



Student Motivation

Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Hello, my name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey. I am the host of the Beyond the Podium podcast series, a University of Florida podcast on teaching and learning, where our faculty guests offer their tips, strategies, innovations, and stories about teaching with a little humor. Today's guest is Dr. Kim Moore.

Dr. Kimberly Moore

I am Kimberly Moore. I am a professor in the environmental horticulture department. I'm located off campus at the Fort Lauderdale Research and Education Center. So I'm 300 miles south of Gainesville. When I was originally hired I was teaching live classes. In 2000 or so I started to switch all my courses to an online format. So I am 100% online. I teach all my courses back to Gainesville. And I teach primarily the undergraduate courses in the plant science curriculum as well as a few graduate courses for environmental horticulture.

Alexandra

Kim Moore is particularly well known for her warmth and her ability to engage students and to keep them enthused. After all, student motivation is a tricky thing. Students, especially brand new ones, approach the fall semester with excitement and wonder, but also a little trepidation. That first week, particularly for online classes, helps to set the tone for the whole semester. A positive, personal, and fun touch can help get students motivated and excited for class, as explains Kim Moore.

Dr. Kimberly Moore

I start off with an email to the class with a welcome email. So I always start with that welcome email to give them the links, how to find the class. Because sometimes, you think students will be computer savvy and they're like, I'm ready for an online class, but they don't know how to find the class and how to log in. So usually it's an email. And normally the first week it's usually introduction about the syllabus and then usually an introduction post where it's like, who are you? And sometimes it's usually something funny or a funny anecdote. What are your expectations for the class? And I always ask, what are your concerns? Because I want to know upfront, what do you expect from me in the class and what are you worried about? And usually

I'm able then to address that in the second week email, like OK, I know we're a little freaked out about this-- especially like chemistry. Organic chemistry, there are a lot of concerns. And I can help them calm down a little bit by the second week, like it's OK, we're all going to go through this together. And it helps them kind of set the tone for the class. They know that I'm there and I'm not going to leave them hanging.

Alexandra

Even in an online class, or maybe particularly in an online class, taking the time to know each student is key to creating a friendly learning environment and helping students to succeed. Whether you teach online or face to face, those first few days or discussions can usually help you identify those students who are extroverts and willing to participate in everything, and those students that might need a little more help.

Dr. Kimberly Moore

You can kind of get a feel for the differences you might have to bring out or who may be a little more introverted in an online class, who maybe kind of want to sit on the sidelines versus those who are really into it and really want to get into the class. And same way if you were in a live class, you can tell those that sat in the back of the class and kind of don't want to raise your hands and those that are in the front of the class raising their hands all the time. You can get the same feeling in an online class by doing this, giving introductory, because those you only post two or three lines, OK, I'm going to watch you and see how you interact. And those who write a page and a book, you know they're really engaged.

Alexandra

What motivates each of us is likely very different. Personalities, backgrounds, life experiences, previous knowledge all play a part in what actually motivates us, what moves us to get things done. Kim explains that she uses different strategies to try to engage all of her students.

Dr. Kimberly Moore

Each week there is a reading and a lecture. And there's no way around that. That's the way we deliver content. But trying to engage in with different activities-- so some weeks it might be a writing assignment for those who really like to write. But to keep the others motivated, I might say OK, this week, we talked about light and its effects on plant growth. So I want you all to go out and find an example and take a picture of something that is poor growth due to too much light or not enough light, and then tell me why you think it's light.

When I turn the problem back over to them and they become the investigator, it stimulates a different type of learning. So it's not the memorizing, give it back to me. It's OK, here's the topics, now go and find an example and share it back to me. And I find they stay a little more motivated when they know that they're going to be asked like, OK, so how do you apply what you just learned in lecture this week?

Alexandra

Kim also believes in constantly encouraging students and remembering that they too have lives.

