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## Listen Up – This is the Most Meaningful Part of My Job

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## Listen Up – This is the Most Meaningful Part of My Job

**By Rick Brunson**  
UCF Forum columnist  
Thursday, December 4, 2014

It's final-exam week at UCF.

Students have returned to campus after the Thanksgiving break, bellies full of turkey and trimmings, heads full of anxiety as big tests loom and grades hang in the balance.

For faculty, there's a heady rush of knowing the semester is almost over and a much-needed break is just around the corner. There's also a sense of relief for some: Faculty are not required to hold office hours during finals week.

Ah, office hours. It can be a touchy subject. That designated time during the week when faculty are required to be available to students for advising – usually in their campus offices but sometimes online – is often viewed as a mixture of pleasure and bane.

There's that great scene in "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade," when Harrison Ford's iconic character – an archaeology professor who'd rather be in the field or the library – escapes out of his office window during his office hours to avoid his clamoring, cloying, malcontented students. Every faculty member can relate. At some point, we all wish we had such a window.

The university's Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning – the heart and hub of faculty assistance at UCF – carefully handles the topic on its website when advising newcomers to UCF's teaching ranks: "The University does not have a set policy for minimum number of office hours to hold, though instructors are required to post their office hours. Some colleges and departments do have individual requirements; check with your department chair for guidance."

The fact that we want to know the minimum number of hours we have to devote to this duty instead of the maximum suggests how much of a priority office hours are on our very crowded, ever-growing list of responsibilities.

Here's the thing: What I did not anticipate when I arrived at UCF as a new faculty member – later in life after a 20-year career as a practitioner in my field of journalism – was how gratifying and important the role of advising would play in my job. I am an instructor, which for me means 88 percent of my job is teaching and 12 percent involves service – to my department, college, university, profession and community. I arrived at UCF 11 years ago ready to teach, to stand and deliver knowledge, to spark imagination, to work side-by-side with students in the classroom or lab to achieve their goals and fulfill their dreams.

What I did not anticipate was the magic that would happen in my office during those six hours a week I was required by my department to be there for students. I did not anticipate the laughter, the tears, the connection I would make with young people half my age who show up and seem honestly grateful for just a few minutes of my time. I didn't anticipate the weekly conversations about "life stuff" – balancing school, jobs, relationships – that seem more important to them than talking about the grade they got on the last test. Most fulfilling have been the multiple "aha" moments when it all clicks and a student moves from declaring their major to becoming captivated by it.

Here's a recent example. A young woman from one of my classes, an introductory Principles of Journalism course, showed up to my office hours at 9:15 on a Friday morning. For a student, Friday morning is an ungodly hour to see a teacher. But here she was with something to tell me:

"Mr. Brunson, I'm an introspective person and I process things. This is what I have come to believe. Journalism is about curiosity – but everybody's curious. It's more than that. So what is it? Red Huber [an Orlando Sentinel photographer who was a recent guest speaker] turned the key for me in our class. This is all about public service. He uses his camera to tell other people's stories – people whose stories need to be told. He doesn't do this for himself. He does it for other people. It's about service. It's about something larger than yourself. I want to do that – whether it's with a camera or a computer. So I'm declaring my major for journalism."

I felt myself crumpling in my chair as she spoke, undone by the sincerity in her voice, despite my repeated warnings about how hard and heartbreaking the news business can be. Decades as a reporter and editor – and now as a college instructor – have installed a well-calibrated bs-detector in my brain. It was not going off. She wasn't there to negotiate for a few more points on an assignment or to request to take a test early because she ignored the syllabus and Mom got a great deal on plane tickets for the holiday break. She was there because she had an epiphany and wanted to share it with someone she hopes believes in her and can guide and equip her to make it a reality.

For me, it was an almost holy moment.

Sure, office hours can be a pain. And this time of year the student excuses swirl about my office door like so many autumn leaves piling up around a Vermont cabin.

But those six precious hours a week – when I'm not lecturing but listening – have become the most meaningful part of my job.

My journalistic hero, the guy I wanted to be when I grew up, is CBS News reporter Bob Schieffer. His advice to aspiring journalists is also great advice for those who teach those aspiring journalists – as well as those who teach in any discipline: “The most important thing a reporter needs to know is how to listen.”

*Rick Brunson is an associate instructor of journalism in UCF's Nicholson School of Communication and is a recipient of the national Society of Professional Journalists' David L. Eshelman Outstanding Campus Adviser Award. He can be reached at [richard.brunson@ucf.edu](mailto:richard.brunson@ucf.edu).*