

Leveraging Your Office Hours to Foster Student Success

TAGSA Quick Guide



Are you sitting alone, in dead silence, in some randomly assigned departmental room, waiting for students to stop by your office hours? You might have wished you had brought that stack of grading or your own work to pass the time. If you are lucky, there might be another teaching assistant with you eagerly awaiting the arrival of the first student. Or maybe you are a teaching assistant who has not been given an opportunity to host office hours but would like to try hosting. Well, this quick guide is here to help! Here, you will find tips and tricks for developing and reframing office hours from "exam cram" and midterm viewing-only sessions to "student hours" filled with dialogue and community building.

What are office hours or student hours?

Office hours are scheduled times to meet with students outside of normal class time. While students are not typically required to attend office hours, these times tend to be designated spaces to ask questions, view assignments, and meet with course instructors/teaching assistants.

Students do not attend office hours for several reasons—they are at inconvenient times or locations, the instructor/teaching assistant is not approachable, and/or they are uncertain of the purpose of office hours. They can also be seen as a last resort in the learning process when students are feeling desperate (Smith et al., 2017).

Why should students attend student hours?

- Increases student-instructor contact—a key principle of effective practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987)
- Offers an opportunity to increase communication and build rapport between students and instructors (Barry, 2008)
- Attendance is positively related to course performance (Gurrero & Rod, 2013)

Organizing student hours

Advocating for student hours. To host student hours, you will need designated hours in your teaching assistantship allocated to this work. This may necessitate conversations with the course instructor, asking for specific time to be allocated to this purpose.

Where? Think carefully about the location of student hours. Should they be online, in-person, or hybrid? Consider surveying students about their preferences. If holding student hours in person, discuss with your departmental secretary if there is a designated room to host them. If not, consider booking a room that is accessible and convenient to students and that allows for both privacy, yet is also public to ensure your personal safety. Possible options might be your office, library, student centre, outside, etc.

When? Drop-in sessions? By appointment? After or before class? Ask students about their preferences! Having variability in time, day, and mode of delivery helps minimize conflicts and makes student hours more accessible. Institutionally supported appointment booking tools or free appointment booking tools can be used to schedule appointments with students.

Advertise and then advertise some more. Include student hours in the course syllabus, on the learning management system, and in your email signature. Ask the course instructor to post these hours at the start and end of class PowerPoint slides. Attend the first class and announce when your student hours are. This puts a face-to-a-name and gives you an opportunity to explain what student hours are (and are not) and pitch to students why they are worth attending.

References

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- Smith, M., Chen, Y., Berndtson, R., Burson, K., & Griffin, W. (2017). "Office hours are kind of weird": Reclaiming a resource to foster student-faculty interaction. *Insight: A Journal of Scholarly Teaching*, 12, 14–29.

Reframing student hours

Now that you have set up your student hours, consider how student hours can be reframed beyond simple Q&A sessions where the onus is on students to drive the conversation.

- Create "teaser topics" during labs/tutorials and direct students to student hours to learn more (Retrieval Practice, n.d.). Teasers can also be included in weekly announcements.
- Structure office hours as study (or work) sessions that include problem sets, activities, discussion questions, etc.
- Promote informal student hours as "coffee chats," "lunch-and-learns," or "walk and talks."
- If you are feeling adventurous, try converting student hours to "walk-and-talks," where you and a group of students walk around campus discussing course content, sharing personal stories, and getting to know one another.

Regardless of the structure of office hours, be mindful of your body language, approach to communicating, and remember, empathy goes a long way.

Offering students a guide to navigating student hours

Students (and teaching assistants) are often unsure of the purpose of student hours. Students might be nervous, shy, apprehensive, or unsure of what to ask or say. To help demystify student hours, consider giving students a script or guide of common questions to ask teaching assistants during student hours. Possible questions that students can ask range from course to research to personal questions. You might even consider asking some of these questions, too!

For example:

- Class discussion/reading clarification
- What are you majoring in?
- What are your research interests?
- What TV shows are you enjoying?
- Professional development opportunities or student services available on campus

While there are several benefits for students attending student hours, as teaching assistants, greater office hour attendance gives an opportunity to get to know students, and it can be easier to identify "bottlenecks" or trouble areas in the course/lab/tutorial. This information can be used to inform teaching practices, review activities, and/or in-class activities. Furthermore, student hours can provide a fruitful opportunity to humanize your teaching and build rapport with students, which may lead to greater in-class/lab/tutorial engagement.

Caring for yourself during student hours

Inevitably, you will interact with students who express a range of emotions, such as anger, sadness, and defensiveness. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, you have the right to:

- Ask a student to leave your student hours
- Request a third party be present during a student meeting
- Keep the door open
- Stop conversations and refer students to the course instructor

Voices from the field

"As a teaching assistant, I've found that a key practice in fostering effective office hours is humanizing myself. I do this by reminding students that just like them, I am also a student. I try to spend the first few minutes of my meetings with students getting to know them beyond the course they are taking with me. For example, I'll ask students where they are from, what type of hobbies and/or extracurriculars they are interested in, and I'll share similar information about myself. I find this helps to "break the ice" and lays the foundation for thoughtful, fruitful, and respectful conversations."

The quick guide series are concise topic introductions created by the Teaching Assistant and Graduate Student Advancement (TAGSA), a special interest group of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE). The purpose of this guide is to offer some strategies for organizing and hosting offer hours that are accessible, engaging, and are thus likely to encourage student attendance. We welcome your feedback and contributions to this guide. Contact TAGSA at tagsa@stlhe.ca and visit our website at stlhe.ca/tagsa-aaecscs. Last updated: April 2024.

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