Dear Gen Ed faculty,

As you begin to prepare your courses for the term, we wanted to send you some thoughts about practices that many of your colleagues in the Gen Ed Program strongly encourage. Drawing from many discussions with Gen Ed faculty and from our experience supporting Gen Ed courses, we have compiled the teaching tips below. Please note that these are in draft form and we welcome your feedback, as well as your suggestions for additional tips you might wish to share with colleagues. These reminders may be redundant to many of you, but others of you are relatively new to Harvard and/or to the Gen Ed Program, so we hope you will find them helpful. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to contact us or your course coordinator.

Best,
Stephanie & Ned

**COLLEGIAL TIPS FOR TEACHING IN GEN ED**

**Why is your course Gen Ed?**
- Explain this to your students
- Discuss this with your teaching staff

**Start of term**
- Set expectations high, and communicate them early and often
- Make your syllabus informative

**Classroom culture**
- Attendance
- Electronics
- Honor Code
- Collaboration
- Absences, late assignments & missed tests
- Academic accommodations

**Assignments & assessments**
- Providing students with early and frequent feedback
- Setting end-of-day deadlines for assignment submissions
- Scaffolding assignments over the course of the semester
- Taking time in lecture to explain significant assignments before they are due
- Offering a cumulative, synthetic final assignment
- Requiring revision of at least one piece of written work
- Adding a “hurdle” requirement

**Grading**
- Grading criteria & rubrics
- Norming grades

**Feedback on teaching**
- Soliciting mid-term feedback
- Adding your own questions to the Q evaluations
- Communicating to students that you value their feedback

**Working with TFS**
- Clarifying expectations
- Explaining the purpose of section
- Working with a Head TF (if applicable)
- Supporting your TFS’ pedagogical development
COLLEGIAL TIPS FOR TEACHING IN GEN ED

Why is your Course Gen Ed?
Why should it make a profound difference to the lives your students lead after college?

• **Explain this to your students**
  Including a Gen Ed statement* on your syllabus – and talking openly with your students in class about what makes your course a Gen Ed course – can make a real difference to their posture towards the course. (I.e., do your students view the course as a ‘mere requirement’, to be completed as painlessly as possible? Or are they genuinely invested in what you have to show them?) Let them know why your course is a good fit for Gen Ed overall, not just for a particular Gen Ed category. This suggestion comes, in fact, from students on the Gen Ed committee, who have all strongly endorsed the idea that every Gen Ed course include, in a prominent place in its syllabus and on its website, a clear and compelling explanation for why it is a Gen Ed course. They have also stressed how much they value when faculty explicitly address this in class throughout the semester and when the assignments reflect those intentions as well.

* Please contact Gen Ed Associate Director Laura Hess if you would like to see sample statements.

• **Discuss this with your teaching staff**
  Spend time talking with your TFs about what makes your course a Gen Ed course. Doing so will help inform their teaching, specifically by showing them how to steer students towards an understanding of the broader context for your course. Draw your TFs into the teaching process by asking how they think they can help students connect what they learn to the lives they will later lead. Help your teaching staff understand how you hope this course will change the way students look at [your topic here].

**Start of term**

• **Set expectations high, and communicate them early and often**
  Many of our undergraduates – too many – think that Gen Ed courses should be easier and less rigorous than concentration classes. They are wrong. Any Gen Ed course that deserves to be in the program should, almost by definition, be transformative for the students. For that to be the case, it’s obvious that you have to set the bar high for students in your course and you have to hold them to these high expectations. Be specific. For example, let students know from the outset how many hours a week you expect them to spend on the course beyond actual time in class. It is not unreasonable to tell them they should expect to spend three hours out of class for each hour of in-class instructional time. Tell students if you want them to read material before lecture or section and come ready to participate. And remind them repeatedly of your expectations. Let students know that what they get out of the class is commensurate with what they put into it (of course this not just a best practice for Gen Ed, but perhaps it is more crucial to emphasize in required courses that students may feel less inspired about).

• **Make your syllabus informative**
  Your syllabus should explain in detail what the course is about, communicate course policies and expectations, and provide a clear timetable for readings, classes, and assignments and assessments.

**Classroom culture**

• **Attendance**
  Consider requiring students to attend class – especially if you and your teaching staff can take attendance simply by sight. (I.e., your class is small enough that you can know everyone by name.)
One simple option: every unexcused absence loses a student 1% off her/his final grade. Even in larger classes, faculty have found a variety of ways to take attendance at lecture, ranging from circulating sign-in sheets to asking students to hand in index cards with their name on them. Enlist your TFs’ help with this.

• **Electronics**

  It is *perfectly okay* to ban laptop and cell phone use in class, and many of our colleagues do just this. If you choose to ban electronics, it’s a good idea to be explicit not only about this policy but about *why* you have it. See “[Laptops in the Classroom](#)”, written by a Teaching Fellow at Stanford’s Center for Teaching & Learning, for a helpful summary of the pros and cons of this issue. Please note that accommodation letters from the [Accessible Education Office](#) may stipulate that some students must be allowed to use laptops.

