to students—that can make a big difference, even in the final weeks of the semester.

Easiest is, of course, intentionally reminding students what to do with office hours. Some universities have long offered [guides to office hours](#) to help students understand what to expect and why they're useful; some are even [authored by students themselves](#). (Turns out there are tips and tricks [guides for faculty](#), too.) You probably talked about office hours during syllabus week, and you might regularly remind students to come; mid-semester is a great time to pause and more intentionally remind students ([and yourself!](#)) how to make the most of this dedicated time.

Recently, there have been calls for [rebranding office hours](#) to “visiting hours,” “help hours,” “student drop-in hours,” or simply “[student hours](#).” These terms not only help counter students' [negative assumptions with office hours](#), but also add clarity. They might nudge reluctant students, and they can encourage [first-generation students](#). (I am one, and I never went to office hours because, frankly, I didn't think they were for me.) These terms can be effective because they explain office hours like they are: they're meant for visiting; they're meant for students. If you like these terms, but already have “office hours” codified in your syllabus, you can still remind students in class, through Canvas announcements, and even by individual email invitations that office hours are meant for them, and for visiting. You could lean into a little humor and share Arizona State University's [satirical video](#) about

student concerns with office hours (as an undergraduate I definitely suffered from, as they say, “FMOOWMP”).

Another approach is to offer students more direction for how to use time in office hours. Some faculty create [meeting menus](#): easy options for students to choose reasons for visiting, perhaps even [with different locations](#). A menu could include choices for a “greet” (informal introductions and getting-to-know-you chats); a “meet” (questions about course material, future work, and other individualized learning journeys); or the opportunity to “work” (dedicated study or assignment time for coursework).

Homing in on that last dedicated workspace piece, some faculty supplement traditional office hours or replace them with [course centers](#). You can create a course center by reserving one- or two-hour blocks of time in an otherwise unoccupied classroom where students can come and go and work on course assignments individually or collectively as they choose. Less formal than a review session, the professor or TA is present to answer questions as they arise, but there isn’t pressure for students to prepare [big questions](#) ahead of time. Instead, they can ask questions more organically while also getting to know you and their peers. As an alternative to classrooms, consider other rooms or spaces available to you for more informal connections (e.g., the [BioCommons](#)).

If that’s not feasible, your office is still a fine place to meet! Some faculty note that it can be important to, ahem, keep a tidy space so students feel welcome and like they’re not interrupting their instructors’ workflow. Indeed, [space is important](#), and classrooms aren’t the only spaces on campus where teaching and learning happen, so making our offices inclusive, accessible, and inviting is key. (One faculty member tries to create a casual, welcoming setting by [offering coffee](#); another apparently rebranded the whole thing to “[cookie hours](#).”)

And, finally, virtual options remain critical. Some faculty have long offered virtual office hours for [online courses](#); the pandemic, of course, pushed most to new ways of teaching and mentoring students remotely. Even if the majority of your activities and courses have returned to in-person, there are compelling reasons [to keep virtual office hours](#), even if [alongside in-person options](#). Sure, virtual office hours can be more convenient for students, meaning more might show up; but they’re also more [accessible and inclusive](#) for students *and* faculty—benefiting folks with disabilities, those who live off campus, students with jobs, and others. Faculty continue to experiment with naming and purpose for these, too, offering virtual “[coffee connections](#)” options and more.

Indeed, however you name them and however you hold them, office hours can be a crucial part of an [equity-minded approach](#) to inclusive teaching, student support, and [care](#) in our community. How might you rethink yours for the remainder of this semester?

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