



Going the Extra Mile¹

Identifying and Assisting Struggling Students

By Rebecca D. Foushée and Merry J. Sleigh

At some point during our college and graduate school careers, most of us can remember struggling in a course or two. Although the courses and reasons for our difficulty may have varied, we probably remember our feelings of frustration and anxiety as we worked to grasp a new concept, perform well on assignments, or relate to professors. Unfortunately, when we finally move to the other side of the lectern, it is sometimes easy to forget about the students who struggle in our courses. We need sensitivity to the needs of at-risk students.

Traditional pedagogical styles are geared toward the majority of students, who fall near the middle of the distribution. However, exerting extra effort to enrich the course experience for students who fall below the middle can be personally and professionally rewarding. In this column, we address techniques designed to help teachers target and assist students who struggle in psychology courses. Our definition of "struggling students" encompasses those who attend class regularly (and appear to be trying) but display poor performance on class assignments and exams; those who perform inconsistently; those who appear less than fully engaged in course activities; and those who have life circumstances impeding progress.

To identify successful methods for reaching struggling students, we interviewed several psychology teachers from colleges and universities across the United States who had won Teaching Excellence Awards from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology. To gain students' perspectives, we surveyed 204 undergraduates (94 men, 110 women) from a large regional university. Finally, we interviewed professionals in disability and resource services and college administrative positions at two universities. From these interviews, we compiled a list of techniques for identifying and assisting struggling students that even busy teachers can implement without substantially increasing their workload.

WHY DO STUDENTS STRUGGLE?

In today's college classroom, you will likely encounter students in introductory and lower-level courses who vary in educational and occupational background, maturity level, interest in psychology, outside commitments, and motivation to perform college work. These individual differences in life circumstances may influence how easily students can process course material, but have little to do with a student's intrinsic ability to learn or perform well in college studies. Instead, other factors may have a greater influence on student success in the classroom (see Perlman & McCann, 2002, for students' perspectives on struggling and success on course exams). When we asked students to list reasons why they struggle, their top responses were 1) poor study habits, 2) poor class attendance, 3) poor time management, and 4) poor teaching.

College faculty and administrators listed these reasons why students have difficulty in college:

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Underdeveloped or Inadequate Study Habits. Many students come to college somewhat underprepared for college-level work. They have difficulty studying, taking notes, asking questions, managing time, setting goals, and actively learning. College work presents new challenges and requires a range of unintuitive skills that must be developed.

Poor Critical Thinking and Reasoning Skills. Poor reasoning abilities and critical thinking deficits may be due to the cognitive developmental stage of incoming, traditional-age students, or from lack of recent exposure to academic life and work in non-traditional students.

Life Circumstances that Interfere with Learning. These hurdles can include pregnancy and parenthood, inadequate financial resources, stress and anxiety from balancing obligations, dysfunctional personal relationships, working full-time, and poor integration into the "campus network" of fellow students. Unavoidable life circumstances or illness may cause frequent absences from class, compounding other problems.

Individual Differences in Learning Styles. Students often struggle when their learning strategy (i.e., auditory vs. visual learning) does not mesh well with that of a particular professor.

Poor Awareness of Teacher Expectations. Students are often unsure of what is expected in coursework, participation, and performance. Students may have incorrect expectations or beliefs about what constitutes "good work" in college.

Learning Disabilities. Many students are unaware that they have a learning disability, even if they have been assessed earlier in their school careers.

Psychological Impairments and/or Addiction. Mental illness or substance use, abuse, or addiction impairs academic performance, even if students believe otherwise.

IDENTIFYING STRUGGLING STUDENTS

According to students, 38 percent (range = 5 percent to 95 percent) are struggling in the average college classroom. When asked if they themselves were struggling in any or all of their courses, 29 percent of students said "yes" and 52 percent "no;" the remainder reported being neutral. Students' perceptions largely matched those of faculty and administrators. Faculty perceptions varied, depending on the type of institution at which they taught. Faculty at community colleges and public 4-year institutions estimated a larger percentage of struggling students than faculty at private colleges. It appears that many students struggle, so what are some ways you can target or identify these students? Our interviews of faculty, administrators, and college resource center personnel led to several suggestions.

Solicit Information from Students. Taking a baseline inventory of your students' needs at the beginning of the course helps identify those at risk. Informally talk with them during the first week. In large classes have students fill out index cards or questionnaires on the first day. Ask them to list their time commitments and time management techniques, study style and habits, reasons for taking your course and goals for the class, GPA, major, age, work schedule, resource needs, or previous experience taking psychology courses. Some teachers with expertise in their use administer the *Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire* (MSLQ; Pintrich et al., 1993) or the *Learning and Study Strategies Inventory* (LASSI; Weinstein, Schulte, & Palmer, 1987).

