

**The Role of Office Hours**  
wayne.smith@csun.edu  
[ updated: Wednesday, May 21, 2008 ]

---

“The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life.”  
---Plato (c. 427 B.C.-c. 347 B.C.)

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this document is to help students understand the value and importance of office hours.

**Affective Relationships:**

It can be difficult for a professor to memorize each student’s name. It can also be difficult for a professor to associate high quality work with an individual student, particularly early in the semester. Why does this matter to a student? We live in an emergent, that is, “difficult-to-deliberately-structure,” world. A student might request a “letter of recommendation” from a professor at some point (especially six to twelve months after the class is ended). It can be valuable for a student to have imprinted a quality relationship with a professor. Such intellectual residue, often the result of a quality conversation and rich dialogue, can be sparked and nurtured during just a single visit during office hours.

**Tacit Knowledge:**

Education is fundamentally about phenomena that we can explain (i.e., understand, or better, predict). Research is fundamentally about phenomena that we don’t really know enough about to explain (well). The former is often transmitted to the students via *explicit* knowledge (i.e., knowledge that can be articulated well). The latter is occasionally not transmitted to the students at all. Discussing issues during the office hours generally enables a larger fraction of the *tacit* knowledge (i.e., knowledge that cannot be articulated well) to be exchanged between the both the student and the professor.

**Individual and Open-ended Questions:**

During class, it can be difficult to answer questions that are deeply individual. Sometimes, it is the nature of the question that is inappropriate (or incomplete) and sometimes it is the nature of the answer that is appropriate (or incomplete). For some types of issues, office hours permit more time to structure good questions and absorb good answers. Office hours tend to be more relaxed and informal, for both the student and the faculty member. This helps especially with questions of an exploratory nature.

**Large-Lecture Hall:**

The role of office hours is even more important for students enrolled in courses taught in a large lecture hall. Due to the sheer number of students, the large lecture hall can seem impersonal, attenuate faculty-student interactivity, and worse, permit much less rich dialogue. The one-on-one nature of office hours can work to ameliorate such ills.

**International Students:**

Expectations and standards can vary considerably across geographies, cultures, and institutions. International and exchange students can benefit by introducing themselves to a professor and communicating directly on issues of mutual concern.

**Student Athletes:**

I try to attend at least one game for which a student athlete is participating. Please do let me know of your status and schedule.

**Students with Disabilities:**

Discussing issues related to disabilities, particularly medical disabilities, is probably better done in during office hours than during class (or “just before” or “just after” class).

**New Students:**

A new University, or even an unfamiliar College within a University, can be a formidable place. Greeting a professor informally is helpful, even if only to bounce a few ideas off of or to ask questions of a logistical or strategic nature.

**First-Generation Learners:**

Students that are the first in their family to attend a University are an important sub-group at CSU Northridge. In particular, crafting a support network can be essential to academic and professional success. It just makes sense to add a professor to that support network early in your studies.