

Teaching: Strategies to Success
AALS Workshop for Retention of Minority Law Teachers
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Each teacher will face unique challenges in the classroom, which if not properly addressed, can negatively impact the classroom atmosphere as well as the teaching experience. The same can be said for situations that routinely occur. Set forth below are scenarios that are likely to recur during your teaching career. There is no stock response to any of these situations. How a professor responds will be influenced by numerous variables including:

- Whether the situation occurs in a first- or second-year class
- The point in the semester at which the situation occurs
- The nature of the relationship the professor has established with a particular student or students generally
- The requirements for professionalism established by the professor
- The culture of the institution at which the professor teaches
- Whether a professor considers certain student behavior distracting, disrespectful or unprofessional. Something that is disturbing to you may not be to one of your colleagues and vice-versa.

In deciding how to address any potentially disruptive interaction that may occur in the classroom, also be mindful of the following:

- Don't take everything personally because it isn't. A student may interact with all of his or her professors in a similarly offensive manner.
- Not every student is your enemy. Most students want to see you succeed in the classroom because they want a positive classroom experience.
- Not every student challenge is a race-based challenge. A black female professor shared the following comment: "There may be a tendency to feel that a problem student is creating an uncomfortable situation because you're a person of color. This is not necessarily true."
- The same professor suggested exercising caution in one aspect of your interactions with students of color: "Do not treat students of color as a monolithic group who will share your views or those of other students of color."
- You will not be able to answer every question asked. Do not attempt to fake an answer. Respond to the question naturally and if need be admit that you haven't thought about the topic posed, but that you'll look into it.
- The student may not be aware that he or she is acting in a way that you find problematic. If the behavior continues, talk with the student privately.
- A bit of humor can go a long way to diffuse a potentially uncomfortable situation.

- Where time permits, consult with senior colleagues, including associate deans of academic and student affairs. They may be able to offer helpful advice.
- The negative impact of a situation on the classroom atmosphere can often be minimized by addressing the situation outside of class by talking with the student involved or sending an e-mail message.
- Reputation goes a long way (both good and bad). One way to deflect certain types of potentially negative classroom interactions (student challenges to your substantive knowledge) is to be well-prepared.
- Set aside an ample amount of time to observe well-respected faculty in the classroom. This can provide considerable insight into what, as well as, what not to do in the classroom. Observe colleagues with a range teaching styles.

Additional Teaching Tips

- Don't underestimate the amount of preparation time required to be proficient. Prepare detailed notes. If a colleague shares his or her teaching notes, customize them for your class. A colleague's notes are no substitute for your preparation. One of my senior colleagues suggests preparing your own notes even if you have a more experienced professor's notes. "Preparing your own notes requires you to work through the material." Develop questions and responses to questions students might ask. Review discussions of cases in casebooks other than the one you have adopted for class. Research and review cases related to the case that will be the subject of discussion. Also read the materials that students are reading such as hornbooks.
- As the professor, you will establish the learning goals for each class. However, learning is a shared responsibility. Both professors and students are crucial to creating a successful learning environment. Communicate to students that you want them to successfully learn the material and to develop their skills. One of the more effective means of communicating your interest in the students' learning is a high level of preparation combined with setting high yet reasonable expectations for students.
- Effective teaching requires an openness that is a precursor to communicating that you enjoy teaching.
- View the first year of law teaching as similar to the first year of law school. You will learn a great deal. Much of the learning comes from: seminars such as this; regular observation of senior colleagues; interaction with junior and senior colleagues; and, direct and indirect student feedback.
- Questions! Questions! Questions! Ask questions relating to teaching of colleagues and mentors.
- Take advantage of any teaching related seminars or training that may be offered in the college of your university.
- Tape your classes and as painful or uncomfortable as it might be, review the tapes.
- Become familiar with the different ways in which people learn. Take note that your teaching style may reflect your learning style which will not match the learning styles of all students in your class. Use teaching techniques that will

facilitate the different learning styles of students. For example, use powerpoint to facilitate the learning of visual learners. Read books and articles that offer insight into learning and teaching theory.

- Adopt the style of classroom dialogue (e.g., random, volunteers) that works best for you and your students. The approach you select will depend on various factors including: the subject matter; the size of your class; whether it's a required or elective course; and, the teaching materials adopted.

Consider how the professor should respond in each of the following scenarios:

Scenario 1 – The Late Arriving Student

Scenario A: During the first class meeting of the semester, the professor discusses his or her attendance policy which is also outlined in the syllabus. In addition to regular attendance, the professor emphasizes the importance of students arriving to class on time. The second class of the semester, a student arrives five minutes late.

Scenario B: Assume the facts of scenario A, except that the same student who happens to sit at the front of the class, arrives five minutes late the following class.

Scenario C: For the first quarter of the semester, students arrive to class in a timely fashion. Thereafter, however, the professor who has a fairly relaxed attendance policy observes that a noticeable number of students are habitually late.

Scenario 2 – The Excessively Absent Student

Scenario A: During the first class meeting of the semester, the professor discusses his or her attendance policy, which is also outlined in the syllabus. A student misses two of the first-four class meetings.

Scenario B: The professor communicates with the student who offers no explanation and promises to begin to attend class as required. The following week, the student misses another class.

Scenario 3 – The Interrupting Student

In a first-year class, a student repeatedly blurts out questions or answers without raising his or her hand or waiting to be acknowledged by the professor.

Scenario 4 – The Overly Inquisitive Student

In a first-year class, a student raises his or her hand to ask questions several times during each class. The questions typically fail to relate to the issues being addressed by the professor.

Scenario 5 – The Challenging Student

A student asks questions intended to discredit the professor (e.g., questions a professor's interpretation of a case) or asks questions intended to demonstrate how much the student knows due to the student having done outside reading.

Scenario 6 – The Unprepared Student

A professor calls on a student, but it quickly becomes apparent that the student has not read the assigned material.

Scenario 7 – The Lost/Just Doesn't Get it Student

A professor calls on a student who has read the assigned reading material but it becomes clear that the student has not been able to grasp the main points.

Scenario 8 – The Overly Talkative Student

Two students are talking to each other during class while either you or students that you've called on are talking.

Scenario 9 – The Student Who Disrespects Another Student

In the course of responding to a professor's questions, a male student gives a substantively fine response, but also makes a comment that is dismissive of women.

Scenario 10 – The Long E-Mail Message Student

A student frequently sends long e-mail messages in which he or she asks several detailed questions relating to substantive material.

Scenario 11 – The Student Who Refuses to Address You as Professor

In class and outside of class, a student addresses you by the title of Mr. or Ms. rather than professor.

Scenario 12 – The Blatantly Disrespectful Student

An African American male professor with less than five years of teaching had the following experience, which occurred spring 2008. Please consider whether you think the professor handled the situation properly. How would you have handled it?

The teacher was discussing an employment discrimination case in which a court awarded relief in favor of a group of black employees. While the professor was writing something on the board, a student mumbled, "Why in the **** are we discussing this thing."

The professor turned around to face the class and asked, “Who said that?” Several students pointed to a white male student. The professor asked the student what he had said. Initially, the student stated that he had said nothing. After being asked again, the student said no one was suppose to hear his comment. At which point the professor calmly said, “I heard it and your classmates heard it. This matter is important to discuss because it involves issues relevant to the subject matter that we’re discussing. If you feel that these materials are unimportant, you need not attend class.” The student did not respond and the teacher continued with his lecture.