• **The Honor Code**

  FAS faculty recently approved an [Honor Code](#), which will be implemented in Fall 2015 (learn more at [honor.fas.harvard.edu](http://honor.fas.harvard.edu)). The Honor Code states:

  Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work with integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to our ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.

  Please include this statement in your syllabus and on your course website. You may also wish to link to the section on “Academic Integrity and Academic Dishonesty” in the [Harvard Handbook for Students](#). We encourage you to explain to your students what is expected of them in your course and why, and to discuss with them what academic integrity is in the context of your course and why it matters. It can also be helpful to reference the [Harvard Guide to Using Sources](#) (a required text for Expos courses), which includes a section “Avoiding Plagiarism”.

• **Collaboration**

  [FAS](#) requires that all syllabi include a policy on collaboration. If you allow students to collaborate on assignments, be sure to define what is acceptable and what is not. We encourage you to discuss your collaboration policy with students and to remind them that they are expected to acknowledge any collaboration and its extent in all submitted work.

• **Absences, late assignments & missed tests**

  In your syllabus, be explicit with students about your attendance policy. Let them know what the consequences are for excessive unexcused absences. Tell students if you accept late assignments (they may not understand that you might). If you do accept late assignments, explain the limits and possible penalties. (One practice many of your colleagues have found helpful: give each student, at the beginning of the semester, an allotment of “late days” that they can use at their discretion.) Finally, clarify to students what happens if they miss a quiz or test.

• **Academic accommodations**

  [FAS](#) requires that faculty include in their syllabi a statement on supporting students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are responsible for registering with the [Accessible Education Office (AEO)](#). Well before any timed exams or exercises and ideally by the end of the second week of the term, students who request accommodations should present you with an introductory letter from AEO giving an overview of the accommodations deemed appropriate. At the beginning of the term, you may wish to remind students in lecture and on the course website to submit their AEO letters to you.
asap. During the term, you will likely be responsible for securing any rooms needed for students needing academic accommodations. AEO handles arrangements for final exams.

Assignments & assessments

- **Providing students with early and frequent feedback**
  We encourage you to give students some kind of graded assignment well before the middle of the term. Rather than just requiring a midterm and a final exam, you may wish to consider spreading assignments out over the course of the term so students get frequent feedback on their learning. Providing students with early and frequent feedback can help them gauge their understanding of the course material and prompt them to adjust their study habits well before the end of the semester, and can provide you with feedback on your teaching.

- **Setting end-of-day deadlines for assignment submissions**
  Consider having assignments due at 5pm, rather than in the morning. Honor Code violations are more common when assignments are due first thing in the morning.

- **Scaffolding assignments over the course of the semester**
  You may wish to consider breaking bigger assignments up into smaller component parts, so students are set up to succeed on the bigger assignments because they have worked on them incrementally and gotten feedback along the way. You may also want to give some thought to ensuring that you prepare students during the term for the kinds of work you ask them to do on the final exam or final project or paper.

- **Taking time in lecture to explain significant assignments before they are due**
  Spend time in lecture talking in some detail about significant assignments before their due dates. Explain how the assignments are linked to the course goals, articulate your expectations, and give students an opportunity to ask questions. This helps ensure that students get consistent information from a single source.

- **Offering a cumulative, synthetic final assignment**
  A surprisingly common theme, in our discussions with students, is that they tend to welcome a final assignment that requires them to draw cumulatively and synthetically on what they have learned. A final research paper, by way of contrast, does not necessarily do this by itself, but rather allows them to drill down in depth on a particular topic.

- **Requiring revision of at least one piece of written work**
  If your course features writing assignments, then it is an extremely good idea to require students to revise at least one assignment during the term, based on feedback they have received. Writing is an iterative process, and we want students to come to know in their bones that they can always improve their prose, especially when given constructive feedback. You might want to refer students to the Writing Center, where they can get feedback from trained undergraduate tutors.

- **Adding a “hurdle” requirement**
  Consider adding a “hurdle” requirement specifying that students must complete all assignments and exams to earn a passing grade in the course.

Grading

- **Grading criteria & rubrics**
  Develop explicit grading criteria and rubrics for your assignments. Not only will you thereby make the grading process more efficient and fair, but you will also help your students better understand how to succeed in your course (and, as an extra bonus, minimize grade disputes). You may even wish to consider distributing a rubric with paper assignments. Make sure your TFs understand your
evaluative criteria before they begin grading. Grading some assignments or exams together as a group can help ensure that everyone is applying the criteria or rubrics consistently.

