



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (NISOD), COLLEGE OF EDUCATION,
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN - WITH SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION AND THE SID W. RICHARDSON FOUNDATION

Dear Aggie: Letters to a Teacher

Each of my students begins the semester with a "letter to the teacher" assignment, and I begin each semester by reading the students' letters.

Next semester I plan to make an addition to the usual letter-writing assignment: I shall write the students a letter and require them to read it prior to writing their letter to me.

Write a letter to me, Aggie, your instructor, telling me who you are. Tell me of your strengths, weaknesses, fears, and goals. Discuss your worlds and how your roles in these worlds might affect your performance in this class. Speak of your mathematics background. Discuss how mathematics might play a role in your future.

Tell me what I can do to help you achieve your goals for this class.

Include a statement indicating that you have read and understood the Grading and Cheating Policy.

Before employing this letter-writing strategy to begin each class, I got to know my students more gradually via a seating chart; in-class discussions and questions; and tests, quizzes, and "questionbook" responses (responses are to questions that focus on major points in course content and topics or ideas with which students often have problems). Sometimes after a hard test, I've asked: How'd you do? What do you feel good about? What was your weakest area? What made the good area good and the weaker area weaker: what made the difference? What was the hardest part about taking the test? What could have made your grade better?

Sometimes I have used the words of others to inspire student responses. The following assignment is an example.

Write a short position paper or essay about the message one of these quotes has for you:

Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.

—Thomas Alva Edison

All things are difficult before they are easy.

—John Norley

I. Read the following letter (also the Grading and Cheating Policy statement).

Dear Student,

Teaching mathematics to people is my vocation. Both mathematics and my students are important to me. I work hard at teaching and expect my students to work hard at learning. I am a parent, a full-time teacher, a landlord, an author, a publisher, and an educational consultant.

My office phone number is (# inserted) and home number is (# inserted). (Please use these numbers if you wish to reach me or if you are stuck on the homework.)

It is your responsibility to learn the material. It is my responsibility to make the learning process as productive as possible. If you miss a class, check the course outline to determine what work you must do, read the material in the text, do the homework, and phone if you need help.

Tests are like job interviews scheduled months in advance: Treat them as such. Don't miss a test. If you must miss a test, be sure I know about it as soon as you do.

Being a student is not an easy job. It is work. Plan time to attend class, as well as time to work on the material outside of class. If I can be of help, call me or see me in my office or just after class.

Have a good semester.

II. Now, write a letter to me, Aggie, your instructor....

Meeting students through their initial letters and maintaining a one-to-one relationship through additional letters and personal contact really does work! Getting to know the students through letter-writing increases the speed with which



individuals become individuals and not just members of the "10 o'clock precalc class."

Agnes Azzolino, *Assistant Professor, Mathematics*

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Postcards for Student Success

Aware of the high correlation between class attendance and academic success, Vincennes University implemented a project designed to improve class attendance. The challenge was to develop a system for notifying students early when class absences began to undermine the likelihood of a passing grade. The criteria were that the system must be effective, immediate, inexpensive, and not labor intensive.

Using the automation capabilities of the mainframe computer, VU designed a "blue card" which students were asked to sign during the first day of class. The card verified a local address, and the student's signature allowed the release of academic information. Instructors would begin classes by discussing the importance of attendance and explaining that the "tear-off" portions of the blue cards would be used to notify students that the instructor was concerned about their absences.

When students began to miss class, the instructor would tear off the first part of a computer-generated ticket. A 10 keystroke input would generate two postcards, one to the student's local address and one to his permanent address; the cards would indicate concern over non-attendance. Further absences would generate a second, more strongly worded postcard. A third tear-off would generate a letter to the student that he/she had been dropped for non-attendance and had received a grade of W or WF. A copy of this letter would be sent to the Records Office for the permanent file.

Pilot Test and Results

The system was tested during fall semester 1989. All reading, English, and mathematics developmental courses, English composition, and two large occupational programs (Broadcasting and Law Enforcement) took part in the pilot study.

A total of 563 first-notification cards were sent, representing 605 classes. Just under 150 second-notifications were mailed, and 110 students were dropped from class for non-attendance. The Dean of Students (whose name appeared on the card) received numerous calls from parents, thanking him for the notification and asking how to contact the instructor. The president also received numerous positive calls and letters.

Academic advisors expressed their gratitude. The system periodically generated for them a list of their majors who had received attendance notification, frequently from courses outside the major field of study—the first time this information had been available.

Overall, a 2-3% reduction in D/F/WF grades was realized. The effect was most pronounced in basic developmental mathematics classes—a 17% decrease in D/F/WF grades and a 14% increase in A/B/C grades. The results were significant among classes scheduled at 8:00 a.m. or in the evening—a 4% increase in A/B/C grades. For the 8:00 a.m. and evening basic developmental math classes, there was a gain of 33% in the success rate and concurrent decrease of 33% in D/F/WF grades.

Program Cost

Approximately \$500 was spent on this project. Programming was a one-time internal staff effort; design and printing of the "blue card" and postcards totalled \$185; the remainder of the cost was postage.

Faculty, for the most part, welcomed the project. Word of the project spread fast on campus, and many asked when they could become part of the project. "Project Bluecard" has been fully implemented with the 6,000+ full- and part-time students on campus. Further research will be conducted to determine if retention and graduation rates appear to be affected, as well as changes in the proportion of students, especially freshmen, who find themselves in academic difficulty.

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November 15, 1991, Vol. XII, No. 28
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INNOVATION ABSTRACTS is a publication of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, EDB 348, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712, (512) 471-7545. Funding in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Sid W. Richardson Foundation. Issued weekly when classes are in session during fall and spring terms. ISSN 0189-106X.