



## Supporting First-year Students in their Educational Journey

### Speakers:

Marva Brewington, Tierney King, Dorian Rhea Debussy, Kristin Ziska Strange

### Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast. This episode is sponsored by the Teaching Professor Online Conference. Join us from the comfort of your own home and transform how you teach with nationally recognized teaching and learning presenters. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching.

### Kristin Ziska Strange 00:25

Do you remember your first year as a college student? Were you nervous, scared, excited, lonely, happy, sad. Maybe you felt all of these emotions, which is a lot for anyone to take on. Add to that figuring out your class schedule, where things are on campus, the new dialogue instructors use with words you've never heard before. So today, we're going to focus on how you can continue to support first year students in their educational journey. We'll talk about being purposeful in your course design, from study habits to evaluations, and then we'll talk about how an instructor created a discussion board lab for first-year students to help them engage in discussion and increase their confidence in their abilities. Lastly, we encourage you to ask your students: What's working well? What do we need to change? What do we need to improve upon? How can we continue to do better and meet what you need? These questions and tactics can help your first year students become more successful and confident. In our first program, How do I create a class that supports first year students?, Kristin Ziska Strange will go over the definition of a first-year student, how you can encourage different studying techniques, and how you can use evaluation as an informative process for both yourself as an instructor and your students. I do feel we need to take a moment and talk about what we mean when we say first-year student. Depending on the institution to which you are apart, a first-year student might look very very different. As a part of the Office of Digital Learning, our demographic is not the typical fresh out of high school student, but instead is a woman with a family in her 30s; however, in my work with a first-year seminar program at NAU, I have only ever had three students that were anything other than stepping straight from high school to college. As you can imagine, I needed to figure out how to help all types of first year students regardless of their age. What I actually mean when I say first year student is an individual that has truly never taken a college course before, or has very limited collegiate experience. And let's be honest, higher education classrooms have a very distinct culture, flow and language that is often hard to learn. If their last experiences were in high school, or even trade school,

they may be coming in with a very skewed view of education, learning and their own skill sets. I would probably even venture to include individuals that have been out of school for an extended period of time. I took my last ballet class over 30 years ago. I couldn't even begin to tell you what I need to do to be successful in a class now or what a class even looks like beyond leotards and standing on toes. Although it may feel like they look the same college classrooms have changed a lot and anyone who has been out of the game for a while, may be just as lost as I would be walking into that studio. Do you remember your first time walking into a college classroom? Are you a traditional student or non traditional? Was it an online or in person? Do you remember how you felt or what you were thinking? Most of my students admit that studying for them equates to throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping something sticks. It is fun in the moment, but no one has any idea what they are doing and it makes a big mess. Many of them believe that rereading a chapter is going to give them the knowledge of the concepts that they need to pass a test, or to understand the concepts enough to build on them. We know that just isn't enough. Exam wrappers and assignment wrappers ask students the questions around what they did for the exam or assignment. For the assignments, I ask them how much time they spent on different steps and what supports they used. Since my one course is writing-based, I asked them what online supports they use, such as Purdue, OWL or citation generators. On exams, I ask them how they studied what supports they sought, and how their study methods differed from the last exam or test. The final portion on both is to ask them to plan for the next time. These are made available to the students when the grades for the assignments or exam are released, and they are handed back or rereleased to the students when the next test or assignment is announced. So they can review and do their plan. Helping students figure out the whole learning process is incredibly important. Studying in my writing-based class looks nothing like studying and preparing for one of the challenges I give them in the design-based course. Students, especially those in their first year, need to understand that what learning looks like how it's accomplished and how the actions that lead to learn vary from discipline to discipline. I'd love to challenge you to think differently about your evaluations. First-year students are balls of anxiety. Can you blame them? This is a pretty scary endeavor - offer your first test early. I'm saying within the first two weeks, give them a taste of what a test will look like. If you are more paper-based, have them read a big paper within the first two weeks, then offer feedback early and often. Make it robust, spend some time helping them out. If you're giving multiple choice tests make large question polls and the feedback useful such as showing them where to go for more information, or guiding them to additional support. By doing this, you shift your assessments from a punitive exercise to a learning exercise. You can prevent cheating by randomizing questions and making those large question pools. One more story and I swear I will stop. I went to school believing I was going to be an English major. I had won a writing contest, I aced English AP exams two years in a row, and I wholly believed that English was my thing. My first paper in my English composition class was to analyze a short story I had read and analyzed several times before. I turned in my paper expecting the same outcome I always got - my big beautiful A. I got a big beautiful C, I was devastated. I was the English person who obviously could not English. So what did that make me? Many of your students are going through the same thing. I needed to learn how to write for college and what a collegiate level analysis actually meant. They need to learn what the expectations are and the level of rigor that this level of education means. That is why I give audio and video feedback. On their first paper, I will screenshare and record my voice going through their paper talking about the big areas where I see the most potential for change. I talk to them about next steps and how one grade is not the end of the world, anything to show them that this grade does not define them. They just need to learn how to learn and to

