Little Things Like Knowing Names

Every August we are asked to help with the retention effort. Of course, the fuddy-duddies always groan that they have no mind to loosen their grading scales. But that is not what the administrators are asking. At the current rate, some twenty percent of the freshmen we will meet next week will not return to OSU next August.

Does this mean that one-fifth of admitted freshman aren’t actually prepared to complete an OSU degree? The answer is most definitely not, because many of the kids who don’t return for a third semester leave before there is adequate evidence to address that question. Nonetheless, many students just leave, convinced without evidence that they can’t cut the mustard.

Recently we’ve been told that the first couple of weeks of a freshman’s experience is critical to long-term success. It is in these first dozen or so days that many begin to second-guess their capabilities. For too many, a decision to quit follows a rapid and vicious circle of self-doubt propelled by little shocks and setbacks. Of course, the little shocks and setbacks that make for life experience make us older folks so resilient that we may forget that we were once in their shoes. The little crises we hear students anguishing about can seem ridiculous to those of us who know our way around campus and have friends and family within close reach. Little things do sometimes matter.

We’ve also been told how important it is to engage students in the classroom. Most of us do, or at least we try, though the magic of classroom engagement is as much an art as a science. It takes time to get to know our students; we usually start by learning some names, which is the first step toward developing the rapport and trust necessary for honest discussion. I am not at all good with names, so I have to make an effort to know even a few names, and it usually takes a few weeks.

But a little thing like using a student’s name early in the term may be enough of a positive to counteract enough of the little negatives that help a student decide whether to stay or go. It seems like nothing, but making the effort to use names can mean a lot to a teenager far from home . . . and even some who are far from home.

On Monday, August 20th, 1984, just about 35 years ago, I was a skinny 17-year old OSU freshman with a part down the middle and stonewashed Levi’s. I sauntered into CLB 203 (or one of those
corner rooms with 72 seats), to my very first college class, and sat down in the back row (south side) next to Randy Jones, a familiar Stillwater face who graduated ahead of me in 1983. We were Stillwater kids in HIST 1103: Survey of American History. The room was full and crowded and stuffy.

At the front of the class looking toward us was a thin, pale, balding man, standing very straight in a dull gray suit, with a fixed look of surprise on his face. He spoke with northern accent and his voice seemed a little higher and squeakier than it seems it should've been. I was in the back row and there were more people crammed into this place than I had ever seen in a classroom in my life, and this guy didn’t know me from Adam. According to my schedule, the professor’s name was Sylvester, which to my experience was a black and white cartoon cat.

It wasn’t long before I was bored. After thirty minutes or so, I turned to my left and said something to Randy, who replied at a normal tone of voice. All of sudden, from the front of the room, the squeaky voice said “Mr. Bays and Mr. Jones . . . Do you have something to share with the class?”

Randy and I looked at each other in time to see each other’s shocked faces. “Uh, no sir . . . uh, sorry.” We looked at each other again as if to say “How did this guy know our names?!“

A few weeks later, on a cool morning in late October, I was sitting on a bench at Theta Pond with my nose in a geography textbook. From out of nowhere, the squeaky voice said, politely, “A very fine day, Brad, and a nice place to study.” It was Dr. Sylvester, this time using my first name, dressed in his Ivy League tweed. I was impressed and pleasantly surprised that he would bother to notice me. I looked up and smiled and made some small talk before zipping my backpack and heading to class.

I made a B in Dr. Sylvester’s course, and I eventually earned a minor in history (the double major didn’t work out). But the fact that he knew my name the first day of class has always impressed with me. How did he do it? Still to this day I have no idea.

Now for the point of all this: a little trick inspired by Dr. John Sylvester some 35 years ago, but enabled by 2019 technology, and perhaps you have already noticed this.
If you log in to the Faculty Services page and navigate to the Faculty Grade Entry (ellucian) site, then select Midterm Grades and a course, you will get a roster of the class in the window below. Be sure to maximize your window. Now, if you slowly mouse over the linked name in the roster, a pop-up will appear with a photo of the student. In the pop-up is a button called “view profile,” which takes you to the student’s information page.

There, you can right click the photo and “save image as” to your computer. I saved the images and named them by last name-first name (i.e., Smith.John.jpg) in my Office365 folders. The file sizes are about a megabyte each. Now, all I have to do to start learning my students’ names is open these folders on my phone and start memorizing names and faces . . . before the first day of class!