Provide Opportunities for Students to Self-Identify. Include a statement on your syllabi indicating your willingness to accommodate disabilities and requesting students to self-identify. Often, students will let

you know they need extra help if they perceive that you are approachable and sympathetic to their special needs. Public Law 504 - ADA states that at the college level, students are expected to become their own advocates and provide documentation of any disability. However, be sensitive to gender, ethnic, and cultural differences that may influence how comfortable students feel in revealing and discussing a disability.

MONITOR PERFORMANCE OR CHANGES IN PERFORMANCE

Students who change their performance during the semester may be experiencing a change elsewhere in their life. Students often find it harder to return to a classroom after a poor performance or extended absences. In these cases, teachers should quickly contact students regarding their performance and be sensitive to their students' perspectives and problems. Teachers are not expected to solve these problems, but can refer students to appropriate resources.

Techniques for Assisting the Struggling Student. Although some factors influencing whether or not students struggle in your courses are beyond your control, teachers who implement techniques that are under their control may minimize or counteract other forces that impede student success. Beyond using good teaching strategies (see McKeachie, 1999 or Perlman, McCann, & McFadden, 1999 for suggestions), here are some specific strategies to help struggling students.

SHOW STUDENTS YOU CARE

When students perceive that you care about their success, they will be more likely to ask for extra help. Try to get to know your students, within the realities of class size and your personal style, and build a sense of rapport, or positive emotional connection, with as many as possible. Buskist and Saville (2001) argue that rapport helps students feel part of the "community of learning." Learn their names, or at least recognize their faces, respect them as individuals, make yourself readily available, be engaging in the classroom, and make course content relevant to their lives. Reflect a positive attitude that the class is "worth it" for everyone, not just those who are psychology majors or graduate-school bound.

Focus on Skill Development, Not Grades. Struggling students may benefit if you shift your teaching strategy from outcome-focused (i.e., earning grades) to process-focused (i.e., building skills). Chances are that those who struggle initially will not miraculously learn to process course material without someone showing them how. Instead of focusing on course content and grades, try building students' learning skills, expanding their information processing strategies, or changing their cognitive style. Teach them how to use memory strategies, answer test questions, put concepts in their own words, and write logical papers. Good grades will follow their mastery of effective learning skills. Even more importantly, these skills will transfer to other courses.

Be Accessible. Being easily accessible outside of the classroom is important. Today's students defined accessibility in many ways, including through office hours, phone, e-mail, Web sites, discussion boards, and teaching assistants. One-on-one interactions with struggling students provide perfect opportunities to answer questions in a non-threatening and personal manner, to help students work on academic skill building, or to refer students to counselors, writing centers, or tutoring.

Be Sensitive. Be sensitive to struggling students in the classroom. Avoid the question, "Is anyone having trouble?" and replace it with "Would anyone like me to repeat that information?" Make personal contact with poorly performing students immediately after the first assignment. This initial contact may be unnerving for some, as struggling is a sensitive issue for many students. Always ask that students meet with you privately, rather than discussing problems in public. Students who have academic

difficulty frustrate many teachers and students are aware of our feelings. Showing students that we are genuinely interested in helping them may alleviate their anxiety in asking for extra assistance.

Encourage Use of Tutors and Study Groups. Struggling students often benefit from studying with other students. Create or encourage students to self-organize into study groups, where active involvement is emphasized. Students can engage in question and answer sessions, divide up material and present summaries to each other, or write sample test questions for the group to answer. You can also facilitate improved studying by utilizing tutors. If your department does not offer tutoring services through Psi Chi or the Psychology club, consider making a list of high-performing students from previous semesters who might be willing to serve as tutors.

ESTABLISH STUDENT MANAGEMENT TEAMS OR STUDENT GROUPS

Helping students help themselves is an excellent way to reach those who are at-risk. Use student groups and teams, which give students control over their own learning process and connect them with fellow students. Consider identifying several students at the beginning of a course to serve on a student management team or create focus groups made up of students who have concerns with the course. These teams advise the professor by relaying concerns, suggestions, and questions on behalf of others. Or, create diverse student groups of 5 to 7 members based on information you gathered from them. Assign students to different roles (e.g., recorder, spokesperson), where each role builds on different strengths and gives students of all abilities opportunities to shine. You can rotate students in roles or have students keep the same role throughout a course.

PROVIDE CLEAR EXAMPLES OF HOW TO SUCCEED

Students are not mind readers. To help them succeed, provide explicit examples of what you expect. Post or read in class good and bad quality papers, provide examples of multiple choice or essay questions, or show them exemplars of projects, exercises, exams, or problems from previous classes. Remember that students of all abilities struggle most when they are unaware of what is expected of them.

