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The Art and Science of Preparing Today's Students for the Real World

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The Art and Science of Preparing Today's Students for the Real World

By Keith Harrison
UCF Forum columnist

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How we should challenge them to get ready for a competitive and sometimes harsh future.



(Photo by Igor Aleksander at iStock)

Things have changed in the classroom since I became a professor more than 25 years ago. I love teaching, mentoring, interacting and watching students grow — from undergraduate to graduate to doctoral levels. I love the game.

I do not assess today's changes as better or worse, just different. Society changes, generations evolve, and higher education looks like something else than it did a quarter of a century ago.

My goal has always been the same, with one question: How do I challenge today's student to be prepared for a competitive and sometimes harsh world that lays people off and even fires employees for underperforming and/or not having an indispensable skill set that an organization values enough to keep one on at the job?

Here is a list of some things that we do in the [sport business management](#) minor program to hold our students accountable and hopefully prepare them to thrive for excellence in their future careers.

Reading. Fifty percent of students in higher education do not purchase required books for class, which is alarming. Further, the average American citizen reads up to only one book a year after graduating from college. The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go. That is not taken from Dr. Seuss; however, it is the same message. Feeding your brain and applying the information that you read to life is key.



Columnist C. Keith Harrison when he was a youngster at a basketball camp with UCLA Coach John Wooden.

Show up on time, be present and ready to engage at a high level. We require that our students be on time at the start of class and after the break halfway through class. We do this so that our students build habits of being a professional. Personally, I learned this value not only in my home but at UCLA Coach John Wooden's basketball camp many years ago in La Jolla, California. Wooden stressed being on time at the camp and to be quick, but do not hurry.

Detach and maximize social media. Social media has allowed all of us to connect with so much content and other humans across the globe. However, social media has also become a major distraction to focusing, quietly studying, and critically thinking about various social, political, educational, etc. issues in society. We require that students keep their phones put up during class and the result is that more human interaction takes place in courses and that our students build more high-quality relationships with their peers, get to know one another, and even know each other's first and last names in class. Our classrooms should be a place for community building after all, right?

Parental boundaries and respecting authority. We often have to remind students that due to FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) that we can't speak with parents about their children's academic issues. Of course, there are exceptions to speaking with parents, but what we most enjoy is when parents visit our classrooms and observe the great learning environment that our students help us create. We also mentor our students that being autonomous and solving as many challenges that they can on their own will help them navigate the real workplace that awaits them soon after graduation. This is a much better approach than going over a faculty's rank and running to the dean's office with parents calling because of falling short with grades or not managing expectations while at the university.

In the final analysis we have many stories of students that grew by allowing themselves to embrace the mentoring and coaching that our team of full-time and adjunct faculty passionately displays. Empowering students over the years with non-cognitive attributes has helped many of them succeed and all of our students can embrace the "little things" that mean a lot. Body language, thank you notes to guest speakers that visit our classrooms, and dressing for success build habits that last a lifetime.

We in no way want to contribute to anxiety that students might have as we are empathetic about the realities of stress and mental health. Our goal is not to trigger but to enable our students to grow through accountability versus avoidance or entitlement. Go Knights!

Keith Harrison is a professor of business/hip-hop and sport in the UCF College of Business and the chief academic officer of the DeVos Sport Business Program. He can be reached at Carlton.Harrison@ucf.edu.