Notes from the Acting Assistant Director

When students struggle by Sabrina Kramer

A student comes into your office after the first exam and tries to justify to you (and her/himself) how the poor grade they got does not correlate with the hours they spent studying for the exam.

Or a student submits a final lab report that contains all the required information, all the right data and graphs -- but the writing is so poor that the score for the paper is very low.

Everyone has their own strategy for dealing with these types of situations. When I was a graduate teaching assistant (TA), for instance, I was determined to help every student, no matter how much of my time it took. I ended up tutoring a few of my students several hours every week, and before every exam, to help them pass the course.

Then, I became a course instructor. I looked at all the work I had to do to keep up my research, prepare for the course, and prepare materials for my TAs, and realized I had too much on my plate to tutor students individually. I felt frustrated that I couldn’t help students, and also by the students who came to me not seeking help, but to negotiate a better grade. They should have come to me earlier to do the former, because when a student comes to you asking you to give them a higher grade, it means you and they have left things too late.

I typically teach sophomore- or senior-level courses, so I feel that I shouldn’t have to teach my students how to study. I do, however, give them suggestions on best practices for studying for exams. But every time that I have checked to see if a student who needs help has downloaded my study guides, I have been disappointed by the paltry number of students who actually use the guides that I spent precious time preparing.

Having taught the same course several times, and having taught a wide variety of students, my perspective has again changed. Naturally, I still want students to learn, do well, and take ownership of their learning. But I also recognize that students don’t come into a course with the same skill-sets or self-awareness, and that their skills change continually.

It wasn’t until I started working at the Center for Teaching Excellence that I found out about the Learning Assistance Service. (http://www.counseling.umd.edu/LAS/html/welcome.html). Students who need help can go to the LAS of their own volition, or instructors can direct them to the service. But neither can use the service if they don’t know about it.

LAS can help students to learn study skills, and instructors can provide LAS with advance information on what sort of help to give the students who will be coming to see them, and by supplying LAS with helpful material such as copies of old exams or study sheets.

One of the biggest problems my students have is being unable to determine what information is an essential concept and what are details that are only presented to reinforce the concept. Working with LAS, I can help my students learn concepts that are specific to my course, and acquire skills that will help them in all of their courses -- without it taking all my free time.

CTE is hosting a workshop about helping struggling students on March 28. For details and to RSVP, please visit our website: http://cte.umd.edu/teaching/workshops/index.html