



**Teaching Scholars Institute:**

## **Connecting with Our Students**

**A collection of teaching strategies introduced  
by teaching scholars from:**

**Murray State University**

**University of Tennessee–Martin**

**Western Kentucky University**

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# Table of Contents

<b>Teaching Scholars: Connecting with Students</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>I. Instructor-specific Approaches to Connecting with Students</b> .....	<b>2</b>
Learn Students' Names and Make Eye Contact .....	2
Increase Student Interaction in the Classroom .....	2
Identify Student Interests.....	3
Use Icebreakers .....	3
Create Group Assignments.....	3
Bring in Real World Examples .....	4
Share Your Enthusiasm .....	4
Model the Learning Process .....	4
Be Accessible and Responsive to Students .....	5
Establish Boundaries .....	6
Use Technology to Foster Better Interaction between Faculty and Students.....	6
Increase the Students' Comfort Level with the Technology of Online Classes .....	7
Maximize Contact in an Online Environment.....	7
Give Feedback on Papers/Exams. Solicit Feedback from Students. ....	7
Engage Students by Recognizing Diverse Viewpoints .....	8
<b>II. Department or College-specific Approaches to Connecting with Students</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Offer Training for Advising .....	8
Provide Faculty/Guest Presentations.....	9
Host Faculty/Student Brown-Bag Lunches .....	9
Provide Publications/Communications .....	9
Pair Seniors with Graduate Students .....	9
Sponsor Professional Organizations and Research .....	9
Host Graduate Student Get-togethers.....	10
<b>III. University Initiatives for Connecting with Students</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Create Learning Communities through Residential Halls.....	10
Support Community-based Service Projects .....	10
Provide an Office of Undergraduate Research and Creativity to Facilitate Faculty/Student Interaction.....	11
Model Interaction with Colleagues .....	11
<b>IV. Concerns and Cautions</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Problems Fostering Interaction in an Online Class .....	11
Online (Virtual) Office Hours .....	12
Interaction with Students and Faculty outside the Classroom.....	12
Equal Opportunities for Students with Disabilities .....	12
<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>14</b>

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## Teaching Scholars: Connecting with Students

The Teaching Scholars Institute (TSI) consists of faculty members selected by Deans at Murray State University (MSU), Western Kentucky University (WKU), and University of Tennessee—Martin (UT Martin) for their innovative teaching approaches. The mission of the Teaching Scholars Institute is to foster communication among the universities and to develop a record of effective teaching strategies.

The Teaching Scholars Institute held its first meeting at Murray State University on February 27, 2004, to discuss Chickering's first principle of effective teaching: "Good practice encourages contact between students and faculty." The faculty first met in small groups based on their discipline to discuss how they encourage and establish contact with their students.

Discipline Groups included:

- Business
- Health
- Humanities
- Science/Agriculture
- Social Sciences/Education

After coming together to discuss each group's findings, the instructors divided into small groups based on special interest topics, such as civic engagement and upper division classes.

Topic Groups included:

- Civic Engagement
- General Education/Large Classes
- Special Issues (e.g., Legal Issues, Disability, etc.)
- Technology
- Upper Division Classes

The findings presented in this report highlight the success stories that the instructors shared during the day. The faculty members offered innovative approaches to connecting with students and involving students more significantly in their chosen discipline and in the broader area of lifelong learning.

The report is divided into four main sections:

- I. Instructor-specific approaches to connecting with students
- II. Department or college-specific approaches to connecting with students
- III. University initiatives for connecting with students
- IV. Concerns and cautions

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## I. Instructor-specific Approaches to Connecting with Students

Instructors in the Teaching Scholars Institute (TSI) discussed techniques for building relationships with their students. In addition to learning the students' names, many of the teaching scholars incorporate various activities into their courses to create an environment in which students feel comfortable asking questions or seeking additional help. The following examples demonstrate instructor-specific approaches to connecting with students.

### ***Learn Students' Names and Make Eye Contact***

Knowing the students' names increases the students' comfort level with the instructor. One instructor found that the students seem shocked when she said, "hi" to them by name when they crossed paths outside of class.

*"They seem to understand that they really do have value if I know their names, which results in them taking more responsibility for their work in my class."*

*—Jo-Ann Hammons, MSU*

For large classes, some instructors in the Health discipline group have used nametags early in the semester. When they lecture, they walk through the class and talk to students. They also make eye contact with the students.

