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“Weaning off of Email”: Encouraging Students to Use Office Hours over Email to Contact Professors

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“Email is dead for today’s student” a recent headline reads (Philipson 2014). Despite the increasing use of alternative social media, this hardly seems true. The 2011 ECAR National Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology (Dahlstrom et al. 2011) reports that 99% of all students use email and that it is their most common form of communication. This is not surprising, given that it is a less intimidating, fast form of communication that can provide the opportunity to carefully craft a message (Walther 2007).

PROBLEMS OF EMAIL USE

Many professors feel overwhelmed by the volume of their email and the perceived need for prompt response - even at night, on weekends, and holidays. One student email often expands into multiple email exchanges. Together, these expectations increase faculty workload and frustration, especially when many student questions could be answered more efficiently face-to-face. In fact, communicating via e-mail may not always be beneficial for students. Recent research has shown that subtle biases may work against women and minorities in email (Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh 2014) and some faculty and students may not know how to construct emails politely and effectively, which may risk unfavorable first impressions that can carry over into the classroom (Knupsky and Nagy-Bell 2011).

BENEFITS OF FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTIONS

Office hours are largely underused by students (Curtis et al. 2013), even though there are benefits to using them instead of email. Face-to-face interactions are a key part of the intimate experience of attending liberal arts schools. In fact,

they facilitate relationship-building, which personalizes the educational experience and provides a foundation for student-faculty collaborations in the future. Repeated face-to-face contact may encourage professors to take on active mentoring roles, positively impacting retention (*e.g.*, Walker and Taub 2001), especially for underrepresented students who benefit even more from this early engagement (Kinzie et al. 2008). Less tangible benefits include providing a space for students to practice articulating questions or goals, and being their own advocate. In other words, low-stakes meetings with faculty are opportunities to practice self-presentation, interpersonal skills, and to build self-efficacy. Making office-hour-appointments teaches students to plan ahead, delay gratification, and tolerate stress and uncertainty. It also helps students find other resources (fellow students, textbook, library, *etc.*) for smaller or more pressing questions. These are all skills students will need in the workplace (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

STRATEGIES FOR ENCOURAGING THE USE OF OFFICE HOURS

1. Make office hours part of an assignment.
2. Count office visits as part of class participation.
3. Give students the opportunity to earn back points on assignments by discussing them during office hours.
4. Meet with groups of students with similar questions.
5. Offer theme-based office hours (*e.g.*, identifying a major, participating in research, finding internships, applying to graduate school).
6. Hold office hours in informal settings (campus coffee shop, student center, outside).
7. Offer phone, video, online options during office hours.
8. Have clear policies limiting email to specific functions and times.
9. Consider department-wide email policies to protect untenured faculty.

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