Descriptions of Instructor Types

Firm but Fair
I've been called “firm but fair.” The phrase strikes me as a bit of corny cliché, but if that’s how students judge me, I’m fine with that. Perhaps it goes back to my favorite teachers in high school and college. They came off as tough and unforgiving at the beginning and gradually opened up. I try to do the same. One can always get softer over the course of a semester, but it is very difficult to get harder. On the first day of class, I even wear a tie (something I rarely do) and try to come off like a hard-ass. I do not want or need to become friends with my students. (Mind you, one of the most satisfying aspects of teaching is the students with whom I became and remain good friends!)

I purposely do not take a hand-holding approach to most students. Is this mean? Perhaps. But students will always try to push teachers to see what they can get away with (I don’t hold that against them. It’s human nature. It can also be fun.) I like to nip such attempts in the bud. Short of family deaths, I rarely accept excuses for late papers. Nor do I allow for “excused” absences (except for jury duty and military training). We all have excuses, sometimes very good ones. But students still need to be in class. Besides, what if a student has a very good reason to miss half the classes? My attitude is that if students can’t make it to class, they shouldn’t be enrolled. Have there been some legitimate excuses I’ve been unsympathetic to? Probably. But much more often, I simply prevent student procrastination and enforce good study habits. If you make your policies clear, students will rarely complain.

The Friend
Usually the most loved teachers come off as empathetic, friendly, and supportive, particularly if the teacher is a woman. But if that doesn’t come naturally, don’t fake it. There’s a fine line between caring about your students and getting involved in tragic stories of family woe you can do little to change. And though it may mean you’re a better human being, helping won’t necessarily make you a better teacher. (Besides, we are not paid to be social workers.) If you want to help your students with non-classroom issues, who am I to tell you not to? But be aware that you could be in for far more than you expected. Also, you might legally be required to break your confidence. The law now requires you to report instances of domestic violence.
It can be difficult for an empathetic person to draw a line about appropriate and inappropriate themes and discussions. You can and should refer students to the college services that are available. And keep in mind that some students will never ask for help, even when they should. If you notice a sudden drop in performance or attendance, sometimes the smallest gesture can have a huge effect.

One student was doing well until the last two weeks of class. Then she stopped attending and turned in a failing paper on the last day of class. I sent her an email saying I was both disappointed and concerned. She wrote back, saying she was simply touched that I had noticed something was wrong. She never explained what had happened, nor did she ever ask for sympathy or help. Unprompted, I offered her a two-week extension to write an acceptable final paper so she could pass the class with a decent grade. She did. I still have no idea what happened, and that’s OK. But I like to think I helped her out through difficult times.

The Egghead
Perhaps you’re quite nerdy and not particularly charismatic. That’s fine. Teaching isn’t a popularity contest. You don’t have to be as cool as your students. Nor should you try, because in your students’ eyes you will never be too cool for school. There is nothing wrong with being a poorly dressed, nerdy academic. That’s what a professor is supposed to be!

And your more introverted students may appreciate the calm confidence of an introverted, intellectual professor. When you teach, you can play the role of professor to a T. It’s OK to be a bit
scatterbrained, smoke a pipe (outside class, anyway), and wear tweed jackets with patches on the arms. In some ways, the egghead professor fulfills a role students love.

But if you’re an egghead, make sure you’re a passionate one!

**The Practitioner**

Real-life experience—as a cop, a prosecutor, a defense attorney, or whatever—is a huge advantage in the classroom. Having walked the walk allows you to talk the talk. You got hired for your expertise, and it gives you knowledge and confidence that work in your favor. But war stories only go so far. In the college classroom, you’re a professor first, and everything else comes after that, no matter what you feel in your heart.

There’s nothing wrong with being a practitioner, but make sure to combine your firsthand experience with a bit of perspective and some techniques and attitudes from the other professorial traits listed above: firm but fair, friend, and egghead.

Be wary of presenting yourself as anti-intellectual, somebody who knows how it really goes down. If you are a practitioner, think of how skeptical you are of civilians who come to your job and telling you how to do it. If you keep saying, “The book says this, but the author doesn’t know what he’s talking about,” you might be right, but then why are you using a bad book? Or maybe a close reading of the book might teach you something you don’t know.

You don’t need to prove you’re the coolest or smartest guy or girl in the classroom. Even if it’s true, let your students reach that conclusion on their own. Be particularly on guard against macho tendencies you have. This is not about being overly concerned with political correctness (though it is part of it), but a joke that might kill at work — a casual reference to somebody’s race, religion, national origin, immigration status, sex, or sexual identity — might not only be against university regulation (and sometimes the law), but also rude to students who have a right to be comfortable in their class. (That said, I’ve found CUNY students are New Yorkers who appreciate a good joke and are not easily offended.) Certainly there can be a time and place for a bit of swaggering, but it’s probably not in the classroom. What is appropriate in your full-time job can go very wrong in the college environment. And for God’s sake, don’t flirt with students.