Heather DeHart, WKU, mentioned that she teaches mainly large general education classes in biology, yet she does her best to learn names and know the students. DeHart stated, "This mainly happens before and after classes and through informal contacts at other times of the day."

### ***Increase Student Interaction in the Classroom***

Instructors in both the Health and Business discipline groups discussed how personal contact makes a significant difference in relationships. They stressed that when we, as instructors, create a welcoming classroom environment, we foster a learning community where students are free to ask questions and create a fellowship with other students. We want students to be willing to talk about what they do not understand and to ask questions, but before we can expect them to reveal their thoughts we must create a comfort level in the classroom that promotes their involvement and interaction.

Brenda Wilson, an instructor in the College of Business and Public Affairs at MSU, tells students that she appreciates questions asked during the class. She believes that open communication between the students and instructor is crucial in increasing their comfort level.

In the General Education/Large Classes group, Carol Eckert, UT Martin, stated that it is important for instructors to remember that the students are not responsible for the large class size. Her advice is to listen to students as individuals and let them know they matter.

Bob LeMaster, UT Martin, described how laboratories and design projects permit instructors to work very closely with students and provide them with much more personal interaction and explanation. LeMaster mentioned to the Science/Agriculture discipline group that he finds this type of interactive explanation to be more effective than the usual lecture environment.

While teaching large physics classes, Hamid Kobraei, MSU, provides problems for students to solve at the beginning of class. As students experience difficulty, he assists them and then solves the problems on the board for everyone.

Dwayne Driskill, MSU, teaches large classes and has found that he changes his teaching style somewhat to fit the personality of the classroom. “But more than anything else,” Driskill said, “I find if I ask a direct question of someone in the class, it keeps them all on their toes; it keeps the whole class attentive and involved.”

### ***Identify Student Interests***

An important step in connecting with students is identifying the students’ interests. Brenda Wilson, MSU, asks for students to write a short note about themselves at the beginning of the semester. She asks for information about the students’ hobbies, which she can then work into examples and demonstrations throughout the semester.

In Duane Bolin’s history survey courses at MSU, he provides an assignment on the first day in which students write a letter telling him about their lives. He uses the comments and topics from the letters to learn about the students and make a connection with them. In a large class, such an exercise can be especially helpful.

### ***Use Icebreakers***

Effective icebreakers can be helpful early in the semester, to break down barriers and get the students interacting among themselves. In large classes, students tend to cluster and get to know only the students nearby. However, icebreakers can help establish a welcome and friendly environment and make students feel more comfortable talking in class. Some sample icebreakers mentioned in the Health group include:

- **Pose a controversial issue.** One instructor separates the students according to their position on the subject and then asks them to defend the opposite point of view. This usually gets a spirited discussion started, and the students feel more comfortable expressing their opinions in the classroom thereafter.
- **“Objectification”.** Have students bring to class three objects that represent something about themselves. Ask students to introduce themselves to the class by showing the objects and explaining their significance.
- **Pair and interview.** Have students select a partner, interview each other, then introduce each other to the class using the information they learned. The interviewer must find three unique things about the person. This helps to establish a sense of community in the class. (Tracey Young, WKU)
- **Bag of objects.** Bring in a grab bag filled with a wide variety of objects or topics. Have the students speak on whatever they pull from the bag. Instructors have used everything from state quarters to topics such as fears and taxes. This helps the students understand that they can feel free to speak out during class discussions. (Tracey Young, WKU)

### ***Create Group Assignments***

Tom Noser, WKU, described that when he creates group assignments, he tries to de-mystify the projects for the students by clearly defining the objectives. He has noted more student success with group projects when he does so. One instructor in the Health group stated that she pre-assigns group

activities to reduce the chaos that can develop. Pre-assigning an activity also gives the students time to think about what they are to do and seems to be less threatening to them.

The instructors also consider how to establish the groups. For smaller classes, groups may be limited to no more than four members to make sure everyone participates. For larger classes, Kacy Harris, WKU, creates groups consisting of ten students. Both Harris and Jo-Ann Hammons, MSU, described that when they use groups in their classrooms, they try to spend some time with each group and relate personal experiences. They commented that the contact between students and instructor in this smaller setting helps the instructor to be seen as a real person to the students.

