

Professionalism in the Academic Environment (AKA, How to Look and Act Like a College Professor, Even if You Don't Feel Like One)

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So... you're a college professor now. *Congratulations!* Teaching and working with college students can be incredibly rewarding, enriching, and downright *fun!* If this is your first venture into higher education or academia, you might also discover that it has a culture all its own, with plenty of expectations for its inhabitants – particularly for the faculty who will be interacting with students. What follows here are a few tips and guidelines for keeping in line with those expectations as you embark on your new career as a faculty member at Collin College.

What does a college professor look like?

Clothes shouldn't matter. In a perfect world, a person would be judged at their workplace based solely on the caliber of their work. Unfortunately, that's not how the world works and that's also not how a college campus works either.

The good news is that you will not be expected to wear a suit to work every day! However, this does *not* mean that you can wear sweatpants, track suits, sloppy t-shirts, or ripped jeans in the classroom either. Obviously, certain disciplines might have their own set of expectations or requirements for professional attire (such as scrubs in the health sciences; lab coats in... well... labs; or safety goggles, masks, or coveralls in a hands-on welding class); check with your mentor, Director, Associate Dean, or other colleagues to confirm expectations within a specific disciplinary culture. Nevertheless, in most academic settings, it would be safe to assume that you should strive to maintain a slightly elevated (i.e., not yoga pants or shorts) and well-groomed appearance. Here are a few suggestions and specifics if you're not sure what that needs to look like:

- **Aim for a somewhat more reserved look.** While it's *not at all* necessary to dress like a nun or a monk, and you definitely don't need to wear high heels or a tie at all times, in the academic environment it is probably smart to keep your attire a tad on the conservative side in order to preserve respectability and show that you are a professional. This means bearing in the mind the length of a skirt or the cut of a blouse, as well as slogans or graphics on shirts. In other words, save those tube tops, plastic flip-flops, or t-shirts with fart jokes for when you are not in the classroom! But don't worry – you can still infuse your look with personality and your unique style.
- **Wear clothes that fit and distinguish you from your students.** Wearing clothes that fit you well will always make you look your best and most pulled-together! Likewise, what you choose to wear can help define useful boundaries between you and your students, as well as establish your authority as the instructor. For instance, when I first started out teaching college courses in my twenties, I looked a LOT like my students; in order to make sure they knew I was their instructor and not their buddy, I made sure to dress up a little bit more to create that visual distinction between us. (I always made sure to wear my “power suit” on the first day of class! I relaxed a little bit in the weeks that followed...)

- **A little effort goes a long way.** We *all* have those mornings when we are rushing out the door, but it is always in your best interest to put a modicum of effort into how you will be presenting yourself as an instructor. You already know the basics: shower, comb your hair, brush your teeth, groom your beard! A few other things to consider are making sure your clothes don't look (or smell) like they just came out of the bottom of your laundry basket, and that they are not stained, frayed, or ripped. Just the smallest bit of effort can demonstrate that you care about your role as a teacher and you want to put your best foot forward.
- **What about jeans?** College faculty can certainly enjoy a more casual look than business executives most of the time, though the previously mentioned guidelines will always hold true. So when the question of "Can I wear jeans?" arises, the answer is ... sometimes, and it depends on your department! In general, you might look to your peers and mentors as models for this particular question. One great thing to know about working at Collin is that we all enjoy "Spirit Wednesdays." Each Wednesday, everyone is encouraged to wear their Collin College gear, and jeans are absolutely welcome. "Casual Fridays" also embrace the wearing of jeans! (But again, make sure those jeans are clean and tidy, and still...leave the fart jokes at home. Seriously.)

How should a college professor behave?

The culture of the college setting might be very similar to what you're already used to, or it might be totally different. There is, of course, plenty of room for fun and camaraderie, but within reason and parameters that will maintain your professionalism as an instructor, and the professional reputation of the institution as a whole.

- **Establish and maintain healthy boundaries.** When working with students, it is likely that you will forge some strong bonds – and that is a *great* thing! Those bonds are what make this profession so rewarding. However, it is vital that you keep those bonds professional and confined to a working relationship. The blurring of personal and professional boundaries in the classroom can lead to many complications for you as an instructor. For instance, if students perceive you as their pal or BFF rather than their professor, they might begin to presume special treatment, or expect you to be a pushover when it comes to upholding class policies that were designed to maintain fairness and accountability. You might also have students who over-disclose personal information with you or necessitate help that you are not trained to provide. Some strategies for maintaining professional boundaries with students include:
 - **Set clear boundaries and expectations from the beginning of the semester, and articulate them in your syllabus.** Setting up a well-defined framework from the start will help remind both you and your students about important expectations related to behavior and classwork, and make it easier for you to enforce those expectations throughout the semester.
 - **Treat all students equally.** If you encounter a student asking for special treatment, ask yourself if the request is in keeping with established course policy, or if you could reasonably make the exact same accommodation for all students in the class. If the answer to both of those questions is "no," then you should not consent to that request.
 - **Operate within the physical confines of the campus, when possible, and always keep the door open.** It is easier to keep your relationship with students professional when you stay on campus. This doesn't mean that you can't have class "field trips" or course-relevant gatherings elsewhere,

but you probably shouldn't be meeting with individual students outside of your campus office or off campus grounds. Likewise, when you do need to meet with individual students, it is good practice to keep your door open or meet in public, not only to avoid creating a private space in which inappropriate disclosures might happen, but to also maintain propriety and especially safety for all.

