

features

Office hours:

By Martha Johnsen

The door is closed. You knock. No answer. After having climbed five flights of stairs to see your professor, he's not there.

Meanwhile, down the hall, a door stands open, invitingly. A professor dutifully leaves his research at the library and busies himself in his office, waiting. Available. But no one comes.

There is still another door. This one is cracked open and the sounds of two distinct voices emerge. Inside, professor and student intently discuss a test, a paper, the weather, their lives.

Every semester on the first day of class, the instructor inscribes his office hours in chalk on a fresh green board. Students busily scribble down the name, room-number and hours on the inside cover of a new spiral notebook. And for many students that's all there is to office hours—an unaccepted invitation.

Why the unaccepted invitation?

One student sums it up this way. "Some people really don't care—they just go to class and study as little as possible. Some people are intimidated. Some people are self-sufficient. Some people just don't have any questions.

"And some teachers you really don't care to see. Some teachers discourage it, if not outright, by their attitudes in class," she explains.

One common reason is a lack of free time. "I'm usually so busy," says one drama major. "But I think we're busy on both parts."

Teaching assistants have classwork, orals, dissertations on their minds. And professors have the demand to keep up their research. "Pressures of teaching and writing are so intense that teachers don't have enough hours to see students," says an adviser and retired history professor.

Another reason is schedule conflicts. "A lot of times office hours don't correspond with my schedule," says one sophomore interdisciplinary major. One of her teachers even took a survey to find out what time to establish office hours so as not to conflict with most students' schedules, but her schedule still conflicts. "I think that's a good idea though," she says.

Opportunity for students, professors to get acquainted, work out problems



Staff photo by Sharon Clarke

Office doors in Greenlaw Hall

But there are other ways to get around schedule conflicts. "I think the easiest thing to do is to make an appointment," says one junior history major. Professors often are willing to meet at times other than official office hours if the student wants to make an appointment.

And there are ways for professors to avoid twiddling their thumbs waiting for students to show. Many grade papers, study, read and plan lessons. One professor in the religion department announces to his class that he will be in his office during his hours only if students sign up earlier to indicate they'll be coming.

Basically the kind of contact the teacher has with the student in class makes the biggest difference in whether his office hours are used. "The teachers I go to see are mostly those in small classes," says one junior zoology major. "And I usually go see a teaching assistant in one of my large lecture courses before I'll see the professor."

Some students talk about the distance they feel between teachers and themselves. And so do some teachers. Those with offices on the fourth and fifth floors of Greenlaw feel the stairs cause a barrier to a great extent.

"I have to put the themes on my door," says an instructor in freshman English, "or else I write 'see me about this' in

hopes they'll come."

One former department chairman attributes the barrier to the fact that both teachers and students tend to see each other as one-dimensional, as not having any life outside of class.

A teaching assistant in his department agrees. "I remember when I was a freshman—I never went to see my instructors because I felt I was such a nerd. It's humiliating and embarrassing and frustrating enough to be a freshman: why voluntarily walk into someone's office to get a dumping?"

"Now that I'm the instructor, I know I'm not going to dump on anyone or anything like that. But they don't come," he says.

Among all the students who refuse the invitation to come during office hours because of time, intimidation or lack of concern, there are students who accept, willingly.

Students want to discuss tests and projects and develop ideas. Often they want a concept clarified that they didn't quite grasp in class. And "there are some teachers that you just want to get to know," says one senior.

"I usually go before a test to find out what kinds of things they're looking for. Sometimes it doesn't help at all, except at least you know you went," says an economics major.

Stopping by to see professors also helps to build rapport and often provides needed references. "It's nice to know that when I give a professor my reference sheet, he knows more than my name and grade," says a career-bound senior.

The faculty are also a good resource to help students investigate careers. "Choose someone in an area that you're interested in and say 'Can you give me some pointers? Where do I start?'" advises another senior. "I mean who would it be better to ask—that's their field!"

Besides the academic help, career direction and references available by taking advantage of office hours, some students and teachers gain an added benefit.

Friendship.

"Someone just called to talk this weekend that I taught over four years ago," says a retired history professor. "I believe in office hours."

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