Harris has noticed that when students form their own groups, they tend to create groups with their friends. It may take time to separate these groups and create better interaction among the entire class. Some instructors create groups by having students count off from one to four and then breaking into groups by their number. For other projects, Hammons pre-assigns the groups to “equalize the strengths” of each group; she assigns students to groups according to their abilities and backgrounds.

Instructors in the General Education/Large Classes group also discussed the benefits of standing back and observing students interacting in group discussions; the instructor does not always have to get involved. The instructors concluded that by stepping aside, they are creating an environment where students should feel freer to share their own opinions.

### ***Bring in Real World Examples***

To aid in students’ comprehension and show relevance of the material being covered in class, instructors in the Business discipline group bring in outside materials, such as articles from journals in the field and examples from outside projects that the instructors are involved with. Getting out of the textbook occasionally and sharing examples from the real world show how the course material applies to the profession. The instructors may also talk about their outside projects to show students how to interpret and practice with real-world opportunities.

*“First and foremost, our students are people, too. They have things going on in their lives. We have to be sensitive to students’ personal issues. A favorite saying is that our students will not always remember what they’ve been taught, but they will remember how they’ve been treated.”*

*—Dwayne Driskill, MSU*

### ***Share Your Enthusiasm***

Both the Health and Business discipline groups commented that sharing appropriate personal information in addition to class content breaks down barriers. An instructor’s enthusiasm promotes student interest and their willingness to ask questions about a topic during class or office hours.

### ***Model the Learning Process***

Instructors can model a self-initiated learning process for their students, particularly in areas where technology changes frequently. Teaching scholars in both the Business discipline group and the General Education/Large Classes topic group commented that faculty could let students know they themselves are learning new information from the field and may even take classes. In doing so, they are demonstrating lifelong learning for their students. Instructors can also tell students that although

they do not have an answer to a particular question immediately, they will research the question and provide an answer at their next meeting.

Members of the General Education/Large Classes topic group examined their goal of teaching students how to think and enrich their lives. As instructors, they want to teach students how to take the next step in the learning process. Yvonne Petkus, WKU, noted that the learning process is accomplished in her classroom by starting students at the beginning level and building on this foundation throughout the course. The group noted that instructors may work hard especially at the beginning of the semester to make students feel comfortable with the subject.

The Business group agreed that instructors should point out there is a method to their madness. For example, when Kevin Hammond, UT Martin, has students give impromptu presentations, he reminds students that an employer may ask for a report during a meeting without prior notification. Also, essay questions help students prepare for the written communication they are likely to encounter in the workplace.

### ***Be Accessible and Responsive to Students***

Jo-Ann Hammons, MSU, and Tracey Young, WKU, addressed the need for instructors to be available to students outside of class if we are to expect students to come to us for help when they encounter problems. Bob LeMaster, UT Martin, also discussed approachability in the Science/Agriculture discipline group. He stated, “Students have to feel a faculty member is approachable. If they are comfortable with coming to see you outside of class and asking a question, that is a success.”

*“A faculty member’s approachability is related to his competence as a teacher. A competent teacher who projects a good attitude will attract students. If you show you are enjoying what you’re doing, they will approach you.”*

*—Hamid Kobraei, MSU*

Tom Noser, WKU, prefers to have informal conversations in the hallway with a student. He believes that the informal contact increases the student’s comfort level, and he uses the time away from other students to address concerns that he has with the student’s performance. Noser also recommends arriving early to class and staying longer. He observed that being more accessible before and after class led to the students being more responsive.

During the Science/Agriculture discipline group discussion, Dwayne Driskill, MSU, mentioned his similar approach for connecting with students in his large classes. He arrives early and stays a few minutes after class in order to make himself more available to his students. During their interactions, he finds out what is happening in their lives. Driskill believes that these informal conversations help him to learn about his students much faster than he would otherwise.

Hammons, MSU, encourages instructors to publicize the times of availability and to make sure we are, in fact, available at those times. She stated that if we see students having problems, we should invite them to our office. If those students do not accept the invitation, we should find out why they will not come and try to resolve the issue with them. Duane Bolin, MSU, noted that when students do come to our office, we should give them our undivided attention. Aaron Hughey, WKU, stated that if he is called to a meeting during his posted office hours, he puts a message on his door stating when he will return.

