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Dressing up Our Students

by Lucas McMillan, Assistant Professor of Political Science

TO BETTER PREPARE our students for life after graduation, Lander faculty members need to highly incentivize and encourage our students to dress in professional business attire at key points during their coursework and academic experiences. Specifically, we need to require our students to wear professional attire when they are (1) engaged in active learning exercises, such as simulations; (2) making a presentation before a class; (3) participating in mock interviews; and (4) making presentations at local conferences, such as the annual Student Academic Showcase.

This type of attire will provide our students better practice for the world and increase students' opportunities, whether in terms of jobs, graduate school acceptances and funding, or succeeding in professional networking. As some colleagues and I have discussed, mock interviews—for internship providers, employers, competitive scholarship selection committees, or graduate admissions committees—also require the right attire to set the proper tone with these external audiences when they meet a Lander applicant.

Wearing business professional attire will also lead to students earning better grades in Lander classes since most of us have oral presentation rubrics that include "attire" as a category that contributes to the student's overall grade. (My own rubrics contain language based upon teacher education standards.)

Faculty members also need to be more open to having conversations about what proper attire includes—from proper shoes to the length of a dress. These discussions are particularly needed by students who have grown up in a much more relaxed culture. Journalists, for example, have relaxed their standards of attire, especially on morning shows or "on assignment." Norms of attire in houses of worship have also relaxed, and

professional dress is less likely to be followed in many employment fields.

Despite this new casual norm, research in various disciplines demonstrates that persons are judged by their appearance and attire (Gillath et al. 2012; Heldman and Wade 2011; Howlett, et al. 2013; Rhode 2010). Thus, our students need to learn about and be exposed to proper attire and to be taught to recognize those situations when professional business attire is needed.

My own views on professional dress have evolved over the years. In my classes, I used to say that students should wear a nice shirt and pants for oral presentations. In the same vein, I used to encourage my students to "dress the part" for simulations of decision-making groups, but not really emphasize attire. However, I have come to the view that proper attire is a key part of professionalism. One of the biggest reasons is that my experience suggests that students *perform much better and take presentations and simulations more seriously* when they "dress up." Those students that do not dress appropriately for these experiences do not score as well on the rubric as it relates to attire, but—more importantly—they are also much less likely to (1) fully engage in role-playing; (2) present themselves as professionals in terms of posture and clarity of speech, and (3) reflect upon active-learning experiences in a serious manner.

Some of our students may not have access to professional business attire. Therefore, we should commit ourselves to making students aware of how to find these clothes and build upon the work of Lander's Career Services Office to try to provide some of these clothes.

We all recognize that successful people do not have to dress up. But, we also know it is best to make a favorable first impression even before the first words are exchanged.

We can do our students a big service by teaching more about proper attire as well as encouraging and incentivizing professional dress to increase their likelihood of being considered for more opportunities.

References

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The Trouble with Consistency in Instructional Practices and Policies

I'VE STARTED TO NOTICE a couple of consistencies in our instructional practice that concern me. First, there's the consistency in practices across courses, regardless of level. I mentioned in a previous post that I didn't think capstone and other upper division courses should have the same policies as first year courses. It seems to me that if we still have to hammer students about deadlines, use points to get them participating, and offer detailed descriptions of civil discourse, students have not learned some very important lessons in their earlier courses.

Yes, it could be the students' fault. I have had students who, given their actions in my courses, appear to be very slow learners. But is that a plausible assumption to make about all students? It seems more reasonable to question the methods we are using to teach students about what it means to be responsible learners and about how professionals are expected to act.

I think we need to design courses and learning experiences with the awareness that they should be part of a developmental trajectory. I'm not sure we've done a lot of thinking about the progression of a set of policies, say on attendance, deadlines, or class preparation. Where do you start, what changes do you make, and in what order? Does anyone know of literature on the topic that might be helpful? We can be consistent about having policies—they help us define the kind of classroom environment we hope to create—but I don't think that consistency should mean using the same set of policies across all course levels.

There's a second aspect of our instructional consistency that's also troubling me. We are doing too many things because that's the way everybody else does them. Yes, it would be very difficult for students if everything that happened in every course was different. For the sake of sanity (theirs and ours), some things do need to be the same. My concern is more about using the practice of others as the benchmark for what we do, and so we pepper our colleagues with questions. How many excused absences do you have in your course? How much does participation count? Do you let students drop the lowest quiz

score? What's your policy on extra credit? Do you take points off for spelling?

The question here isn't about whether the policies are right or good. Most of them are probably fine. I'm also not recommending that we avoid conversations with colleagues about what they do. We will make better decisions if we have discussed and considered a range of options. But I don't think that's why most of us inquire about each other's policies and practices. It's more a case of, "Tell me what you're doing so I can see if it's like what I'm doing (or considering doing), and if we're both doing it, then I can feel more comfortable about my policy."

I've been here before in the blog (you're getting to know all my ideas), but for sometime now I've been asking faculty how much participation counts (if they grade it). Almost across the board, the answer is the same—somewhere between 5 and 10 percent. When I ask, "How did you decide on that amount?" or "What's the rationale behind that amount?" there's usually a moment of silence, followed by something like, "Oh, I don't know. I think that's pretty much what everybody else does." Those with small tendencies toward paranoia then ask, "Why? Do you think that's wrong?"

I'd say the correctness of your participation percentage (policy on make-up exams, credit for homework, penalties for missed deadlines, the list could go on and on) is determined by the rationale behind the policy. What learning objectives is the policy being used to promote? How well is it accomplishing those objectives? (And here I'm asking for something in addition to your wise opinion.) We can select to use policies that others are using, but we need a better reason than feeling justified because we're in the company of others. Large companies of others have been known to make grievous mistakes. And this is the consistency that becomes "the hobgoblin of little minds" (thank you, Mr. Emerson).

Maryellen Weimer, PhD; *Teaching Professor Blog; The Trouble with Consistency in Instructional Practices and Policies*; December 11, 2013; [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/the-trouble-with-consistency-in-instructional-practices-and-policies/>]; January 31, 2014.

Nine Strategies to Spark Adult Students' Intrinsic Motivation

1. Encourage students to draw on past experiences and facilitate a dialogue of discussion with regular active participation.
2. Encourage students to share their own learning expectations and goals related to the course content
3. Provide announcements and emails with information about the resources available for struggling students (i.e., mentorships, coaching, or counseling services).
4. Provide real life applications through simulations, case studies, and role playing activities.
5. Provide visual aids or even field trips that enhance the students learning and application of learning outcomes.
6. Invite guest speakers that are experts in the field. Experts can peak students' interests and highlight relevance of the learning concepts being taught.
7. Talk with students about how the class assignments are relevant to future careers.
8. Teach students to reflect and take control over their own learning by using weekly reflections (anonymously, if you like) to solicit feedback about their own performance and where they need to improve.
9. Empower students by teaching them where to find materials and how to use resources in an online college platform that will help them in areas where improvement is needed.

Excerpt from: *Faculty Focus* article, January 13, 2014 by Ludmilla Battista and Verinda Ruble. [<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/nine-strategies-to-spark-adult-students-intrinsic-motivation/>]; January 31, 2014.