

When Students



Risk Failing

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Introduction

“During this stressful time of the semester, it can be motivating to reflect on students who were failing but who pulled through to succeed. How have you helped a student succeed who otherwise might have failed? What strategies seemed to encourage success in those ‘on the edge’? How have you helped to transform a stone in the oyster into a pearl? What are the important variables? What worked? What experiences can you share with colleagues (student identities appropriately obscured)? You may have a personal story of support from a teacher that made a difference in your life. Reflect on key elements that got you over the hump.”

Friday, October 31, 2008, FaCET sent the above message to all faculty at WKU and to a national listserv to garner faculty ideas on how best to assist “on the edge” students.

Responses we received follow.

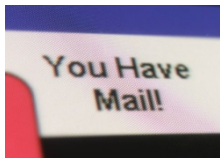
Early Identification

Any student who gets a D or F on my first exam in my introductory meteorology course is invited to sit down with me during office hours to go over the exam question by question. During this discussion, students often admit they do not read the chapters prior to attending class and thus are bewildered by much of the terminology I use in class. I explain to them that learning science is a lot like learning a foreign language in that without a strong grasp of the vocabulary (definitions), it is very difficult to read or write in the language. Thus, if they are not fluent in meteorological terminology, they will certainly struggle when trying to apply the concepts. I require those students to write down a definition in their own words to every word listed in the "Key Terms" section at the end of each chapter. I then schedule weekly meetings with these students to go over the homework assignments and make sure they can apply the definitions to the concepts we cover in class. Students who do this often improve their exams scores by more than 20% just from a better understanding of the definitions.

☞Greg Goodrich

In a smaller, upper division course, I send an email. Sometimes they are less aware than we think. They may not know.

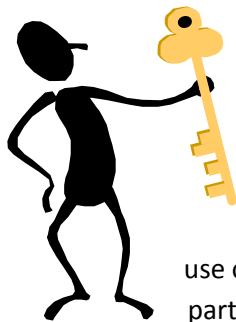
☞Anonymous WKU faculty



[I do] a very simple thing in an introductory class: after the first test, I email all those who failed to take the test. I ask those who didn't want to be registered in the class to drop before the date of automatic W. Those who missed, but still want to be in the class, are asked to contact me ASAP. Many contact me, with a large variety of mistakes or life challenges. I was able to get these students back on track before they were far behind.

☞Margie Bowker

Encouragement



What I feel works is encouragement. Encouragement, especially at the right time, can make all the difference to a student. Obviously the encouragement must be 100% genuine because the student will carefully filter it for flaws. I try to remind them that this class is short term. They will get through it. They can learn. They can perform. They can make themselves good stewards, as students, by changing their study/learning strategies to provide better success. They can be encouraged to make use of opportunities available to them (study groups, tutoring centers, office hours, class participation, etc).

I don't feel this sells anyone short or offers a sense of candy coating poor students. Students are made aware of their shortcomings by their exam scores. Low scores speak loudly enough. Our message needs to encourage them to seek their own potential.

☞Chad Snyder

For us [at the Gatton Academy], we see many elements that fit in this discussion. Two that stand out for me are a real relationship over time and creating a culture of success. The relationship over time is critical. Last year when we started, we had several students who hit the wall after the first round of tests. Despite being some of the “best and brightest,” many of our students received the lowest grades ever in their life. This led to some serious emotional turmoil. I remember one particular young lady who was distraught and was ready to go home at any moment. When we intervened by being available to her at any time, we rode out the wave. One night on a weekend, she and her mother called me trying to fight through the depression and desire to quit. We wrestled through the situation for over an hour, but it was what she needed at the time. Fortunately, over the next three or four weeks, she tasted success, and we could focus on her perseverance and accomplishment to lay a foundation for the weeks ahead. She is now a leader for other students in the Academy this year.

Secondly, the culture of success idea revolves around building a community that supports each other. While I can't attest to 100% involvement, the vast majority of our students surround each other through the good and bad. Now that we have a precedent of what a year in the Academy is like, the students push each other and support each other to challenge themselves. When someone is down, we have mentors and peers who have “been there and done that.” This helps build the confidence and the belief that they will survive any storm and come out stronger on the other end. In a strange way, it is like the scene from a *Harry Potter* movie when Harry sees himself fighting multiple enemies and realizes that he saw himself be successful previously so he knows he can do it now. When the students believe that others like themselves have crossed a challenging path, they then can believe in their own success.



I guess all this may sound a little hokey, but it is the relationships we build with students that are the most important element.