keep working. Even if you aren't teaching a writing-based course, I can't help but suggest sending what I call "love notes" every so often. Just a word of encouragement. Acknowledge that you see them working hard and that the hard work will eventually lead to success. There are some weeks it's hard to find that one thing to commend. They get just as exhausted as I do and the essays and discussion boards can slack off but find something let them know you see them.

**Marva Brewington 07:29**

I was able to draw the conclusion that the discussion board engagement that I saw in my classroom was a reflection of my students fears and uncertainty. So to address the fear that my first experience students have had with writing, I implemented what I call discussion board labs. And what helped me to discover the need to create these labs was the process that I use to conduct regular classroom assessments on a session-by-session basis. So this allowed me to kind of brainstorm and determine an innovative way to meet the needs of my students. My classroom assessment kind of looks something like this. It consists of three different processes. I have what's called a pre-class assessment, and this is where I explore and assess the challenges and then develop pedagogical methods based on the needs of my students. So for example, I go through student surveys, I listen and I communicate with my students regularly. And I have my students writing in the discussion, work demanding. And doing these things is what led me to the fact that I needed to find a way to eliminate this fear factor. So this was the first type of assessment. But the second one, I call it, the post-class assessment. So with this, after I implement the discussion board, I evaluate and assess any areas that need improving because my goal is to make it better. Now I look at basically what worked, what didn't work, and then what needs to be improved from there. And then lastly, there's a third type of assessment that I do and I call this my ongoing assessment. And this is kind of where I display instructional agility. I shift and I pivot regularly throughout the semester based on the progress or the lack of progress, and I make adjustments from there. So for example, once I discovered the huge amount of progress that my students were making, through the implementation of these discussion board labs, this led me to create another extension of these labs that I call success labs. So my discussion board labs are designed to help my students get acclimated to the first week of classes.

**Tierney King 07:29**

Discussion boards can be one of those assignments that students do mindlessly. They may not put as much enthusiasm into their discussion as you had hoped, which is why in this program, How can I use the discussion board to stimulate engagement and build confidence for first year students?, Marva Brewington will explain a three-process discussion board lab to help engagement and confidence in your first year students. With a pre-class, post-class, and ongoing assessment, Brewington explains how an innovative way of conducting discussion boards has helped address first-year student fears and uncertainty.

**Marva Brewington 10:01**

But when I extended this out, then the success lab would be picked up in successive weeks and carry out for the duration to help my students succeed week upon week. So, it was through this type of assessment process—a pre-class, post-class, and ongoing assessment—that I was able to brainstorm ways to address my students' hesitations and fears regarding writing. So, what does this look like? Let's discuss the implementation of my discussion board labs. So, basically, I feel this issue of fear and