Good teaching helps all students, but especially the struggling one. Study guides, workbooks, handouts, and study sessions, as well as clear wording and directions on assignments on tests are particularly helpful. Offer various types of exam questions, review tests when they are returned, create a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom to reduce test anxiety, and work individually with students who perform poorly on assignments.

TEACH TO ALL LEARNING STYLES

Paying attention to your students' learning styles by teaching to both auditory and visual learners helps students struggle less. Vary class activities, lectures, and assignments to include multi-media components whenever possible.

BECOME TECHNOLOGY-SAVVY

Familiarity with technology can make you more accessible and responsive to students' needs. For example, most of today's students feel comfortable with electronic communication. Both students and professionals recommended contacting students via e-mail, because this format offers students flexibility in when and how to respond. When using this format, however, remember that emotions behind a message can be misinterpreted. Write carefully and interpret student comments generously.

ENCOURAGE QUESTIONS

Strive to create an atmosphere where students feel comfortable asking questions. Periodically stop your lecture or class activities to ask if anyone needs clarification. Create a question box into which students can anonymously drop questions. Begin the next class by answering those questions and encourage students to contact you via email, phone, or appointment for further explanation. Come early to class and stay after to help. Again, being readily available encourages struggling students to actively participate in their educational process.

PROVIDE RAPID FEEDBACK AND POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Struggling students often need encouragement and immediate feedback about their progress. Try to use positive reinforcement for skill building whenever possible, and keep in mind that struggling students may suffer in self-esteem or self-efficacy based on their prior classroom experiences. Providing at-risk students with opportunities to be recognized and reinforced for their achievements and successes helps them believe in their capabilities to achieve their educational goals. Reinforce students by acknowledging effort and improvement in addition to achievement. For example, provide summary information about test scores, but also report how many students improved their exam scores. Individually recognize students through short notes on papers or exams, in e-mails thanking students for obvious effort, or by personal and private conversations after class.

UTILIZE CREATIVE ASSIGNMENTS

For both in-class and out-of-class assignments, teachers in institutions or courses where students typically struggle should allow room for creativity and individuality in learning style. Sometimes, students who struggle with traditional assignments excel if they can respond in non-traditional ways. Consider assignments that allow students to build on their strengths and use their talents. Some teachers have students choose their own assignments from an assortment of options. For example, have students choose to write papers or take exams. Suggest that they read and summarize a primary article on a psychological topic, or gather observational data on that concept and report their findings. Other teachers use strategies such as active learning, role-playing, service learning, and journal writing. Many faculty focus on teaching fewer concepts at a deeper level of cognitive processing. Almost all encourage students to use study guides that accompany texts and attempt to relate course material to students' lives.

INFORM STUDENTS OF AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Most colleges and universities offer courses in learning strategies and study skills. Resources such as writing centers, learning resource centers, and counseling centers, tutoring programs, student support groups, and health and child-care centers, are often provided on campus. Struggling students could benefit from these resources, but have to know they exist before they can use them. Even if you cannot help students with life issues impacting their academic progress, you can point them to whatever resources your college or university provides.

ADJUST EXPECTATIONS

Your struggling students will likely not earn the same grades as other students. However, grades are not always the best measure of success in learning. Good teaching may manifest itself in students who get C or D grades instead of a D or F, or students who modify their thinking or studying style because of their class experience.

EVALUATE YOUR TEACHING STYLE

The teacher-student relationship is a partnership where you serve as a facilitator of student success. For some students, success comes easily. For others, you may have to implement different methods to help them reach their full potential. Evaluate your "teaching tools" by having colleagues periodically evaluate your teaching for weaknesses that may be particularly detrimental to students with disabilities or certain learning styles. Or, have students develop profiles of "good" and "bad" teachers based on their needs, perceptions, and previous experiences. Students appreciate teachers who show a willingness to take responsibility for their teaching, so ask struggling students, "What can I do to help you in this class?"

FINAL WORDS OF WISDOM

Remember that students bring different strengths and weaknesses to the classroom. Striving to maximize the potential of all students regardless of where they fall on the learning continuum can be highly rewarding for both you and your students. Try to inspire students and make course content relevant to their personal lives. Seriously evaluate your beliefs about how and why students learn, as well as what you hope to accomplish in teaching. Actively engage and create connections with struggling students however you can from the beginning of the course. Inform students about campus resources that are available for them. Finally, celebrate the diversity of students and tailor your teaching methods to different learning styles whenever possible.

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