

Are Your Students On Course to Graduation?

A decade ago I was chairing the Student Success Committee at my college, searching for effective strategies to address attrition and success rates. As is typical of community colleges, only 50% of our students who enrolled in the fall returned the following fall (for universities this rate is only 67%: see ACT data: act.org/path/policy/pdf/retain_trends.pdf). Success and retention rates in our basic skills courses were even worse, especially for at-risk student populations.

I examined multiple intervention strategies, but I failed to find any program with components that would speak to my students' lives and learning challenges, and with data to establish that it had a measurable impact. Truth be told, I wasn't just looking for any impact, but a significant increase in student retention and success rates. To go from 50% to 52% retention is not my idea of educational reform and innovation. My goal is to increase both student retention and success rates to over 90%. Across the state of California. And across the United States.

Granted, I'd found some promising ideas, but nothing that convincingly and effectively applied the theories to best practices that students (and educators) could use consistently, with significant results. What to do?

As I pondered this challenge, I received an email from the Director of our EOPS program. I was invited to attend an On Course Workshop with Dr. Skip Downing. Curious, I decided to attend to see what I could learn. It turned out I had a lot to learn. By the end of day one, I began to take detailed notes on Downing's research and strategies. By the end of the last day of the workshop, I had drafted an On Course learning communities model. The following fall, our college piloted this model and our retention rates increased by 22% in the first semester. Not bad. I then discovered that results as good (or better) were not atypical for colleges using Downing's approach. In the last three years, Mt. Hood College (Oregon) has produced consistent results in the range of 26-27%, and this with a sizeable (450+) cohort of students with higher risk factors for dropout than the average scores among the comparison group. Many other colleges have had notable increases in retention and success rates (<http://oncourseworkshop.com/Data.htm>). I'm sure that this approach is not the only answer, nor will it address all of the wide range of issues faced by students today, but it certainly seems promising.

So what is this intervention? As Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner argue, "Good learners are good learners precisely because they believe and do certain things that less effective learners do not believe and do. And therein lies the key" (Teaching as a Subversive Activity, Dell 1969). The On Course approach offers students the opportunity to examine and revise beliefs and behaviors that sabotage their academic success. Hunter R. Boylan (Director of the National Center for Developmental Education) also believes that successful educational preparation must address issues well outside of academic readiness:

"Students fail to do well in college for a variety of reasons, and only one of them is lack of academic preparedness. Factors such as personal autonomy, self-confidence, ability to deal with racism, study behaviors, or social competence have as much or more to do with grades,

retention, and graduation than how well a student writes or how competent a student is in mathematics." (<http://www.nade.net/documents/Articles/MakingtheCase.pdf>)

Synthesizing best practices from innovators in psychology, education, business, sports, and personal effectiveness, the goal of On Course is to strengthen the factors that Boylan mentions?and more. The On Course Success Principles represent eight of the essential "things" that good learners believe and do. By guiding students to adopt these principles and tools, it empowers them to become more effective partners in their own education, giving them the outer behaviors and inner qualities to create greater success in college and in life. As Downing argues, successful students:

- 1) accept self-responsibility, seeing themselves as the primary cause of their outcomes and experiences;
- 2)discover self-motivation, finding purpose in their lives by discovering personally meaningful goals and dreams;
- 3) ...master self-management, consistently planning and taking purposeful actions in pursuit of their goals and dreams;
- 4) ...employ interdependence, building mutually supportive relationships that help them achieve their goals and dreams (while helping others to do the same);
- 5) ...gain self-awareness, consciously employing behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes that keep them on course;
- 6) ...adopt life-long learning, finding valuable lessons and wisdom in nearly every experience they have;
- 7) ...develop emotional intelligence, effectively managing their emotions in support of their goals and dreams; and
- 8) ...believe in themselves, seeing themselves capable, lovable, and unconditionally worthy as human beings. (oncourseworkshop.com)

These life skills are vitally important to both college success and workplace success. The SCANS report indicates that employers are seeking these same skills as basic competencies in their employees (<http://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS>). If our students, so many of whom are already working while attending college, can become more successful in both work and college environments, we have an approach that addresses both educational and career reform and innovation. My students' ability to succeed in college is dependent on their ability to perform well at their jobs, and I intend to give them tools that will support them in achieving their goals once they reach their desired careers after graduation.