- **Norming grades**
  Using grading criteria and rubrics is just one way of standardizing grades. You may also want to consider blind grading (i.e., grading student work without knowing whose work you are grading), having TFs grade work produced by students not in their section, dividing up exam questions so that one person grades all the same items across sections (rather than entire exams), etc. This is especially important in large courses with many TFs and sections.

**Feedback on teaching**

- **Soliciting Mid-term Feedback**
  Consider soliciting feedback from your students partway through the semester. Mid-term feedback provides the kind of input that allows you to enhance your teaching and your students’ learning during the term. The [Bok Center’s website](http://example.com) has a variety of suggested midterm course evaluation forms and helpful tips.
  Ask your TFs for their own thoughts on how things are going in the course so far. They are likely to be hesitant to express their views unless you explicitly invite them to do so – but also grateful that you asked. TFs have an invaluable perspective on how to enhance lectures or improve assignments and exams; it’s also incredibly valuable to hear directly from them how you might better support them in their work. You might spend time at a teaching staff meeting reflecting jointly on aspects of the course that are going well and aspects that could be improved. This would obviously benefit you as the instructor, and would also be critical pedagogical training for your TF(s), as it would help them better understand the ongoing reflection that we instructors have to engage in throughout the term.

- **Adding your own questions to the Q evaluations**
  Many of our faculty add their own tailored questions to the end-of-term Q evaluations, since this allows them to probe the effectiveness of teaching practices specific to their course. In November and April, faculty have the opportunity to add up to three questions of their own.

- **Communicating to students that you value their feedback**
  After students provide mid-term feedback, you may find it helpful to share their feedback in a generalized way and let them know what changes you will make or have made in response (or won't make, and why). Help them understand the value of the Q by sharing ways you have changed the course based on past feedback.

**Working with TFs**

- **Clarifying expectations**
  Let TFs know what you expect of them and what you expect from students in the course, both pedagogically and procedurally. TFs are often on the front lines responding to students’ questions and concerns, so make sure they understand the course policies. Set up regular meetings with your TFs, and establish how best to communicate outside of these meetings. Consider holding these meetings over lunch, which can be paid for using the Instructional Lunch Fund.
  Give your TFs an overall "map" or timeline of how the semester will work, especially around periods that involve grading and deadlines-- e.g, the midterm is on [X date], which means that on [Y date] we'll meet as a group to divide up the questions and have a group grading session. Or, the first paper is due [X date] so by [Y date] you will have preliminary grades prepared, on time for our meeting to quickly check that grades are consistent across sections before we hand them back to students. This helps with making sure TFs do not go out of town or make other commitments right when you need them.
• **Explain the purpose of section**
  Clarify to your TFs what the role of section is. Do you want them to use section to delve into concepts from lecture? To address key points from the readings? Something else? Discuss with your TFs if all sections should be in lock step or if some variation is possible (or even desirable). In large lecture classes, it is helpful to have consistency across sections. Make sure your TFs have a clear sense of what they should be doing in section each week.

• **Working with a Head TF (if applicable)**
  If you have a Head TF, it is essential to clarify mutual expectations, communicate well and meet regularly. You have embarked on a joint venture with a graduate student, but remember that you, not your Head TF, are responsible for all pedagogical and procedural decisions. Serving as Head TF is a valuable professional development opportunity, so that graduate student will need your guidance. Make sure your Head TF understands the scope of his or her responsibilities and knows how best to communicate with you. Establish a clear “chain of command” that you can clarify to the teaching staff, so that everyone understands what is expected of them in their respective roles and who to contact regarding particular issues or concerns. Encourage your Head TF to attend the Gen Ed Program’s Head TF orientation, held each term just before the start of classes. If there is no Head TF manual or set of course-specific instructions, you might want to ask your Head TF to draft one to make things easier for the course’s next offering.

• **Supporting your TFs’ pedagogical development**
  Let your TFs know how you will support their development as teachers over the term. Use regular staff meetings to discuss pedagogy. You might collectively discuss learning goals, teaching strategies and common points of confusion; connect lecture to section; identify useful resources; practice collective or delegated lesson planning; or discuss/practice grading. Help your TFs consider how they might get feedback on their teaching during the term. Encourage them to solicit mid-term feedback and help them interpret and act on the feedback they get. You might wish to observe each of their sections and/or ask them to sit in on each other’s sections. Encourage your TFs to take advantage of Bok Center programs and services such as the fall/spring teaching conference (which includes a session on “Teaching in Gen Ed”), practice teaching sessions, video consultation or classroom observation. Invite a Gen Ed Pedagogy Fellow to one of your first TF meetings so that your TFs understand the range of pedagogical support they can get from the Bok Center. Refer your TFs to the Gen Ed Pedagogy Fellows for peer support. Experienced Gen Ed instructors themselves, the Gen Ed Pedagogy Fellows can discuss Head TF concerns, advise individual TFs on pedagogy, conduct classroom observations, help interpret mid-semester feedback, and design and lead pedagogy workshops.