*“I thought about the interactions that took place between my professor and me during my undergraduate years. We were often invited for dinner or cookouts, and that made me feel a different kind of connectedness with my professors. I knew my professor as a person, and that gave me a different perspective. It really broke the barriers. Sometimes I would feel intimidated about going to my professor; I would feel I was too dumb. But knowing that my professor was a real person made a difference. I’m certainly not advocating for all professors to have barbecues, but when students can see us in a real world situation, it begins to break down barriers in terms of initiating contact.”*

*—Kathy Evans, UT Martin*

Tracey Young, WKU, stated that we should also be very careful that we advise students honestly. Sometimes it might be best if we gently encourage a student who is doing poorly to think about a change in major areas of study.

It is also important that we carefully read students’ comments in the course evaluations that they fill out. If they make no comments, it should be taken as a warning flag about something that is or is not happening in the classroom.

### ***Establish Boundaries***

Although many instructors noted the benefits of conducting informal conversations with students, several teaching scholars commented on the benefits and safeguards of setting boundaries and maintaining, at times, the more traditionally formal relationships. For example, Eric Pelren, UT Martin, stated that many faculty members have a “familiarity breeds contempt” attitude, while some others prefer to work informally, on a first-name basis. Pelren stated, “We need to think carefully about how we can best relate to our students. I try to find the right level that makes them comfortable around me.”

The General Education/Large Classes topic group discussed the need for boundaries between instructors and students. Yvonne Petkus, WKU, commented that instructors should be aware that different students require different boundaries. We should define the boundary between being a friend and being an authority. The group members agreed that students should look up to the teachers.

Duane Bolin, MSU, noted that it is important to think about where you meet with students. Other teaching scholars echoed his concerns and suggestions. The topic is addressed in greater detail in Part IV’s section, *Interaction with Students and Faculty outside the Classroom*.

### ***Use Technology to Foster Better Interaction between Faculty and Students***

Teaching scholars in the Technology topic group discussed how they use electronic tools to improve the communication between the instructor and the students outside the classroom. Brenda Wilson, MSU, prefers to use email to communicate with her students. She explained that because technology supports quick communication, students could receive the answers they need in a short amount of

time. If they are unable to resolve an issue or get a question answered, they may be unable to complete the assignment.

However, some forms of electronic communication can be distracting. Aaron Hughey, WKU, noted that he uses email and discussion boards rather than instant messaging to avoid interruption while concentrating on a task. Students may also expect an instructor to reply to an IM or an email immediately. So, it is important that instructors set boundaries with students and clearly spell out when we will be available to students for questions.

Kathy Evans, UT Martin, agreed with Hughey about the importance of setting boundaries with students, including in an online environment. She has set a standard of communication with her students. They know that she will respond to their emails within 24 hours between Monday and Thursday. However, she reserves the time between Friday and Monday to add content to the course materials and perform other course work. Her students respect the boundary and know exactly when she is available to respond to their questions.

### ***Increase the Students' Comfort Level with the Technology of Online Classes***

Kathy Evans, UT Martin, described how she uses the first week of class as a time for students to become familiar with the technology so that they will be comfortable with the tools that will be used in the online class. For example, she usually creates a “meet and greet” forum on the Discussion Board [a bulletin board within the Blackboard Course Management System] and gives them the opportunity to post pictures. Such an activity seems to help the students reach a good comfort level with the technology.

### ***Maximize Contact in an Online Environment***

Some instructors use the Virtual Classroom [real-time chat room within Blackboard] as a way to increase contact with online students. However, they have noticed that schedules make it difficult for the students to be online at the same time. Similar interactions can occur synchronously or asynchronously on the Discussion Board. Kathy Evans, UT Martin, noted that her students “talk” more on the Discussion Board than they would in the classroom.

The Technology topic group recognized that students might interact quite differently in a traditional class setting than in an online discussion. A student who is very quiet in the classroom may be very vocal in online discussions. Aaron Hughey, WKU, noted that instructors who have students in both environments have the opportunity to know them in a more complete way.

Evans described her weekly assignments that require students to make at least two postings on the Discussion Board per week for credit. They have to make at least one post of their own and reply to at least one posting from a classmate. She noticed that after making the minimum required posts the students get involved in discussions and actually post much more than required. This activity builds interaction among the members of the class.

### ***Give Feedback on Papers/Exams. Solicit Feedback from Students.***

Duane Bolin, MSU, has a feedback mechanism in place that he uses after the first exam of the semester. He asks each student to write their answers to a series of questions that include:

1. What was your response when you received your graded test?
2. How many hours per week did you spend studying the class material?
3. How many hours did you spend studying for this exam?
4. Based on your goals for this class, how many hours will you spend studying for the next exam?