I recognize that there is no one solution that will address student success. The On Course approach has worked with many of my students, but not all of them. Using On Course in conjunction with learning communities is likely to have been an important factor in the success of our intervention model at Mission College, as well as some of the others

(oncourseworkshop.com/data). Some students will not be ready to assume greater responsibility for their education, though there are other life and learning skills they could use to great benefit. I also used a variety of other approaches (introducing concepts of transfer errors, for example) with my second language students, and have discovered that these strategies work best with students who simultaneously apply life skills concepts such as personal responsibility and self management strategies. Certainly I have students with learning differences who need significant support that On Course does not address. Other students will also need support that differs from the On Course model as well, so it is clearly not a fit in every instance, but I should note that over the last decade I have observed over 2000 students applying On Course strategies in my classroom with one consistent result: they have improved their learning outcomes through their use of self management strategies.

My research on these principles supports my classroom experience. Studies support the importance of emotional intelligence for college student success (Goleman, 1995; Brearley 2001; Low & Nelson, 2006). Lam and Kirby (2002) argue that overall emotional intelligence, perceiving emotions, and regulating emotions all contributed positively to individual cognitive-based performance (139). Shifting greater responsibility to students increases motivation. According to Pintrick (2004), the assumption of increased responsibility is "critical in the classroom" and operates in conjunction with experiences of autonomy to improve learner motivation (399). Educators, across disciplines, using learner-centered best practices promote effective learning, as evidenced by the latest studies in brain-based learning (Sousa, 2006). They are more likely to facilitate a set of experiences that also contribute to increased motivation through student autonomy (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Collaborative and cooperative learning structures, such as case studies for problem-based learning or paired learner tasks to deliver content appear to offer an effective opportunity to support experiences of student motivation (Bruffee, 1993; Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998).

Once I recognized how critical the On Course principles are for my students, and once I demonstrated that they worked at my college in increasing retention, I felt that I had a responsibility to ensure that my students had access to such strategies, in fact students well beyond my own college. This brought me back to my goal to increase both student retention and success rates to over 90% statewide and nationwide. Many thousands of educators, across multiple disciplines, from over 350 colleges and universities have incorporated these learning and success principles. They have developed and refined their student success programs. They are taking action and creating measurable results (<http://oncourseworkshop.com/Data.htm>). I am certain that it's possible to reach 90% retention and success rates, should we make this goal our priority, and if we work together through a shared commitment to student success.

One group of educators at a workshop decided to create a national conference where educators can share best practices using these strategies. Based on many volunteer efforts, over the last three years, over one thousand educators have now attended the annual On Course National Conference (<http://oncourseworkshop.com/Conference.htm>), participating in over 100 active learning sessions. Sharing best practices across disciplines and among colleagues from a wide

variety of higher education settings is essential in ensuring continuing innovation in this life skills approach to increasing student retention and success rates.

What On Course does for students is impressive, but what it offers educators is equally powerful. My experience at Downing's workshop impressed upon me very deeply the importance of paying greater attention to how meaningful learning unfolds in the classroom, to methods of active learning, addressing varied learning styles and learner-centered models that draw from current research. Downing notes that learner-centered strategies "are designed to engage learners in the active construction of knowledge" and are guided by the following instructional principles:

Students construct learning primarily as a result of what they think, feel, and do (and less so by what their instructors say and do). Consequently, in formal education, the deepest learning is provided by a well-designed educational experience. The most effective learners are empowered learners, those characterized by self-responsibility, self-motivation, self-management, interdependence, self-awareness, life-long learning, emotional intelligence, and high self-esteem. At the intersection of a well-designed educational experience and an empowered learner lies the opportunity for deep and transformational learning and the path to success-academic personal, and professional.

<http://oncourseworkshop.com/On%20Course%20Principles.htm>

I am grateful to have found an intervention that works with many of my most at-risk students, as well as with my highest performing students. Many more of my students make better choices, both inside and outside the classroom. They come to class prepared to learn, solve problems that impact their ability to attend class or complete assignments, and demonstrate more qualities of highly motivated students. Downing's work is in alignment with much that I've researched on learner motivation, emotional intelligence, systems thinking, leadership, brain-based learning and creating learning communities.

Newly inaugurated President Obama recently called for all Americans to obtain at least one year of higher education or career training. This is a tall order. Using On Course in conjunction with other innovative interventions that promote student success, I think we have some wonderful opportunities to support many more students in reaching their academic goals.

I'll leave the last word to Downing, addressing the essential shift from teacher-centered to a learner-centered educational model:

"The On Course Instructional Principles are antithetical to the beliefs that the instructor's primary role is to profess knowledge and that what the teacher speaks is what the student learns. Consequently, On Course has much to offer educators who seek innovative ways to engage students in active learning, helping them to relinquish learned passivity or defiance and once again become responsible and empowered partners in their own education and growth."
(oncourseworkshop.com)

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