
Meet Your Profs WittSem

As described briefly in class last time, I've suddenly been scheduled to visit UCLA next week, concerning a program that Witt is developing in bioinformatics. I'll be gone from early afternoon Monday until very late Tuesday, so I'll miss our class. To keep you from getting bored (ha!) in my absence, I have the following supplementary assignment, in addition to the assignment from our text.

Here's my main motivation for this assignment: everyone should get in the habit of developing good professional relationships. In your line of work as a student, the most crucial relationships are between you and your profs. You're paying a lot of money to study at Witt, so you might as well take advantage of the opportunity. That definitely doesn't mean that the profs are your employees, that you pay their salaries and hence that you "own" them, or that they should do everything you ask and do your bidding. Rather, you're paying for the opportunity to enter into professional relationships with highly trained and experienced workers with great expertise in their fields. You're more like a client who pays to work with a skilled consultant. Ultimately in your career here at Witt you hopefully will develop relationships with one or more profs in your major field through which you'll learn how to be a professional in that discipline yourself. For now, though, because you're new at being a college student, it will be enough to work on making the general student/teacher relationship more interactive and productive.

Better students take the initiative by visiting the prof during office hours to talk about coursework. Many students think that they should visit profs only if they need help. Wrong! Believe it or not, students often stop by to talk about all sorts of things, and nothing tickles a prof more than a student who stops by to engage the prof with ideas that go over and above the ideas in the course. But sure, most visits are indeed from students who seek help with coursework. Unfortunately, some students are reluctant to get this help because they mistakenly think that seeking help from a prof is a sign of defeat, and that the prof will think the student is stupid. Nothing could be further from the truth! Most profs are very eager to have their students visit – and not just because they genuinely want to help their students understand and succeed. Moreover, these visits can help the prof as much as it can help the student. Profs get a certain amount of feedback on how they're doing during class sessions, and through the students' papers and tests and assignments. But direct one-on-one contact with students outside of class during office hours can really help profs figure out what the students are and aren't understanding. That's one reason why many profs even build these visits into the structure of the class, e.g., conferencing in English 101.

The bottom line is that I want to make sure you get in the habit of working with your profs, not just passively attending classes. Even if things seem to be going fine in each course, it's a good idea to make contact early. Why wait until things start heading south? Do it now. To that end, here's what I'm requiring you to do:

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- Visit each of your other profs (not including me) during their office hours sometime between now and next Wednesday. (I'll require that you meet with me a bit later.)
 - Find out what that prof's specialty is within their department, and learn enough about this specialty to describe it to a layman. Also find out about the prof's professional activity. For example: I'm in the department of Mathematics and Computer Science, but my specialty is in statistics. Statistics is the science of data – designing studies in which data is collected, organizing and summarizing the resulting data, and getting insight from data. My primary professional activities are 1) statistical consulting: working on special projects in which I gather and analyze data to help other people solve problems in their work, and 2) leadership in the American Statistical Association: as regional chapter officer, as editor and referee for one of our stat journals, etc.
 - Learn a bit more about each prof that you wouldn't know just from attending class.
 - Make sure the prof learns a bit about you – including any special needs or concerns you might have.
 - Figure out ahead of time how you think you're doing in the course – by summarizing how you've done on all assignments and papers and tests so far, and by looking ahead to what major assignments remain. Find out whether the prof agrees with your self-assessment, and be open to advice on how to improve your performance in the class.
 - Report on your visit. In particular, here's what I want you to write up for me (in a word-processed document, not hand-written), to be delivered in class on Thursday, October 2: For each of your other classes (of 2 credits or more):
 1. Cite the prof's name.
 2. List the department, course number, and title of course.
 3. Describe the prof's specialty within the department, and describe the prof's professional activity.
 4. Tell me a few other things you learned about this prof that I might not know.
 5. Assess how you're doing in the course – verbally, in about 100 words, and estimate your current grade.
 6. Record how much time (to the nearest minute) you actually spent in your session with that prof.

Please don't think that I'm asking you to become chums and best buddies with your profs, or that you need to start socializing with them. I'm just asking you to nurture your most important professional relationships. That doesn't mean that you need to talk shop the whole time, though; in any professional relationship, it's helpful (and necessary) to involve aspects of who you are personally. But the focus should ultimately be on the mutual work that you need to do together.

Any questions? Send me a message, give me a call, or... stop by my office!