Dr. Kimberly Moore

I also try to remember that my students have lives other than their school work. So remembering that-- we look at our lives and we say, well, I have to sit on this committee and I have this to do and this to do and then I have to grade these assignments and da, da, da. OK, but your students are also busy people who you may look at them and go, well, all they have to do is go to class. Well they might have class but they have assignments. They have responsibilities. They have homes. They have parents and family and people who are important in their lives. And they sit on clubs and committees and are active, just to keep in mind that they're just as busy, just as impacted, and anything we can do to lighten it, to make the mood a little lighter, to tell them that we understand.

Alexandra

Another one of Kim's great tactics is to try to lighten the load in a number of ways. Particularly towards the end of the semester, Kim will include silly assignments or opportunities for student creativity to come out.

Dr. Kimberly Moore

Sometimes you're discussing a very heavy topic and you say, OK, so this week I want you to create a funny photo or write a joke or something and relate it to the topic and put it in a discussion post. That sometimes helps, anything that will lighten the load. And they know that, I'm going to get the points no matter what I put up there. And they do like taking funny photos. I mean, everybody loves their Snapchat and like, can you take something funny in organic chemistry and turn it into something about our-- if we're talking about maybe carboxylic acids and soap, can you take a picture about soap and make it funny? So there's little bubbles floating around. And a lot of them use their pets in the bathtub with little bubbles or they have bubbles coming out of their mouths, just something fun to break the monotony of chemistry and oh my

gosh, we have to talk about chemistry and reactions. Oh wait, we can do something fun this week. OK, this is good. They like to be creative.

Alexandra

Kim also believes in being honest with your students when you feel that drag towards the end of the semester, when you're tired, that you can share that with your students and allow them to share their struggles with you too. But the idea is that you will all make it through together.

Dr. Kimberly Moore

I guess the students don't realize that faculty get as burnt out and that we have just as many troubles. One of the tactics I like to share with my students is that I fail too. I love telling my students about my first year living in Florida and growing plants, and I grew the ugliest, nastiest looking poinsettias. I thought I knew how to grow poinsettias, brightest in Iowa, grew these lovely poinsettias for sale. Moved to Florida, I'm like, I can grow poinsettias. And they were tall, spindly, ugly, and nasty, and everybody went, what are these? I'm like, they're poinsettias. They're like, no they're not. And I remember taking pictures.

So telling the students that we're human, that we know you're tired. We're tired too and we're feeling the drain and sharing our failures, sharing our stories to say, it's OK. I mean, I learned a lot by not growing good poinsettias so I know how to grow them now. But students don't realize that faculty fail too.

So I think it's not easy to admit, but sometimes it makes-- when students know that you're a real person with a real life and that you feel these struggles too, they connect. And it's kind of, if I can get through it, you can get through it, and we're going to push through it together.

Alexandra

It's also important to stay motivated as instructors all the way through the semester and into the next, even when Thanksgiving comes around and we're drowning in end of semester grading. One way to do this is to keep things fresh, to try something new each semester.

Dr. Kimberly Moore

One of the worst things we can do is become disinterested teachers. So we have to keep ourselves engaged and energized. So I always try to add one new thing every semester, something new that I read about and I thought, OK, I'm going to give it a try. It may or may not work, but I want to try one new thing every semester.

Alexandra

Kim's best-kept secret is so simple, to just remember to have fun.

Dr. Kimberly Moore

My last tip is to remember to have fun, because if you're not having fun when you're teaching, it comes through. So you have to be able to laugh at yourself and laugh at the situation and have a good time while you're teaching, because that comes through and that keeps the students engaged too.

Alexandra

With that, you can inspire your students to become lifelong learners. You can also create opportunities to share your passion and inspiration while leaving room for humor and creativity.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Beyond the Podium podcast series. For more tips, tools, strategies, and resources on teaching at the University of Florida, or to find out more about future episodes, visit the teach.ufl.edu page.