

HELPING AT-RISK COLLEGE STUDENTS SUCCEED

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Helping at-risk students to change their life values is fundamental to their success.

Bill* is typical of an at-risk college student. A likable fellow, he is involved in various campus organizations and in many ways seems to be the image of success. He attends class regularly and appears to devote adequate time to studying. However, very early in his freshman year, Bill is in trouble. Although his midterm grades are low, Bill feels sure that he will have no trouble raising them. But at the end of his first semester of college, he has earned a disappointing 1.6 grade-point average (GPA) and isn't quite sure why. All semester, Bill had confidently assured his parents that he was doing fine. Now, faced with their ire, he promises to do better the next semester, but finishes the year with a cumulative 1.3 GPA and thereby ends his college career.

At-risk college students like Bill share three major traits. First, they are sleep-deprived. The most important cause of poor academic performance is improper and irregular sleep. Sleep deprivation results in missed classes, dozing in class, unfinished assignments, poor health, and a host of factors that affect academic performance.

Second, at-risk students are unable to set and keep a daily schedule. At almost any suggestion by practically anyone, at-risk students like Bill will drop whatever they are doing and run off to the mall, take in a movie, attend a ball game, or join a party. They consistently underestimate the time required to do assignments and overestimate their ability to complete assignments by required deadlines.

*Not his real name.

Finally, at-risk students have incomplete self-images. They have not been exposed to prolonged image-building activities, relationships, experiences, books, or audio-visual programming. They enter college unable to visualize their gifts, talents, abilities, or strengths. Because they cannot "see" where they are going or what they want to become, many at-risk students randomly follow life/career paths that seem interesting at the moment but for which they may be ill-suited. Generally, at-risk students have trouble choosing academic majors and minors and therefore sign up for many unnecessary courses. Naturally, they run into repeated dead ends, thereby confirming their poor self-image.

Learning to Say Yes, No, and Maybe

Faced with a growing number of at-risk students, college and university administrators and instructors have two choices: (1) They can abandon these students to the consequences of their inadequate study habits, or (2) They can work with them to help them succeed. Professors who teach freshman classes, and are therefore uniquely positioned politically and pedagogically to help at-risk students, agree that the most valuable skill any college student can have is time management. However, time management is not some set of tricks to be mastered. It is a manifestation of one's basic life values. Therefore, helping at-risk students to change their life values is fundamental to their success. Regardless of the curriculum, textbook, presentation style, or theoretical framework, time management properly taught and understood involves a clear understanding of when and how to use three key words: No, Yes, and Maybe.

Universally, students who manage their time productively say

NO to opportunities that take them from one crisis to another. Such opportunities include heavy dating (going steady), late partying, substance abuse, skipped classes, extended weekend trips, excessive TV or video viewing, and time-consuming extracurricular activities and sports. When faced with opportunities to drift off target, at-risk students can learn to say NO successfully and instead offer productive comments like this: "I am in school to earn good grades that will help me become a professional person who earns a good lifetime income. Unless the proposed activity will help me get better grades, I choose to delay being involved and to focus on activities that help me scholastically."

Without exception, at-risk students who learn to say YES to activities and experiences that positively affect their academic success will achieve higher GPAs and greater personal satisfaction. For example, driving 100 miles to Chicago with one's friends on a Wednesday afternoon is a waste of valuable time. However, the same trip, with the same friends, taken as part of a class requirement, helps the student build lifelong friendships, earn better grades, and expand his or her knowledge base. At-risk students who are determined to graduate from college say YES to attending spiritual/religious services, academic support centers, tutorial sessions, course review periods, motivational/instructional dorm worships, visiting lectureships, on-campus artistic performances, and individual conferences with teachers.

MAYBE is the term commonly defined as delayed gratification. Although it may not seem so at the time, at-risk students do not have to permanently give up any activity or event that they find enjoyable. As one aphorism puts it, "One can enjoy everything that one wants, but not everything at the same time." When at-risk students face situations that might draw them

Picture Removed

Sleep deprivation is a characteristic of at-risk college students.

from their preset daily schedule, the correct response is the same one used by highly effective executives, managers, and leaders: "Let me check my calendar and get back with you. Do you have an E-mail address or voice mail?"

