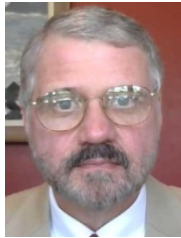




Center for Teaching and Learning Newsletter

26 September 2018

Message from the Director



In conjunction with several other units on campus, CTL is focusing a significant portion of its programming for the 2018-19 academic year on the topic of “struggling students.” Traditional approaches to teaching are likely to be ineffective or insufficient for non-traditional students. Students have difficulty in our classes for variety of reasons: poor high school preparation, financial pressures, personal and family problems, physical and mental health issues, and unclear guidance on how to succeed.

Each of these requires a different intervention and strategy, and not all of them can be redressed by instructors or even the university as a whole. One common response from faculty, however, can lay the groundwork for student success. This is demonstrating understanding and empathy to student problems rather than automatically assuming that the students lack intelligence or are lazy. This does not require relaxing standards, but it might require some flexibility in the timing of when those standards are met.

Upcoming Events

- 9/27 Invited Speaker: Dr. Jane Thierfeld Brown, *Supporting Students on the Autism Spectrum*, co-sponsored with OSA
 - 10/1 Graduate Professionalization Week: Establishing Authority and Developing Your Teaching Persona
 - 10/9 Student Panel: “What I Wish My Professor Knew,” co-sponsored with OUE
 - 10/15 1-3p TA Workshop: Developing a Teaching Philosophy & Portfolio, co-sponsored with OGS
 - 10/16 Faculty & TA Workshop: Designing Courses to Promote Intrinsic Motivation
 - 10/24 Faculty & TA Workshop: Course Policies and Their Hidden Implications
 - 10/31 Invited Speaker: Dr. David Rettinger, *A Positive Approach to the Serious Problem of Academic Dishonesty*
 - 11/7 Faculty & TA Workshop: Teaching and Reaching All Students
 - 11/13 International Center Workshop: Intercultural Competence in the Classroom
 - 11/28 Faculty Workshop: Writing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy
 - 2/8/19 9a-12p 4th Annual *Excellence in Teaching* Lecture: Dr. Kathleen Gabriel, *Creating the Path to Success in the Classroom: Teaching to close the graduation gap for minority, first-generation, and academically unprepared students*
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Teaching Tip

Every faculty member has followed a unique path to where they are today. Our students are following their own paths. To demonstrate that there is no single best pathway, consider sharing with your students the career paths that you have followed, and the obstacles that you have confronted and overcome along the way. Last year, 24% of UTD students who were new to college reported household income under \$20,000. Of the new first-year students, 27% reported working during their first year. Among first-year transfer students, 56% were working. Students who are not necessarily following a straight, simple career path are likely to find it reassuring to learn that faculty members have not always followed straight or easy paths, either.

Research into Practice

Students often come into our classrooms feeling academically inadequate and fearful of being found out as imposters. They want to learn and are willing to work hard to do so, but worry about the assumptions they think professors make about them. This sense of being judged, or believing that others are noticing them more than is likely, is what social psychologists call the *spotlight effect*. Several strategies can be used to overcome students' fear of self-conscious embarrassment:

1. Communicate your understanding that introversion and shyness are not indicators of disinterest or disrespect.
2. Warn students in advance that you are going to call on them, and follow through. Give them time to prepare both academically and emotionally. For example, ask certain students to prepare an answer to a question that will be posed in a later class session. Plan for all students to take turns doing so.
3. Talk with students about the process of developing a professional or academic identity separate from their private self. Practice transparency by explicitly telling students that you are intentionally creating a safe space for them to practice speaking up, sharing ideas, and taking risks.

For more on this topic, see:

Cox, R. D. (2009). *The college fear factor: How students and professors misunderstand one another*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kaufman, P., & Schipper, J. (2018). *Teaching with compassion: An educator's oath to teach from the heart*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Newkirk, T. (2018). *Embarrassment: And the emotional underlife of learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

What the Students Say

It is not that struggling students fail to understand that they are having problems in one or more classes; they recognize failing or near failing grades on exams and assignments as well as instructors do. Rather, they tend to have unrealistic expectations about the future, and their ability to pull themselves out of the holes that they have dug. Some misconceptions stem from preparing the same way as before, only more so – “if I just study longer for the next test ...” The problem is that unsuccessful strategies are not more effective when repeated more frequently. In other instances, students depend on everything going right for the rest of the semester, failing to plan for setbacks, unexpected demands on their time, and other impediments to success; in fact, the likelihood that the equivalent of a “hail Mary pass” in

football will succeed is low. Accordingly, many or most students won't ask for help from the instructor, believing that they can solve the problem themselves.

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