- **Cultivate a classroom environment that is inviting and inclusive for everyone.** One of the core tenets of Collin College's strategic plan is to create an increasingly welcome environment for students, faculty, staff, and the entire community. As a faculty member, you will play a crucial role in this mission through the ways you interact with your students. Although some disciplines or work environments might be traditionally male-dominated or female-dominated, we are all working in an increasingly diverse society in which every student should feel comfortable. Likewise, your classroom atmosphere should welcome students of all races, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, ages, and abilities. This means no off-color jokes, no prior assumptions about abilities, no foul language, and no cute nicknames.
- **Be smart about your social media activity.** Although your personal social media presence might have started before your job at Collin, you must be mindful that now, everything you post can be associated with the institution. Be cautious about the photos you choose to post or statements you choose to make in any public forum so that they do not reflect negatively on you or on Collin College by association. Further, it might be wise to avoid "friending" or "following" your students on any particular social media outlet – at least while they are your students – lest you undermine those healthy, professional boundaries previously discussed.

How should a college professor communicate?

Just like with your overall behavior in the classroom, your communication – both written and verbal – should maintain a level of appropriateness and professionalism. The way you communicate with your students can have a tremendous impact on the rapport you are able to build with them and the learning environment you create, so it is helpful to be thoughtful and aware of the messages you are sending, and how you are sending them. It is especially important to be mindful with your written communication in particular, such as email, because it does not enjoy the benefit of non-verbal cues to convey tone, and can be very easily shared with others. Here are a few guidelines to follow:

- **Email should take place within official Collin channels.** The College calls for faculty and staff to utilize Collin email rather than personal email for official communications, as it keeps your communication limited to professional platforms. (It is best that your course-related communications with students do NOT come from an email address like "crazycatlady@gmail.com" or "Ilovebeer@hotmail.com.") You can also send messages directly to students through Canvas, the Learning Management System used at Collin College.
- **Include a clear subject line.** A clear subject lets your students know immediately what the message will discuss, and an accurate subject line can play a crucial role in the likelihood that your students will open and read it! It is also beneficial to include the course number/title and section number in the subject line for added clarity, since students are often juggling a number of classes.

- **Include appropriate greetings and closings.** While we might be incredibly casual with friends and family members, it's preferable to adopt a slightly more formal style with students and colleagues. Instead of opening your email with "Hey guys," you might be better off opting for "Hi everyone," or "Dear students." Likewise, always end with an official closing, such as "sincerely," "best," or even "thanks," or "cheers" (but not "love!"), followed by the name you expect your students to call you.
- **Consider your tone and use of humor.** As previously mentioned, written communication can easily be misinterpreted because it doesn't offer the context of vocal cues like intonation and inflection, or non-verbal cues such as facial expressions or body language. A message intended to be direct might instead be misconstrued as harsh, angry, or rude. Likewise, attempts at humor might not always translate as desired without context or a smile. Try reading your message aloud before hitting "send" to make sure it conveys the tone you intend, and it never hurts to be polite, *please and thank you!*
- **Use complete sentences, full words, and correct grammar and mechanics.** We all shorten things and neglect our grammar when texting, messaging, or emailing our friends, but again, in the professional setting, it is best to go all-out with your sentences, spelling, and punctuation. As instructors, we need to model clear communication for our students, and the language we use speaks to our credibility and integrity as their mentors and leaders.

Hopefully these guidelines will help you get acclimated as you get started in your new role at Collin College. Ultimately, a good rule of thumb when it comes to ensuring professionalism is that erring on the side of being too formal is preferable to being too informal! And once you have learned the culture and rhythms of your new workplace, things will only get easier.

For a complete list of all Collin College official policies, go to: <https://pol.tasb.org/Home/Index/304>

Additional Resources

A guide to professionalism in the workplace. *Glassdoor.com*. <https://www.glassdoor.com/blog/guide/a-guide-to-professionalism-in-the-workplace/>

Akhtar, A., & Ward, M. (2020). 15 email etiquette rules every professional should know. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/email-etiquette-rules-every-professional-needs-to-know-2016-1>

McKay, D.R. (2019). Professionalism in the workplace: How to conduct yourself on the job. *The Balance Careers*. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/professionalism-526248>