

Empowerments for Student Learning

Exclusively for Adjuncts

Honoring active learning and supportive teaching environments in a changing paradigm of higher education

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First Day of Class (or not) Activity: The Interest Inventory

The interest inventory is a simple tool to help acquaint you with your students. Unlike the typical icebreaker, the interest inventory is a paper-based activity so students do not have to give answers aloud in front of class. It helps you get to know your students privately and allows you to ask different questions than you would during oral introductions.

The inventory is simply a list of questions about students' interests and backgrounds, but you decide which questions appear. The questions should always include students' names and majors (or whether or not they have decided on a major). It is helpful to ask students their reasons for taking this course at this point in time, and what they would like to learn or get out of the class. These types of questions help you discover what their expectations are. Some fun icebreaker questions are valuable too. "What is the best book you've ever read?" "What kind of music is playing on your iPod?"

While the icebreaker questions might seem frivolous, they are helpful in building the classroom community and in establishing a warm, welcoming environment. Keep in mind that although the interest inventory is private, you still want to use discretion with the questions. Don't ask anything very personal or embarrassing. In addition, the interest inventory also needs to include questions that will provide information about students' skills and preparedness. For example, you can have students solve some math problems or write a paragraph about a favorite book. This information will allow instructors to tailor lectures by addressing any general deficiencies.

A Sample Interest Inventory

Ask questions that will not only help you get to know the student, but that also help you understand each student's interest and background in the subject.

Get student background — name, major, year in school. Sample questions: How does this class fit into your major? What do you plan to do after graduation?

How do you learn best? What have teachers and professors done in the past that helped you to learn? How many hours do you study outside of class? Where and how do you study?

Background in content. Write content specific questions such as math problems to solve, or writing a paragraph about the subject matter.

The fun questions that help us to get acquainted. What is your very favorite meal? Which restaurant is your favorite? List one hobby. If you have a completely free Saturday afternoon, how would you like to spend it? If I gave you \$5,000 to spend on a trip, where would you go?

If You Dare

Also consider including “if you dare” questions in the interest inventory. These kinds of questions might require follow-up, so they are called “if you dare” questions because you need to be prepared for all kinds of answers and the work they might entail. However, these questions are intended to give you additional information that will help you maximize instructional efficacy.

For example, consider asking, “What did an instructor do last year that helped you learn?” Be prepared for mentions of instructors who provided exam review questions, or review sessions. You can also ask students what a teacher did that didn’t help them learn. The answers to these questions will also help you understand your students’ expectations of you.

Another valuable question is “What else do you want me to know about you?” Many times the answers will require that you take some kind of action. Some students might tell you that they have a learning disability, that they need to see written notes to understand material, or that they need extra time during exams. You will have to determine how to respond to the answers they provide, but it often is far more useful to have the information at the start of class so that you can work with each student appropriately.

Note: Be sure to bring enough copies of the interest inventory and even pencils for the first day. While the pencils may seem excessive for college-level teaching, it is important to ensure that everyone participates. You can use it as a teaching tool and tell students that you did extra work for them on the first day of class, but that the first day will be the only time you will provide them with basic tools, such as pencils, paper, or books. Let them know that you expect them to bring their materials from that point forward. Remember to state your expectations clearly; don’t assume that your students know them.

Adapted from *Faculty Focus*, July 20, 2015 by Jennifer Garrett and Mary Clement

With Best Regards,

Becky Pugh, QEP Winter Haven Campus Liaison, rpugh@polk.edu
863 298.6811, fax: 863. 298.6814

Dr. Lynda Wolverton, QEP Lakeland Campus Liaison, lwolverton@polk.edu 863.669.2885,
fax: 863.297.1034