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Help, Students Are Dropping My Class!

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I spent my first week as an assistant professor contending with what I have deemed the “Dropocalypse.” My Introduction to Judaism class was full before the ink on my contract was even dry, and I was eager to teach students at a new institution. I posted the course website several days before classes began. As I checked the roster the morning of my first class, I was disconcerted to note that four students had dropped. Had my course site frightened them? Was my workload unreasonable? I shoved these questions aside as I walked nervously to the classroom, putting on my friendliest face. After what I thought was a good class, I vowed not to check the roster until the add-drop period had concluded. My next course, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, had similar positive energy on the first day.

Despite my resolution, I checked the roster that evening. Two more students had dropped my Introduction to Judaism class, and one had dropped the other class. By the end of the week, ten of the thirty initially-enrolled students had dropped my Intro to Judaism class, whereas only two had dropped my other one. No other teacher in my department had more than three students drop.

When I saw my chair in the hallway on Friday, I nervously confessed that a troubling number of students had dropped my class. Was I in danger, he asked, of falling below the minimum number of students? Thankfully, I was not. He tried to comfort me, reiterating that students drop classes for countless reasons and that it wasn’t a reflection on me as a teacher.

As I spent the weekend refreshing the enrollment page, scared that if I averted my gaze for too long more students would escape, I replayed the classes in meticulous detail. What had I done, I wondered, to alienate students? What could I have done differently that would have kept them enrolled? The colleagues I asked for advice, sensing my rising panic, reiterated my chair's perspective: students drop for inscrutable reasons that are not a reflection on the instructor.

Despite these kind words, I couldn't shake the feeling that the preponderance of drops was my fault. If I gained a reputation of alienating students, I wouldn't last long at my institution. The fact that I had so many drops in one class but only a few in the other class helped me to pull back from the despair of the Dropocalypse. It was clear that many students who enrolled in Introduction to Judaism claimed Jewish heritage and, consequently, might believe that they would have a head start in the course. If that expectation was shattered, perhaps they would leave? In contrast, students who enrolled in a course on Abrahamic religions might have less of an expectation that the course would be easy for them. Or, it could have been that the Judaism class was at 10 a.m. whereas the Abrahamic class began at noon.

Whatever the answers, a fundamental question remained: Did my actions, while preparing the course or during the class, alienate them? If so, how could I improve? This gave rise to another question: Is it a bad thing for students to drop my class during the first week? I had assumed that it was, feeling the institutional pressure for high enrollments. But if students would have a bad experience, it was better for them *and* for me for them to find a more suitable class.

I weathered my first semester and, despite the turmoil of the first week, received generally positive student evaluations. In subsequent semesters, I continued to try to make the first week of class fun and intriguing, hoping to show students that the academic study of religion was worth their time and effort.

This experience showed me that checking the enrollment vicissitudes would be deleterious for me. At best, I would feel the relief if no students had dropped. At worst, I would feel creeping panic if students had dropped. The difficult truth is that I'll never know why those ten students dropped my course and why future students will, inevitably, switch out of my classes.

As instructors, we need to balance the ability to be self-critical while not letting perceived concerns about student satisfaction guide our practices. No matter how many students drop, my job is to teach the students who stay in my class; worrying about the ghosts of students who dropped does a disservice to them.

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