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In college, it's who you know

Instructors take pains to learn students' faces



Beverly Jaeger, a Northeastern University professor, will study the snapshots she took this week of her engineering design class, including student James King, each with their name written out, to help her create a more personal atmosphere. (David L. Ryan/Globe Staff)

By Peter Schworm

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All summer, Glenn Caffery studied the faces of strangers, searching for the quirky feature or expression that would sear their images in his brain. Slowly, he matched names to faces. Last week came the teacher's final exam: greeting more than 100 UMass Amherst students by name on the first day of class.

"I'd like to say I got about two-thirds right, but that might be flattering myself," said Caffery, a lecturer in the resource economics department. "It was probably closer to half. I had been looking at their pictures for so long, it was strange to meet them in person. It was kind of like meeting movie stars."

After a summer of scanning their classmates' online profiles and photos, college freshmen are often on a first-name basis by the end of orientation. Now many of their instructors, taking a page from Facebook and other social-networking sites, are racking their brains to put names to the sea of eager faces filing into their classrooms this fall.

Accessing student ID pictures from college databases, a growing number of instructors are poring over photo arrays of their classes in an effort to keep pace with their wired students. Some take snapshots themselves, preferring current pictures over dated freshman IDs.

The goal goes beyond simple politeness. Faculty hope the effort will make students feel comfortable, sparking a livelier exchange of ideas.

The approach also gives large lectures a personal touch that makes students feel less anonymous and more accountable to the class.

"If you feel a personal connection, you feel obligation," said Gregory Hall, a psychology professor at Bentley College who studies ID pictures on an internal college website of his students before classes begin. "It creates a sense of community in the classroom. They are the Facebook generation, so they aren't surprised by it at all."

Faculty members stand to benefit, as well. Many students applaud the effort in teacher evaluations, which carry some weight in promotion decisions. And a round of good reviews on ratemyprofessors.com doesn't hurt the cause, either, faculty members noted.

At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, several hundred faculty have embraced a new photo system that allows them to review class rosters before classes begin.

Last week, Caffery toured the classroom, greeting students by name. Some were caught off guard by the personal approach, but said they welcomed the attempt. At the end of class, many went out of their way to say goodbye.

"I can't help but think the names were part of the reason," he said. "I do believe they appreciate the effort. There's a lot of anxiety around the start of classes, and it's good to make that connection right away."

Most schools allow only faculty members to access photos of students. UMass Amherst faculty must take an online tutorial on the proper use and protection of student information before gaining access to the photo system.

Other teachers prefer a more traditional approach. Susan Freeman, who teaches first-year engineering students at Northeastern University, takes pictures of her students - and placards with their names - on the first day of class. While they start in on their first assignments, she studies flashcards of about 100 students.

"I carry them around with me," she said. "I look at them on the train."

Freeman said that quickly mastering students' names fosters camaraderie and creates the expectation that everyone will participate in class. She said some students later cite the effort in their evaluations, with some writing that she was one of the few professors who took the time.

Bernard J. Morzuch, a UMass Amherst professor of resource economics, studied the faces of his students this summer, often toggling between the photos and the evening's baseball scores. If he could summon their names after being immersed in box scores, he had them down. "That was the acid test," he said.

For years, Morzuch learned his students' names as the semester went along. This year, he already has most of them down.

Morzuch said he stunned some of the 350 students in his introductory statistics course last spring by calling on them. He called only on students whose names he knew, of course, but students didn't know that.

"You call two or three by their first name, they assume you've memorized the whole class," he said with a chuckle.

And the occasional cold call transforms the classroom dynamic, professors say. Students sit up straighter and may even forgo their habitual Web browsing in class if there's a chance they'll suddenly be called on by name and thrust into the spotlight.

"I want students to get over the mentality that there is safety in numbers," Morzuch said.

At Northeastern this week, Beverly Jaeger asked some 20 students in her freshman engineering design class to write their names on a folded piece of construction paper and display it on their desk.

It was the first class of the term, but she didn't want to waste time.

"It's pretty important for me to know who you are," she said. "I don't want you to be just an ID number."

She walked around the room, pausing to speak directly with individual students.

"After awhile, it will just be a bookmark," she said. "I'll know it's you, Kevin."

Later, as the song "Time of Our Lives" by Paul Van Dyk played over the speakers, she took photographs of all the students to study on her own.

Casey Davenport, a 17-year-old from Long Island, said he appreciated the personal touch, and said the class already felt unified. "In engineering, teamwork's a big thing," he said.

Still, in the Facebook era, most students assume every photo is bound for the Internet. "A student asked me if I was going to tag the photo" and post it on her Facebook site, Freeman said. "I said 'No, this is just for me.' "