Teaching At The University Of New Orleans

The University of New Orleans is a commuting school serving the New Orleans metropolitan area.
Undergraduate students come from various economical backgrounds but mainly the middle class. Thus most of them hold at least half-time jobs to help carrying them through college. Also most of the students are average students who are usually challenged taking the standard Computing Science curricula.

From the students point of view, time is completely taken (job, school, home, free time) and usually there is not enough time to do it all, let alone do it well. From the instructor’s point of view, time is also completely taken (teaching, scholarly work, directing students, committee duties, home). In particular teaching takes quite a chunk of time for lecture preparation (material and equipment needed), lecture delivery, homework and test development, and grading as unfortunately I do not have any teaching staff support.

On the other hand, my job is not only to teach students but to identify and advance those who display enough understanding and programming facility on the topic at hand. Of course I use the usual means to measure understanding: grading based on homework of various kinds, and tests. The question is: how many of them? In particular, how much homework to give out?

Students and I would readily agree, based on our time constraints, to have only a minimal number of homework and tests. Unfortunately, time has shown that this agreement would only benefit me, but it definitely works against the students’ performance and their possibility to advance in the curriculum. And that is due to the underlying modus operandi we all use when time is more than accounted for: Only the creaky door gets the oil.

Then, what is an instructor to do? When it comes to homework, I give sufficient homework with rather short deadlines (due to procrastination) to make sure that time on the course is dedicated by the students on a rather continuous basis. When it comes to tests, I avoid giving them at the beginning of the week to improve students’ chances to succeed, and I give weekly pop quizzes that I use to find out where understanding is w.r.t. the topic currently at hand. In other words, not only I have to prepare my lectures carefully, but I see myself partly responsible for the students’ success in the course. It is my view that students success is just not based on making sure I am prepared to deliver a clear and lucid lecture as best I can; but I have to make sure students test their understanding often and that I give them feedback on a timely basis. Otherwise, big surprises will be awaiting us all at the end of the term.

As a consequence of this view, I find myself constantly preparing homework, pop tests, and grading, besides lecture preparation. When it comes to grading, I usually give deadlines to fall on the last lecture of the week to have the weekend to grade and return graded work with comments the following week. And although I do this for 3 different courses per term, I resolved long time ago that I will not short-change the student for my benefit. It is my duty to give plenty of opportunity to each student to discover his (her) ability to do Computer Science, and (hopefully) love doing it, while avoiding falling on the (deadly?) procrastination trap by making sure I “creak” enough.