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August 20, 2014

Reality Check: Helping to Manage Student Expectations

By: [Maryellen Weimer, PhD](#) in [Teaching Professor Blog](#)

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Most students begin college, the academic year, and new courses motivated and optimistic. Many first-year students expect to do well because they were successful in high school. Some are right, but others will only find similar success if they work much harder than they did in high school. Yet most start out expending the same level of effort. They will talk with their classmates and convince each other that an exam covering three chapters can't be that hard, so they put off studying and then "look over" the chapters the night before—happily dealing with any and all interruptions and distractions.

It's not until the day of the test, as they're confronted by a number of questions they can't answer, that the anxiety sets in. They will sit staring at the questions and guessing at far too many answers, before turning in the test and then persuading themselves that chances are still pretty good for a B.

A lot of students continue to hold unrealistic expectations throughout the course even in the presence of mounting evidence to the contrary. A student can be going into a cumulative final exam with a solid C, but she believes she is going to ace that final and come out of the course with a high B. That may be possible in a few courses, but it's a long shot in others and is simply not going to happen in most courses.

Adjusting expectations

Unrealistic expectations present teachers with a conundrum. We want students to believe in themselves. We want them committed to doing well. But we need them to be realistic about what success demands.

So, we tell them what they will need to do. Sometimes we try to get their attention with hyperbole. Most of us no longer offer the "look to your right, look to your left. . ." admonition used when we were students. But many of us do still tell students that they need to invest two hours of study for every one hour in class. Yes, that's true of some courses, but it is no longer true of most courses. Is it true of your courses? I recommend evidence-based answers, gently noting that unrealistic student expectations are not adjusted by equally invalid faculty declarations.

The most persuasive claims about how much work it takes to do well in the course are those delivered by other students. Teachers can control those messages a bit by sharing advice from former students on the course website, in the syllabus, or by getting permission from some carefully selected former students that students can contact if they'd like to talk with someone who has taken the course.

Beyond telling, most of us also try to make the expectations more realistic with an early assessment in the course—a first test, early paper, or some other kind of graded work. And some of us are a bit tougher on this initial work. We let the lower-than-expected grade convey the message that this is going to be harder than many students anticipated.

When trying to help students adjust their expectations, it's good to remember how strongly students believe performance is ability based. If they get feedback (which their performance deserves), they are quick to conclude that they can't do it, so they drop the course and perhaps later leave college. What we have them do immediately after the tough feedback is just as important as that initial expectation-correction activity. Is it another test or paper? Is it an opportunity to redo what they didn't do well initially? Is it having a policy that removes the lowest score from the final grade calculation? Is it leading a class discussion about the value of high expectations and sharing realistic ideas about how to reach them?

I remember one faculty member telling me that he had students respond to their first disappointing test grade with a goal-setting activity. He'd start with the prompt: "So what's a realistic amount of grade improvement for your next exam?" After that, each student created a list of what they needed to do and when they needed to do it in order to accomplish that goal. The instructor provided regular reminders and a review of the goal and accompanying activities before the next test. That exam debrief included discussion of who reached their goal and why they did or did not, followed by another round of goal setting.

Setting realistic expectations is an important life skill, and our courses can provide students a chance to learn how.

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[a100ciacierta](#) 1p · 7 weeks ago

+2

Great post. Only last year I tried a new way to "recover" students from a disappointing first mid-term test which almost 50% of the class had failed. I made an appointment with every one of them (80 in the class). Just a 10 minute chat about their performance with a little bit of encouragement and a "yes, you can" message. It worked wonders: all but one passed the course and the average final grade was a B. Give it a go...

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David Cooper · 7 weeks ago

+2

Students who are new to college often have unrealistic expectations about the work required because of grade inflation in high school. Another culprit is the practice of giving students "extra credit" to compensate for a poor grade in high school. In college whatever grade you get on a paper or exam is one that you have to live with. This is a reality check for many first semester freshmen.

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linda liu · 7 weeks ago

+1

extra credit and being able to retake deliverables create real hurdles to overcome when teaching freshman...I spend a lot of time being very clear and open about grading expectations, and that they should focus on studying and doing well on regular credit items, rather than try to make it up through extra credit...

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Kenneth Bell · 6 weeks ago

+1

Some good thoughts, but leaving some screaming questions. If 2 hours of study for each hour of class perhaps used to be realistic, but today is apparently a myth, a) What is the truth about typical expectations for study time today? and b) have we in fact dramatically lowered the bar in our expectations to match the reality of contemporary students?

Also, not only do students believe academic performance is ability based, but they know no standard other than their peers, and expect all grades to be relative to their peers. The possibility that they and their peers might all be failing against some absolute standard does not compute in their relativistic worldview.

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[Mark Helm](#) 1p · 6 weeks ago

+4

Great post and some helpful comments. One thing that hasn't been mentioned, however, is rubrics. I find that using a simple, clear rubric containing measurable criteria helps students understand what's expected and mitigates head-scratching over less-than-stellar grades.

Also, I agree that extra credit can be a slippery slope. I find students come in expecting to be able to blow off assignments or bomb exams because they can "fix" lapses in judgment by doing extra credit. To avoid fostering that kind of mind-set, any extra credit I offer is applied at the end of the term, and only available to students with a "C" or better in the course. And students can never earn enough points to raise their grade by more than a half step. Allowing students to turn a "C" into a "B" or an "A" via the fairy dust of extra credit sends a terrible message.

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Kris Palmer · 4 weeks ago

+1

As an administrator who is also a faculty member at a junior college for over 20 years, I think this is a very intriguing post. Similar thoughts are regularly becoming a topic of conversation at our institution. As has been stated, there are several issues that contribute to this problem (and it is a problem, both for the student and for the course instructor). It seems many first year students come into college very indoctrinated in the idea that everyone is a winner, because no one is allowed to lose. However, recovering from failure is a significant part of the learning process. If this were not so, no one would have learned to walk. Used correctly, failure can be a great learning opportunity. Along with the winner mentality, many students come into college thinking that they already know everything, and if they don't know it, they can always just find the answer on google. They think that studying is unnecessary. Teaching the students how to study and how to actually learn becomes a necessary aspect of almost every beginning course, and it then needs to be re-emphasized regularly thereafter. As stated in the post, rightly stated feedback is important, and I would agree with the comment about the importance of clear rubrics. Like most issues in the classroom, there are no magic answers or quick fixes.

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