hesitation with three, 30-minute live labs conducted on Zoom. And the purpose of each one was to provide my students with a walkthrough of how to read, review, and then create their responses to the discussion board questions. But my goal was to offer these labs during the first week that the course began so that I could help alleviate the fear before the assignment was actually due. This kind of allowed me to use the actual course prompts for that first week as examples. So then how do I structure the labs? As I mentioned, I do three 30-minute labs on Zoom. So lab number one on day one is where I teach students how to write a good response to the prompt. The goal is to help my students understand how to read the question and then develop a strategy to respond completely. So when I do this, I model for them how to identify key words in the question and how to incorporate these into their responses. So for lab two, day two, this lab shows my students how to apply knowledge from their readings. The goal is to teach my students how to reference sources. So I will note that while my course does not have specific citation expectations, such as APA or MLA, it's because their responsibility is to get acclimated to the university first, but they still must note the course content and mention this as they're writing their post information. So to give you an example, that instead of throwing content into the post without an indication of its origin, you know, such as saying something like, "A good interviewing technique is the STAR method." I remind the student how to do this appropriately by stating something similar such as, "Our ebook on career success mentions that the STAR method is a good technique to follow when preparing for the interview." So lab three, day three, this lab is the third and final one of a three part series. This is where I show my students how to write a good response to their classmates. The goal of this final lab is to aid them in developing substantive peer responses that further the conversation and connect to the content. During this lab, I model practical strategies on how to align a response to the discussion prompt, how to reference reading content, how to post follow-up questions, and how to offer suggestions or insights to other students. So another example would be instead of responding to a fellow classmate with, "Hi Mary, my name is John. Great job on your posts. I thought it was interesting." The response might be something more like this, "Hi, Mary, my name is John and I thought your posts was interesting. We both seem to share the same challenges regarding XYZ. If this is something that you struggle with regularly as I do, and our lesson this week matches how you can overcome this, you might want to try ABC the next time you're faced with this challenge." So as you notice, this response connects to the content by mentioning something that was learned in that week's lesson. It also furthers the conversation by offering a suggestion or giving advice. The last thing we're going to talk about are the questions you can start asking your students, yourself, and maybe even your campus to help foster more support structures for first-year students to succeed. In this program, Practical ways to support first-generation college students in the college classroom, Dorian Rhea Debussy encourages a campus-wide open forum to better meet student needs, and ask the questions that make students feel as if you are listening. So while many of us are really thinking about the ways that we can create more equitable learning experiences, a lot of our first gen college students lack visibility on campus. So in terms of what to do, and how to make a more equitable and inclusive learning environment, really one of the first things we have to do is really start talking about first gen college students and talk about the experiences that they have, and that we know they're having across educational institutions throughout the country, and really start seriously considering are we doing anything for for students in this demographic? Are we, and then the question being, are we doing enough? And then can we do it better? Can we improve upon it? So the challenge of basically considering what can we change whether that's us as an educator or some of us as administrators, that's going to be something that's really going to continue to

persist like that is a challenge that's going to actively be there. It's not going to go away. And the reality is that many of our campuses and I'm sure most of us know these these things quite well, but a lot of our a lot of our campuses facing increased demand from access to like mental health resources, tightening budget.

**Dorian Rhea Debussy 15:00**

At larger class sizes, I mean, these are things that the majority of institutions across the country are also facing. So at the same time, we have these realities of what our institutional landscape looks like. We also have the reality of more and more first gen students coming in, and those students also just thinking generationally, having different expectations of what the institution should be doing and could be doing. So in terms of that challenge, I mean, we have to as educators and administrators really consistently and actively consider what's working well, and what do we need to change? What do we need to improve upon? How can we continue to do better to meet what the students need, and one thing that I do in my position, and again, my primary role is sort of working with our LGBTQ students, but again, there's a ton of overlap with other diverse identities there, too. But one thing that I do every semester, or the start of every academic year, is I have a campus wide open forum. And I actively partner with a number of different student groups to encourage folks to come. And it's basically a situation for me to meet the new first year students and meet some of our continuing students, but also to listen, and for me to hear from them. What are the experiences you've had on campus? What are the challenges you're facing? What are the things that you need me and what you need my office, to do across campus to make things more equitable for you. So at the same time, realizing there are national trends that I do know are going to be things that might not be on the student's radar. But also recognizing that, you know, they have a lived experience, and they're going to know what challenges they're facing a lot better than anyone else will. And that's proven really, really helpful, not only in guiding my work, but also in shaping the way that we craft resources, present them to the campus. And it's really helped with building approachability and trust. I mean, I have a situation now where I really don't have to worry about a student not giving me the full story on what challenge they're facing, and what they want the institution to do about it. And I think there's a lot of work that goes into that you're not going to get that type of trust with just one open forum. But I think that's a great starting place to show that you really want to be receptive to what they need, and you're going to let that help with guiding the work that you're doing.

**Tierney King 17:23**

Whether you're driving to work, or you just need 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.