

# USCTIMES

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## NO BUSINESS AT LUNCH

BY CHRIS HORN

**Francisco Blanco-Silva**, instructor of mathematics, and **Lyndsey Reynolds**, sophomore psychology major, Supplemental Instruction peer leader

**LYNDSLEY:** I was an SI leader for Prof. Blanco-Silva's calculus course, and I had to figure out what he expects of students, what his teaching style is. During lunch I learned more about his research; he does some interesting work with artificial intelligence, which is interesting to me because of my psychology major and interest in cognition. So he's doing some really cool stuff with math, and knowing that helps me to become a good intermediary as an SI leader. I can pass along to students in SI sessions those things about him that they might not know. That can help develop a good rapport with students and make them more comfortable with him.

**FRANCISCO:** I think the barrier is broken the minute they ask to take me to lunch. You can feel it — the first few minutes are uncomfortable, and then they start asking about you and talking about what they want to do with their lives. We rarely talk about math at these lunches. Office hours are when they talk business, but there's no business at lunch.

**LYNDSLEY:** If you pair up with someone, it's not so intimidating. I went with a classmate to lunch with a biology professor, and it was less scary. You don't have to try to be on their level; you're not expected to be brilliant and impress the professor. Just prepare for it in advance, think of some questions so you have something to talk about. That way you can avoid any awkward silence.

**FRANCISCO:** Math can be so hard to convey, and it's a subject that's often so hated, so from day one I talk about using math in my own life. It's a motivational technique that conveys the usefulness of the subject but also demonstrates that I have a life outside of the classroom. There's something in that talk that tells them, 'This guy is not 100 percent about business. Maybe I can talk to him outside of class.'

When you're teaching a large class, the perception you have of the students is very general. But then you sit with them individually at lunch, and they start telling you about what they want to do with their lives. With one student, the moment we sat down together it was clear what he wanted to do when he finished his degree. He had this idea of becoming a middle man, gathering food from U.S. farms and exporting it to Japan. It was clear he had spent a great deal of time thinking it through. Pretty much every time you talk with a student one-on-one you get these surprising stories about their dreams and goals.

**LYNDSLEY:** So many parents say they never talked to their professors. I think it's a generational thing. Students here seem to be taking it to heart, the idea of getting to know their professors better. Don't believe what you hear — that professors don't have time for lunch. They'll make time for it if you ask them. **T**