

Teaching: Strategies to Success
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Below is a chronology of issues to consider when developing a strategy to succeed in law teaching. The list is followed by several scenarios for discussion.

Before the semester begins:

- negotiating the teaching package
- selecting a text
- seeking assistance from colleagues
- finding a mentor outside of your institution
- deciding what material to cover
- preparing a syllabus
- evaluating one's own experience as a student
- choosing a "motto"
- thinking and learning about teaching and learning

During the semester:

- preparing for class
- being comfortable in the classroom
- getting outside of your comfort zone
- choosing effective teaching techniques
- focusing on learning
- managing the classroom and setting standards of professionalism
- seeking feedback from students
- using technology in and outside of the classroom
- dealing with difficult students
- dealing with difficult colleagues and administrators
- handling controversial issues
- structuring the time period for the class
- giving feedback during the semester
- bringing the "outside world" into the classroom
- balancing teaching, service, and scholarship
- maintaining a personal life
- finding joy in the experience

At the end of the semester:

- choosing a method of assessment
- drafting the exam
- grading the exam or the paper
- reviewing student evaluations
- determining and acknowledging areas in need of improvement
- finding the energy and enthusiasm to go back into the classroom next semester

Scenario 1: The Helpful Colleague

You have been hired to teach first-year property, a 4-credit course at your institution. You are so excited about the idea of teaching that you draft an ambitious syllabus and map out a plan to be an effective, creative, thoughtful, and concerned teacher. After your first week, Professor A, chair of the tenure and promotion committee, drops by your office to chat. He has heard all about your plans for your property course. He warns you that despite what was said in the interview, no one cares about teaching at this institution; only scholarship determines tenure. Furthermore, he suggests that you revise the syllabus as students will harshly evaluate a professor who is perceived as being difficult.

What do you do?

Scenario 2: The Complaining Students

You have made it through seven weeks of the semester. You believe that all is well as you have received no feedback concerning your classroom performance. Unbeknownst to you, students have been complaining incessantly about your teaching style to other professors. They accuse you of covering material in class that is not part of the assigned reading, of failing to answer their questions, of canceling office hours, of “teaching to them like first graders,” and yet, of “going too fast and being too hard.” The complaining students even send a letter to the associate dean of faculty outlining their concerns. A sympathetic student brings a copy of the letter to you.

How do you respond?

Scenario 3: The Busy Colleagues

Professors B and C have been assigned to review your class for the semester. Because Professor B is in nationwide demand as a presenter on several legal topics and does not know whether she will have time to personally review your class, she tells you that she has instructed the AV department to tape one of your classes and that she will view the tape later in the semester to complete her evaluation of your teaching. She doesn't know when the AV department will have time to tape the class, so be prepared to have any class taped at any time.

What are your concerns? How do you respond?

Professor C is also in demand as a speaker. Because he is unable to schedule a visit in advance, he comes to your class unannounced. While you are lecturing on the Rule Against Perpetuities, he raises his hand and asks a question tangentially related to your class discussion, but clearly within his area of expertise.

What are your concerns? How do you respond?

Scenario 4: The Harsh Student Evaluations

The semester is over, the exams are graded, and the final grades are posted; you are ready to kick back and enjoy the summer break on an island in the Pacific. On your way out the door, you pick up your student evaluations, confident that you have done more than enough to receive a stellar evaluation. You have held office hours every day, you have given practice exams and returned them with detailed comments, you have gone to lunch with every study group in your class, you have used technology in the classroom and have communicated with students outside of the classroom on a 24-hour basis. You have shown enthusiasm for your subject matter and integrated current developments into the course. You have respected divergent points of view and evoked participation in classroom dialogue. You even created a “Jeopardy” game to help students learn The Rule in Shelley’s Case.

Alone in your dining room, you spread the evaluations on the table and begin to read them. You are shocked by the comments - about your lack of intelligence, about your laziness, about your inability to control the class, about your tone, language, and accent, about your boring lectures, about your minimal knowledge of the subject matter, and about your stylish wardrobe and sharp haircut. Your overall score for effectiveness is 3.5 out of 5; the chair of the tenure and promotion committee, Professor A, has told you that a 4.7 is the average score. He also tells you that contrary to popular belief, effective teaching is a critical consideration under the university’s tenure standards.

What do you do?