



Photo by [Brandon Dill](#)

Business etiquette teacher Debbie Neal (far left) instructs (left to right) Kyle Walp, Aresha Hilliard, Crystal Burger and about a dozen other University of Memphis students on the proper way to stir sugar into a glass of iced tea during a 2-hour class at the U of M's Fogelman College of Business executive center this week.

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U of M course helps students polish skills for social side of the business world

By James Dowd
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It's not just books and balance sheets for business students at the [University of Memphis](#) these days.

Upperclassmen at the [Fogelman College of Business and Economics](#) are also learning some of the finer points of launching a successful career, such as impressing a potential employer during a lunch interview and using the appropriate utensils at a fancy company dinner.

Implemented this semester by Rajiv Grover, dean of the business school, the program is designed to produce well-rounded graduates capable of competing for top-level jobs. Funded by an anonymous donor, the single-session course -- which typically costs about \$75 per person -- is offered to students for a nominal \$5 fee that includes food and materials.

"This focuses on soft skills, above and beyond academics," Grover said. "It prepares students for the work world and for society in ways that some of them may not have experienced before. It gives them that extra edge."

Taught by Debbie Neal, founder of [The School of Protocol](#), the evening class features a "mocktail" party and a multicourse formal dinner, offering plenty of opportunities for students to polish their social skills.

One of the most important, Neal stressed, is also one of the simplest. And it's also one that many people don't master: the proper handshake.

"No dead-fish handshakes and no power grips that crush the other person's fingers, just a firm grasp that signals confidence and respect," Neal stressed. "Having a good handshake is one of the easiest ways to impress people, and it's something they remember for a long time. Getting that right goes a long way toward presenting a positive impression."

And in today's uber-competitive job market, smart grads capitalize on every advantage.

"If education and experience between job candidates are comparable, the decision on who gets hired may rest on how socially adept a person is," Neal explained. "All other things being equal, the employer is going to want someone who will represent the company in the best possible fashion. Etiquette enables you to do that."

For senior Angelique Guy, that materialized in short order when she wondered aloud if there's a proper way to ask for a second helping of dessert.

Quick answer: Not unless you're paying for it. But even then, Neal stressed, it's not the best image to present to a potential boss. Better to satisfy that sweet tooth after the interview is over.

"Everybody laughed when I asked, and that's OK. It was fun and a relaxed way to learn some valuable lessons," said Guy, 22. "I didn't know what to expect from this course, but I'm really glad I signed up for it. Everything I learned will be valuable to me in social settings for the rest of my life."

So far, the school has scheduled four of the courses and Neal will conduct one more this semester. The goal is to offer five of the sessions each semester, with 20 to 25 students in each section.

The experience was a little nerve racking at first for junior Matthew Rickman, but he heartily endorsed the program afterward.

"Well, I put my knife down the wrong way and made a few other mistakes, but by the end of it I felt pretty confident," said Rickman, 25. "I have a better idea what to do and what not to do in business and formal situations. It helped me understand how not to look like a complete idiot."

-- James Dowd: 529-2737

Fogelman College of Business and Economics upcoming etiquette course

What: Business and social etiquette course for FCBE students, featuring Debbie Neal, founder of The School of Protocol

When: 5:30 p.m., Tuesday

Where: Fogelman Executive Center at the University of Memphis

Details: For more information, contact the business school at 678-2432 or visit online at theschoolofprotocol.com