Taking Law Students Seriously:
A Guide for New Law Teachers
by Kent D. Syverud

To start, let me advance three propositions about teaching law students.

First: Your students will know whether you like and respect them, and, if they know that you do not, you will fail as a teacher.

Many law professors, when they have had a few beers or a long day, will candidly admit that they don’t like most of their students: “Oh, a few students are wonderful, bright, interesting, and fun to talk to. But most are a pain. They are not bright enough, or they are interested only in a job, and then only in a job that I could not imagine doing myself. First-year students work too hard and buzz about me like flies, and sec-

If you convey in class, every day, your sincere liking for most of your students—if somehow you can make your attitude shine out as “I love being here with you; I can’t believe I am getting paid well to do this”—the students will pick that attitude up, will receive it well, and will reflect that attitude back toward you.

Second: If your students know that you like and respect them, they will forgive a great deal in the classroom.

This second proposition should be the great consolation for a new teacher. If you convey in class, every day, your sincere liking for most of your students—if somehow you can make your attitude shine out as “I love being here with you; I can’t believe I am getting paid well to do this”—the students will pick that attitude up, will receive it well, and will reflect that attitude back toward you. Many of them will therefore be receptive to what you are trying to teach, and forgiving of slips along the way to teaching it.

Third: If your students know that you like and respect them, they will come to you for as much advice and support as you have the time and energy to provide.

This third proposition captures the costs of conveying an attitude of respect toward your students in class. Students respond to the law professor who obviously likes them by seeking that professor out for an ever-expanding array of services: career counseling, letters of recommendation, examination advice, and counseling on every personal problem imaginable. You can easily end up spending all your time providing...
How do you get work done during office hours?

One day early in my teaching career a distinguished visiting professor plopped himself down with disgust in my office while observing "I didn't get a lick of work done today." I asked why. He answered that his office hours were mobbed: "The students wanted everything under the sun—questions about my lectures, about course selection, about clerkships, about lawyering, about life. I didn't get a word written on my article." My unspoken reply was this: "Gee, it sounds to me like you got more work done today than in your last three articles. I thought giving advice to our students about those things was our work, and indeed was among the most important work we do."

I have a colleague, a scholar with broad experience and an international reputation for his writing, who insists that the biggest impact he will make in this world is through the students he teaches. I agree. The startling truth is that, with the exception of a few dozen law professors, our ideas will improve the world more through our students than through our writing. And our students will never really grasp our ideas until we take them seriously.

◆

Out-of-class services to your students, and that is a recipe for disaster in your research and writing and ultimately your tenure.

So what do you do? In the rest of this essay, I address how to be the humane professor that students seek out, while at the same time preserving a decent fraction of time and sanity for your scholarship and for your family. I start with what to do in the classroom, because the impression you convey in class will largely govern the relations you have with your students outside of it.

Creating the Right Atmosphere in Class

First, a decent teacher knows the names and faces of all her students, and constantly lets the students know that by calling them by name inside and outside class. If you don’t believe me about this, ask yourself: Who is the one teacher in your entire life who made the biggest difference for you, who taught you so well that you still think about him or her as your best teacher? I bet that for almost all of us, that best teacher was someone who knew you by name. A classroom in which students feel they are anonymous is a classroom where students feel they can fade in and out without anyone’s knowing or caring.

So learn the names and faces of all your students. How? If you have a photographic memory, wonderful. But if, like me, you are terrible at names, then just work at it. At the beginning of every semester I paste my students’ pictures on 3-by-5 flash cards, and I drill myself on them until I have memorized them. It is a tedious few hours (or many hours if it is a large class), but it pays terrific returns throughout the rest of the semester, as well as the rest of law school and after.

Office Hours

How do you get work done during office hours?

One day early in my teaching career a distinguished visiting professor plopped himself down with disgust in my office while observing "I didn't get a lick of work done today." I asked why. He answered that his office hours were mobbed: “The students wanted everything under the sun—questions about my lectures, about course selection, about clerkships, about lawyering, about life. I didn’t get a word written on my article.” My unspoken reply was this: “Gee, it sounds to me like you got more work done today than in your last three articles. I thought giving advice to our students about those things was our work, and indeed was among the most important work we do.”

I have a colleague, a scholar with broad experience and an international reputation for his writing, who insists that the biggest impact he will make in this world is through the students he teaches. I agree. The startling truth is that, with the exception of a few dozen law professors, our ideas will improve the world more through our students than through our writing.

And our students will never really grasp our ideas until we take them seriously.