

GIFTS: Initiative to Meet Students through Informal Walks around Campus

Dr. Andrew Charles Bartolini, University of Notre Dame

Assistant Teaching Professor, University of Notre Dame Coordinator, First-Year Engineering Program

GIFTS: Initiative to Meet Students Through Informal Walks Around Campus

This GIFTS (Great Ideas for Teaching Students) paper presents the inspiration, implementation and analysis into a new initiative by the author to meet students by taking walks around campus.

In the spring of 2022, the author desired a means to meet more students in a less formal setting than office hours, a format that was more approachable for students, and a modality that was more active in nature. The outcome led to a new initiative by the author to take daily walks around campus with one or two students. The walks are scheduled using a Google Sheet that the author populates every few weeks with the times of the walks and the starting locations. The walks purposefully are not referred to as office hours and are advertised as a separate type of interaction all together. The walks are typically around 30-45 minutes and the scope of the discussion is completely up to the students, although the author will bring up new topics to continue the dialogue if necessary.

While the initiative was meant to be a means to meet more students in an active setting, upon discussing this initiative with colleagues at the university wellness center, they shared that walking has not only physical, but also mental and psychological health benefits. After starting this initiative, the author learned of another professor that started a similar initiative, in a similar non-intentional way. The professor noted similar benefits as the author in removing boundaries in traditional lectures. Walks with students removed the lectern, technology and distractions that provide the environment for a productive, honest and present conversation. One particular paper outlined how teaching while walking has ancient traditions and the professor even introduced a walking component to a class [1].

As previously noted, walking also has important mental health benefits. These mental health benefits include self-esteem, cognitive functioning and a positive mood. One study also suggested that there is growing evidence that physical activities such as walking can help prevent or treat depression and anxiety, although more research in these areas is still necessary. That being said, additional research is starting to illustrate being in nature and green-spaces can increase your well-being. Thus walks on campus in and around nature could have additional positive effects for the students [2, 3, 4, 5]. In addition to the mental health benefits, walking has been shown to improve physical health metrics such as reducing blood pressure, cholesterol and body mass index [6].

Additionally, one study also noted benefits of improved psychological processing, decreased depression symptoms and improvement of mood when using the walking and talking approach. This study noted that it helped individuals become “unstuck” in their thought process, but also

noted that while some aspects of walking and talking, such as not requiring eye-to-eye contact, are helpful in allowing individuals to open up, it can be hard to gauge body language [7]. To date, the author has gone on over 90 walks (totaling over 160 miles) during the second half of the Spring 2022 semester and the first half of the Fall 2022 semester. A total of 121 students joined the author on the walks (58% of the students were male, 42% of the students were female). Through the author's personal observations, traditional office hours typically attract a higher percentage of female students, while the walks have a percentage of attendees that more closely matches the student population demographics.

Due to the author's position as the coordinator of the First-Year Engineering Program, the majority of the students attending one of the walks were first-year students, although students from all academic years joined the author for walks. Walks with first-year students typically focus on major discernment, extra-curricular activities, future courses and abroad opportunities. Conversations with all academic years tend to focus on summer internship selection. Finally, walks with senior students historically have focused on next stages post graduation, especially with regards to strategies for graduate school.

The author still provides traditional office hours for students to ask academic questions that are easier to address with whiteboards and/or computers. Additionally, to ensure an inclusive environment for all students, the author is happy to do an informal meeting or coffee with students in lieu of a physical walk.

The author strongly recommends consideration of adding opportunities to walk with students as a great way to meet students and explore their journeys and experiences.

References

- [1] D. Doughty, "Pedestrian Pedagogy". Insider Higher Education. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/05/31/professor-takes-his-classes-walk-essay> (accessed Feb. 28, 2023)
- [2] P. Kelly, M. Murphy and N. Mutrie, "The health benefits of walking," in *Walking, Emerald Publishing Limited*, 2017,
- [3] J. Barton, R. Hine and J. Pretty, "The health benefits of walking in greenspaces of high natural and heritage value," *Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences*, vol. 6, pp. 261-278, 2009.
- [4] J. Roe and P. Aspinall, "The restorative benefits of walking in urban and rural settings in adults with good and poor mental health," *Health Place*, vol. 17, pp. 103-113, 2011.
- [5] G. Olafsdottir, P. Cloke, A. Schulz, Z. Van Dyck, T. Eysteinnsson, B. Thorleifsdottir and C. Vögele, "Health benefits of walking in nature: A randomized controlled study under conditions of real-life stress," *Environ.Behav.*, vol. 52, pp. 248-274, 2020.

- [6] S. Hanson and A. Jones, "Is there evidence that walking groups have health benefits? A systematic review and meta-analysis," *Br. J. Sports Med.*, vol. 49, pp. 710-715, 2015.
- [7] S. Revell and J. McLeod, "Experiences of therapists who integrate walk and talk into their professional practice," *Counseling and Psychotherapy Research*, vol. 16, pp. 35-43, 2016.