5. What can you do (what changes can you make to your study habits) to achieve your goals?
6. What practical suggestions do you have for the professor so that he can help you meet your goals?

During the next class session, Bolin goes over the list of suggestions and discusses possible changes with the students. This early feedback can help the instructor tailor the course for the particular group of students, and it also shows the students that the instructor is interested in helping them succeed. Many of the teaching scholars noted that a little bit of encouragement goes a long way.

### ***Engage Students by Recognizing Diverse Viewpoints***

In the General Education/Large Classes group, Carol Eckert, UT Martin, Yvonne Petkus, WKU, and Duane Bolin, MSU, discussed how they use General Education courses to provide students with a well-rounded liberal arts education. Eckert teaches topics and techniques that will build the students' understanding over the semester. Petkus uses repetition; she brings up important points more than once. The teaching scholars in the group agreed that they should keep pointing out the big ideas, but let students form their own opinion in smaller areas. They teach students to support the answers they give, to help students develop critical thinking skills so they can come to an understanding on their own.

Students often fear not giving the “right” answers to faculty. To help students to break out of this mindset, teaching scholars in the General Education/Large Classes group described some non-threatening exercises they use to guide students in drawing out their own opinions and perceptions. In courses such as history, instructors can provide examples of how eyewitnesses often have different interpretations of the same event. Duane Bolin, MSU, uses the article “What happened on Lexington Green?”<sup>1</sup> to illustrate how students can analyze the same information sources differently. Students are not given a right or wrong answer; rather, they are drawn into the analytical process through the exercise.

The instructor's input can also be invaluable for increasing students' knowledge and understanding of gender and culture. Bolin conducts a “culture in a bag” exercise with students in his Teaching History course. Each student places three cultural items best defining him or her in a bag. Other students then analyze the objects and try to identify the owner. This exercise not only helps the instructor understand the students in class, but it also reveals the different cultures and backgrounds that comprise the class setting.

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## **II. Department or College-specific Approaches to Connecting with Students**

The teaching scholars were asked to consider approaches taken at the department level of their institutions to establish rapport and provide guidance to students. As the group members examined the current practices, they also identified possible activities that could further enhance the communication between students and their discipline's department or college.

### ***Offer Training for Advising***

The Business discipline group discussed how advising was addressed at the different institutions. All of the group members agreed that faculty and students must take advising seriously. Although

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett, Peter S. “What happened on Lexington Green? An inquiry into the Nature and Methods of History”. Menlo Park, CA. Addison-Wesley, 1970.

universities may manage student advising differently, the contact that students experience with their advisors can be significant to their success in a program. Kevin Hammond, UT Martin, stated that having assigned advisors establishes and encourages contact between the student and the department faculty member from the very beginning.

Many instructors in the group have learned advising skills by talking with other instructors. However, Hammond also mentioned that he met with Student Services staff to learn about the university's expectations. The group recommended this type of orientation or a formal advisor-training program as a way to inform new instructors of the university's advising methods and expectations.

### ***Provide Faculty/Guest Presentations***

Brenda Wilson and Duane Bolin, MSU, described events that encourage interaction between faculty and students within a discipline. Students are enrolled in Freshman Orientation classes based on their chosen disciplines. Many faculty of the discipline come to the Freshman Orientation classes to meet students and provide information about their program. This interaction builds a community within the department.

Bolin also mentioned how special presentations and events can engage students and teach them that learning is not restricted to the classroom. For example, a guest speaker or student presenter may participate in a poetry reading, or a department or student organization may offer an opportunity for students to give presentations in preparation for presenting at a conference.

### ***Host Faculty/Student Brown-Bag Lunches***

In the Social Sciences/Education discipline group, Kathy Evans, UT Martin, and Joy Navan, MSU, mentioned the possibility of hosting brown-bag luncheons to foster interaction between faculty and a group of students invited by the Dean or Chair.

### ***Provide Publications/Communications***

In the Business discipline group, the teaching scholars discussed methods of increasing communication and providing discipline-related news to their students. Brenda Wilson described the MSU Computer Science and Information Systems department website. This website is used by students and faculty to display job openings, guest speakers, and club meetings.

### ***Pair Seniors with Graduate Students***

An instructor in the Health group recommended finding opportunities to pair seniors with graduate students. Graduate students know faculty at a different level than undergraduates, so introducing seniors to the next degree level can help students make the transition to graduate school and become better acquainted with faculty. The graduate students can also help undergraduate students learn more about the demands of their discipline.