As at-risk students deliberately choose *when* to engage in unplanned events, they systematically break away from the demon of urgency and achieve a sense of peace and self-control. At-risk students must learn to review their preplanned study

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schedules and select a time and place for extracurricular activities that will not distract them from their main agenda: graduation with the highest GPA possible.

Visioning

At-risk college students also need help in identifying what they want to accomplish with their lives. This process is commonly known as visioning, goal setting, or finding one's passion. Learning increases exponentially when one is intrinsically motivated to work toward personally selected goals.

Many educators fail to help students develop intrinsic motivation because they focus on reasons for applying oneself and working toward success. This approach is self-defeating for two major reasons: First, students from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds resist believing that their parents' lifestyle will not always be theirs, while students from disadvantaged backgrounds often refuse to believe they are worthy of the lifestyle taken for granted by others. Second, external motivation is always an outgrowth of a relationship between the student and the educator. If a student has a negative view of the teacher-student relationship, he or she will resist, often at all costs, any attempt at external motivation.

Many at-risk students become high-performance learners the instant they learn to identify the deepest unmet needs of their inner persons, or, more importantly, to clarify what they fear the most. Though some evaluation instruments may be useful in revealing the inner person, this work occurs gradually. Helping students to visualize what they do *not* want to become can often be far more powerful than offering

them images of success. Fear is commonly thought to be an unacceptable emotion, but a rational, balanced, and realistic fear of prison, public humiliation, and loss of relationships has successfully motivated many people not to commit crimes. When students have a healthy fear of not graduating with their class, this may motivate them against great odds to graduate in order to avoid the shame of being left behind.

Learning About Learning Styles

Instructors can facilitate the learning for at-risk students by becoming aware of the work of psychologists such as Howard Gardner, who pioneered the concept of multiple intelligences in the early 1980s.¹ In his book, *Frames of Mind*, Gardner identifies seven different intelligences or abilities that influence students' aptitudes for learning. All students, to one degree or another, display linguistic intelligence—that is, they are able to use language to accomplish their daily responsibilities. In some students, particularly those who excel in writing or verbal communication, these intelligences are more refined.

Many students display musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and personal intelligences. That is, they seem to perform music effortlessly, understand and follow difficult mathematical proofs or arguments, conceptualize how parts relate to the whole, play sports with ease, or relate confidently to people. Gardner's multiple-intelligence theory implies that there are many equally valid ways to accomplish a task. Instructors therefore need to be flexible in allowing students to solve academic problems.

Of particular import to teachers is Gardner's contention that the various intelligences are not only sets of aptitudes but also means of knowledge transmission. Some tasks such as reading literature, writing compositions, or giving oral presentations through the use of books, essays, stories, pamphlets, speeches, recordings, or other multimedia presentations naturally build on linguistic skills. While all disciplines to one degree or another are presented via linguistic skills, each content area is characterized by its own unique in-

telligence. Music teachers will talk about musical interpretation, for instance, but musical intelligence is still central. Laboratory experiments will require demonstrations and manipulation of technologies and materials. Physical activities like baseball and basketball require students to employ bodily-kinesthetic intelligence.

Central to the transmission of all of these content areas are interpersonal skills, which influence how the instructor and students relate to one another. To be successful in teaching, instructors must motivate their students to want to learn, which requires interpersonal intelligence.

The Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky suggested that we learn best whatever is most like what we already know.² The implication is that teaching methods that favor one intelligence may not be successful with students whose aptitudes favor another. The most successful lessons employ multiple means of transmission. A lesson presented linguistically may be more effective if it incorporates logical or spatial demonstrations or if it also builds on positive interpersonal relationships between students and teacher.

Facilitating Success

Learning is neither natural nor fun for at-risk students, but fortunately, there are things that teachers and administrators can do to encourage their success:

Challenge at-risk students. Educators should encourage at-risk students to take whatever steps are required to improve their chances for success. They should inform students of the positive and negative consequences of academic performance. At-risk students must be held accountable for their actions. They need to realize that a low GPA can result in their being dismissed from school.

Enrich at-risk students' academic experiences. Provide at-risk students with special orientation sessions that feature hands-on experiences at the college's various academic enrichment centers. They must know what tutorial services are available and how to use them. Often, this means literally taking the students to various campus sites and providing them with actual assignments that can be completed while there.

