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Linda Walters
University of Central Florida

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Secret of Success in Large Classrooms is 'Village' of Support Help

By Linda Walters

UCF Forum columnist

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People often cringe when they hear about high student-to-faculty ratios and the size of some undergraduate classes. While I agree that the University of Central Florida's number of faculty is desperately in need of a large infusion, I do not agree that large classes are the hallmark of an educational system lacking in quality and empathy.

Some courses really need to be small to have an impact, while other content-driven courses can be large and still provide students with all the materials they need for success.

Critical judgments against large classes likely begin with a mental image of a professor arriving late, fighting with outdated technology on which he or she never was trained, talking in a whispered monotone about material they don't know well – and of course, then the talking head disappears at the end of the class, not to be seen or heard from again until the next lecture. In reality, this scenario could happen in any size class.

The worst preconceived notion, however, is that professors of large classes do not care about their students or their learning. This is definitely not the case with the professors I know.

Here is how the Department of Biology runs its freshmen-level core courses with a "village" of trained individuals available to assist students to succeed. Our goals for the two-course freshmen majors sequence (Biology 1 and 2) are to:

- 1) make sure all students who successfully complete this course have a good understanding of the basics of the field;
- 2) introduce students to some of the many topics they need to be aware of as scientists – including information fluency, ethics and plagiarism; and

3) train students to start thinking like scientists.

How do we achieve this in a large class?

Goal 1 is initiated by the professor who presents material in lecture. All Biology faculty members who teach large sections have frequented the UCF Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning and have an arsenal of engagement methods for their classes – be they group activities, real-time response systems (e.g. clickers), or one-minute papers.

My current favorite is having students create YouTube-style videos on difficult course concepts, such as one group of students that used hand puppets to explain the steps involved in DNA replication, and another that solved genetics problems using a human foursquare board.

I don't think some people realize that many college students in large classes are not afraid to ask questions during lectures. In fact, in many classes there can be too many questions.

Students sitting toward the front of the room probably have no idea how many people are behind them. That is good. They are in their own learning world for the duration of each class.

After class, our professors assist students by holding office hours, answering hundreds of e-mail questions, and running test reviews.

But there is more.

We hire undergraduates who have done well in these classes to assist in lecture, hold additional office hours to help answer student questions (especially before exams), and provide group supplemental instruction and one-on-one tutoring through the Student Academic Resource Center.

And add to this Michele Yeargain, Biology's amazing freshmen-course coordinator, who focuses on tracking grades and on the students themselves. In large classes there are lots of student-disability concerns and make-up tests to schedule. Out of 860 students (two classes of 430), we anticipate between 10 and 60 students will miss each of our 6 exams!

The individuals mentioned so far primarily help students learn content. Our required weekly, two-hour laboratories are run by 2 graduate students. As these students

improve their communication skills, they lead labs designed to further reinforce course materials, proctor tests to better facilitate a small-class environment for this critical activity, and work toward completing Goals 2 and 3 (and creating the next generation of scientists).

In a perfect world (read that as funding with an unlimited budget), what would I change?

I would definitely make our labs smaller before tackling the size of lectures. Hundreds of studies document that small, inquiry-driven labs help students better understand the scientific process. I would also make sure the large classrooms are the nicest rooms on campus in terms of technology and physical appearance. And, of course, I would work toward decreasing our student-to-faculty ratio of 31:1.

So, at least in Biology, freshmen have a “village” each semester directly looking after their interests and well-being, as well as many more folks helping behind the scenes. This is very different than a single talking head that only exists during lecture.

Hats off to the professors and departments who make large classes work well.

The community needs to know faculty members treat these courses as an opportunity to positively impact the success of many students.

UCF Forum columnist Dr. Linda Walters is a biology professor at the University of Central Florida and director of the UCF Fellers House Field Research Station in Canaveral National Seashore. She can be reached at Linda.Walters@ucf.edu.