### ***Sponsor Professional Organizations and Research***

Members of the Health group spoke of how they encourage students to join pre-professional organizations. Professional and student organizations are an excellent point of contact between students and faculty, as well as good preparation for students' future careers.

Kacy Harris explained how the nursing program at WKU makes membership in a pre-professional organization mandatory for students. Harris noted that the social and professional interaction fosters relationships between students and faculty. Everyone participates in the pinning ceremony and is involved in a community service project, such as a blood drive.

*“This [community service project] provides a good opportunity for the students to see faculty in a different environment than the classroom. It also allows the students to form social relationships with each other.”*

*—Kacy Harris, WKU*

Each spring, UT Martin sponsors a Phi Delta Kappa [an education honorary society] in-service activity and strongly encourages students to participate. The PDK spring conference is an entry to the state and national organization yearly conferences, which include a student presentation forum. According to Kathy Evans, UT Martin, the students are often hesitant about presenting at a professional level, but they can succeed if they work closely with a professor.

### ***Host Graduate Student Get-togethers***

Aaron Hughey, WKU, invites graduate students and program faculty members in the department to his house for an end-of-semester celebration. These gatherings give students and faculty members a chance to talk in a social setting. The students now expect the get-together, and they look forward to it.

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## **III. University Initiatives for Connecting with Students**

At the institutional level, universities provide activities that provide students with educational experiences outside of the classroom. The teaching scholars discussed approaches taken at their institutions to enhance student learning and foster a stronger campus community.

### ***Create Learning Communities through Residential Halls***

Universities foster social contact between students living on-campus and faculty through various activities associated with residential housing. Learning Communities for some freshmen at WKU cluster students in Freshman Experience and some General Education courses by their residential hall assignment. Tom Noser, WKU, described how this clustering of students helps to broaden their perspectives, aids them in transitioning to college life, and offers shared social experiences and academic support. By forming an “extended family,” this approach improves interaction and increases comfort among the students. Aaron Hughey, WKU, described another school at which students on each floor shared the same major. A faculty advisor was assigned, and they held activities to become acquainted with each other.

### ***Support Community-based Service Projects***

Teaching scholars in the Health group discussed community-based service projects and concluded that service learning and community-based projects make subjects “real” to students. Particularly when students work in small groups, instructors can identify multiple projects for the various groups. As students work through the civic-based activity, they also come to see that learning is not limited to earning a degree; rather, they realize the value of personal contribution.

Tracey Young, WKU, has noticed that by using community-based service projects in conjunction with the American Democracy Project (ADP), the university is able to provide projects for student and faculty interaction outside the classroom. Everyone benefits from these projects, and the students get to know faculty in a different setting, which contributes to building long-lasting relationships. Students write reflective papers on what they have learned from these experiences and the interaction

that occurs. The university forms cohort groups consisting of approximately fifteen students per group, and the results have been positive.

### ***Provide an Office of Undergraduate Research and Creativity to Facilitate Faculty/Student Interaction***

Joy Navan, MSU, has noticed an increase in student contact at several campuses that have an undergraduate research and creativity office. She described how through such offices, faculty members mentor undergraduate researchers like they mentor graduate researchers.

Navan also described how building plans at MSU had incorporated small offices clustered near one another for student organizations. The offices are located near faculty offices, and the integration provides a space for students to work with faculty.

### ***Model Interaction with Colleagues***

Joy Navan, MSU, described the benefit of knowing when to direct students to other instructors or support services. When faculty members are involved in committees within the college and the university, they form relationships with other faculty and learn how others can serve as resources for students. Navan stated, “An important piece of being able to promote interaction with students is promoting collegiality. Each of us holds a piece of the puzzle.”

Several instructors noted how important it is for students to see faculty modeling certain kinds of behavior. Kathy Evans, UT Martin, described how the approach should be not only intra-disciplinary but also interdisciplinary. Evans stated that students benefit from seeing faculty from their discipline interacting with faculty from other disciplines. She suggested that a perhaps a Provost or Dean could encourage interaction among faculty members by sponsoring brown-bag lunches or breakfasts where faculty from different departments could meet and talk.