☞Tim Gott

A happy accident that happened with some of my DENG 055 classes was that I was backed up on grading, and they were overwhelmed with the content and the amount of work. Instead of marking their papers for accuracy, one day I gave everyone full marks for “effort.” The effect was astounding; they actually jumped out of their seats and said, “YES!!” “Woo Hoo!!” and “Thanks Miss Miller!” For some, it was the first A they had received in my class, and they certainly appreciated it. Now I call them “feel good points.” Of course, those who hadn't done the homework weren't so elated....

☞Lisa K. Miller

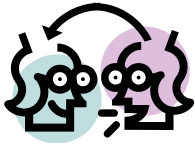


I nag, especially through e-mails. I also post all grades online [in our online course management system] WebCT. During the last week of class and finals, I send out e-mails issuing warnings such as, "Your average will be a D unless you turn in Paper 2." A lot of students come through at the end with this sort of coaxing, but my husband complains that the resultant avalanche of papers is hard on me.

One student last semester went from an F to a C- during finals week. Each time he turned in something, I'd tell him what his average was at that point. He turned in 3 items separately to hit the C at last. And, yes, I DO use late penalties-- but anything is better than a zero.

☞Bunny Paine-Clemes, Cal Maritime, CSU

One-to-One Connections



I have no pearls of wisdom as a new educator; however, as a very recent graduate and hope-to-be doctoral student, I have these thoughts. Be sure to have your door open to students and actively listen to their expressed needs. Seek to validate and clarify their messages both verbal and nonverbal. In a particular course that I was not performing as well as I had hoped, I found my teacher very approachable even though I felt anxious about discussing my inadequacies. I felt empowered to "hang in there" when the teacher told me ***she believed*** I had the intelligence and ability to be successful, and she was willing to share ideas of how I could make it happen. It was like a breath of fresh air, and I found renewed energy to complete the course successfully. As trite as this may seem, students need to know that their teachers believe what may seem elusive to the student to be realistically achievable.

☞Kim Vickous

Talk, talk, talk, email, email, email. Let them know that you care even if nothing can be done.

☞Terry Elliott

What has worked for me in two or three cases was to get the "student on the edge" to office hours, spend some time getting to know them, let them see you care about their success, and get them over a specific hurdle that was holding them back. Fear and/or emotional block was at least part of the hurdle in my cases.

On the flip side, I have a "student on the edge" who I can't get to office hours, and he continues to struggle, and I have decreasing optimism that he will pass the class. He's missed a scheduled appointment and several less formal invitations.

☞Brian Masck



I was a terrible student in high school. I was better as an undergraduate, but only later when I had a better understanding of what I wanted to do. Many students are in a real bind financially and their workloads have a real impact on their grades. I worked third shift for three years while I put myself through college. I would invariably get poor grades in gen ed classes because I couldn't study while on the clock, and my sleep schedule was messed up. I think many professors respond poorly to students in similar positions because they are too easy on the student or too hard. Professors need to work with a student who is struggling, but they need to be firm on what is expected and not allow a student to fall too far behind or not do the required work. In many cases, a face-to-face helps because both parties understand the underlying problem. Some students I think would be better off taking time off from school to regroup instead of sleepwalking through their classes. Once your grade point average suffers, it is difficult to build it up again.

☞ Brent Fisk

Resources for Further Exploration

- Brock, G. (1992, Spring). Teaching tip: Unprepared students? *Teaching Concerns Newsletter*. University of VA, Teaching Resource Center. Retrieved from http://trc.virginia.edu/Publications/Teaching_Concerns/Spring_1992/TC_Spring_1992_Brock.htm
- Graves, S. M. (2006, Oct. 3) Dr. Coach: A metaphor to teach by. *Exchanges: The On-line Journal*. Retrieved from http://www.calstate.edu/ITL/exchanges/classroom/1235_Graves.html
- Kirk, K. (Ed.) (n.d.). Motivating students. *Science Education Resource Center*. Northfield, MN: Carleton University. Retrieved from <http://serc.carleton.edu/NAGTWorkshops/affective/motivation.html>
- Tip #11: When there's just no way to pass. (2006, Fall). San Francisco: Academy of Art Institute. Retrieved from: <http://faculty.academyart.edu/resource/tips/1214.html>

FaCET Booklets

Visit <http://www.wku.edu/teaching/db/teachingtools> and click FaCET Booklet Index under Resources.

- *Cultivating Student Motivation*
- *Murphy's Law 101: When Things Go Wrong in the Classroom, Lessons Learned*