Celebrate at-risk students' small successes. In weekly meetings, spend time

celebrating quizzes passed, exams taken, classes attended, and assignments submitted on time. What is often taken for granted by most students may represent a major cause for celebration among at-risk students. Even small steps toward overcoming non-productive lifestyles and study habits can motivate at-risk students to continue their drive for personal and academic excellence.

Help at-risk students practice their skills.

At-risk students need lots of practice in perfecting their time-management priorities and skills. The more successful programs have staff spend time weekly with at-risk students, carefully reviewing their daily activity schedules. At-risk students benefit greatly from constantly reworking their schedules until their program places what is important before what is fun. At-risk students often fear that the effort required to achieve academic excellence will cause them to miss out on desirable campus activities. Weekly assistance with setting priorities and making choices will help at-risk students to have a full and balanced college career.

Mentor at-risk college students. Because no one is an island and no one stands or falls alone, at-risk students need mentors who respectfully hold them responsible for their actions and behaviors. Mentors require that the person being mentored take the relationship seriously by agreeing to seek advice on a variety of topics and by obeying direct orders. Often, the mentor is not a faculty member, but rather someone from the administration, staff, or community. At-risk students often lack a point of accountability. The effective and consistent mentor provides this personal and academic structure.

Place at-risk students in good company.

At-risk students often find that studying is not so bad when it is done in the presence of others. One university organized a formal study lab and required at-risk students to sign contracts stating that they would regularly attend. The administrators soon made a pleasant discovery. Many non-at-risk students made use of the facility because it was a quiet place to study. When at-risk students participate regularly in a managed study environment, they overwhelmingly improve their attitudes and grade-point averages. One thoughtful teacher invites students to her home for a

three- to four-hour study party that concludes with games and refreshments.

Establish a cohort class schedule for at-risk students. At-risk students especially benefit from a cohort class schedule that requires them to attend many of the same courses. The net results are learning cross-pollination, lifelong friendships, and inclusive learning communities. As at-risk students interact daily to solve academic and personal challenges, they begin to understand that carrying one's responsibilities in a learning community is personally rewarding and consistently enhances grade-point averages. Moreover, teachers of individual cohort classes can construct a master list of objectives and suggested assignments that fulfill those objectives. At-risk students are motivated by discovering how work in one class benefits them in another class. This transfer of learning is the core objective of all educational systems, but it often eludes at-risk students.

Build at-risk students' self-esteem. At-risk students need the exhilaration and positive sense of self-esteem that comes from serving others. Most service opportunities are low-tech, impossible to botch, and generally appreciated by the recipients. Involving at-risk students in community clean-ups, assisting or visiting the elderly, tutoring, and literacy programs has three direct benefits. First, at-risk students learn the joy of being valued not for what they know, but for who they are. Second, many of them discover a career path while serving others. Third, many are able to see up close and personal the consequences of ignorance, poverty, and wasted opportunities in the lives of others. This firsthand knowledge and experience frequently motivates at-risk students to do all they can to avoid a similar future.

No Limits to Learning

Howard Gardner quotes from a book based on presentations to the Rome Club, in which Botkin, Elmandjra, and Malitza note that "[f]or all practical purposes there appear to be virtually no limits to learning."³ In spite of this optimistic assessment, many college students still have difficulty succeeding academically. Teachers are challenged to find ways to help them improve their chances.

Clearly Gardner believes, as we have attempted to suggest, that student success

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is directly related to motivation. Gardner notes that "proper motivation to learn may well be the single biggest difference between a successful and an unsuccessful educational program (and learner)."⁴ He offers a critique of the Suzuki violin method of Japan, noting that its remarkable success at motivating students is due to what he calls "a comfortable fit between the abilities and inclinations of the target population. . . and the particular values, opportunities of the society in which they happen to be growing up."⁵

As teachers, we must help our students learn specific information, tasks, and skills, but in doing so, we must not forget our responsibility for the at-risk students in our classes. We must encourage them and convince them that they can succeed. When we have achieved this goal, truly there will be no limits to learning. ☞

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4. Gardner, *Frames of Mind*, p. 373.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 382.