*“One of my colleagues is a great resource for children’s literature, and one of my students came to me and needed a book for a classroom game. I said, ‘Dr. A. will have a book on that topic.’ The student said, ‘Will she mind if I ask her?’ I said, ‘No, go down and see her.’ Of course, the student got the perfect book, and she was so happy to have it. After that experience, other students came for help. It’s good for them to see that we ask each other questions, to see us interacting.”*

*–Kathy Evans, UT Martin*

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## **IV. Concerns and Cautions**

The teaching scholars were asked to identify potential problems and address concerns raised concerning communicating with students. Many instructors stressed the importance of establishing appropriate boundaries. The instructors also discussed special issues, such as privacy, plagiarism, and equal opportunity.

### ***Problems Fostering Interaction in an Online Class***

Some instructors teaching in an online environment have faced challenges while trying to develop interaction or build a relationship with online students. Heather DeHart, WKU, commented that

especially with large class sizes, it can be difficult to find the time or the means to make one-on-one connections with online students.

DeHart noted that most of the questions she fields from her online students center around technology problems, rather than course content. The interruptions and problems with the technology prevent the instructor from devoting all of the class time to teaching the material. The limited hours of the university help desk, or perhaps the students' misunderstanding of where to go for help, create additional challenges for the instructor teaching in an online environment.

### ***Online (Virtual) Office Hours***

With the growth of online communication tools, such as instant messaging (IM), students have more avenues of contacting friends, peers, and instructors. Some instructors in the Technology group have found the use of IM to be an effective means of conducting "office visits" with students who are not on campus or who are in a different location. Instructors have found that they can hold virtual office hours even while they are physically out of the office by using IM tools or the virtual classroom (Blackboard's chat feature) and discussion board. The non-traditional approach to meeting with students may be more conducive for students' schedules, such as at night for students who work during the day.

Aaron Hughey, WKU, raised the issue that because most universities have office hour requirements for faculty, some faculty and administrators are addressing new questions, like whether the virtual office hours held off-campus count toward the university's office hour requirement. Hughey also noted that instructors should carefully word their statements in email replies to students. He stated, "If I am at home, I am very careful to say that I think this is correct, but it is subject to be checked for correctness once I return to the office."

### ***Interaction with Students and Faculty outside the Classroom***

The instructors in the Social Sciences/Education group made an observation that increased student contact may not be for everyone. Some faculty members may feel that increased contact is not appropriate for them. Kathy Evans, UT Martin, stated that boundaries should always be taken into consideration when meeting individually with students or when interacting with students outside the classroom. During the Science/Agriculture discipline discussion, Hamid Kobraei, MSU, addressed the concern that some students have serious issues. In such cases, Kobraei recommends referring students to the appropriate campus offices where there is expertise to address a student's personal needs.

Dwayne Driskill, MSU, mentioned that he chooses his words carefully when counseling a student. He stated, "It is very important that we think about the answers we give our students. Sometimes, they come seeking us thinking we have all the answers, not really understanding the way life is."

### ***Equal Opportunities for Students with Disabilities***

Universities are responsible for creating an equally effective educational opportunity for students with disabilities. Teaching scholars in the Special Issues group discussed their institutional and personal approach to creating accommodations. Tom Noser, WKU, includes a course statement addressing accessibility in his syllabus, and he discusses the statement with his class on the first day. He encourages students to talk with him and Student Disability Services if they think they may be covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

As Noser stated, "The idea is we'll do what we have to do to ensure an equal opportunity to learn. We can't guarantee equal outcomes, but equal opportunity, to make the playing field level. I try to make

them feel comfortable, to say we're receptive and do what we need to do. It sends a message to the others that this isn't special treatment. We're going to give them the same opportunity, not more. It sends a message that you're concerned with how students perform and that they have an opportunity to learn." Noser also encouraged the instructors to speak with the students in a private setting.

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## Summary

Throughout the first meeting of the Teaching Scholars Institute, the teaching scholars provided numerous ideas and examples supporting Chickering's first principle of effective teaching: "Good practice encourages contact between students and faculty." The participants described their methods of learning more about the students and meeting the students' needs through open and effective communication.

Through their efforts, the teaching scholars have noticed an increased response from their students. As the students' comfort levels increase with the instructors, the opportunity for learning expands beyond the subject being taught in the classroom.

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### **University of Tennessee at Martin**

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Kathy Evans, Educational Studies  
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Joan West, Director, Office of Research, Grants, and Contracts  
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### **Other Recognitions:**

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