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Helping Failing Students Part 2: Understanding, Reaching, and Helping Passively Failing Students

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In Part 1 of this essay (Buskist & Howard, 2009), we made a broad distinction between two types of failing students — those students who actively fail our classes and those students who passively fail them. Actively failing students, despite their efforts to pass our classes, nonetheless perform poorly in them. In contrast, passively failing students exert little or no effort to pass our classes, and unsurprisingly they perform poorly. Because actively failing students attend class regularly and often respond to our attempts to contact and help them (electronically or in person), our attempts to assist them to improve their grades is often met with gladness. However, the story is often quite different with passively failing students: They don't come to class and quite often do not respond to our prompts to drop by our offices and discuss their performance in our classes. Here, in Part 2 of this essay, we focus on (a) understanding the mindset and behavior of passively failing students, (b) improving our efforts to contact them, and (c) helping them improve their academic status in our classes.

Understanding Passively Failing Students

To be sure, passively failing students are an elusive bunch. Because attempts to contact these students border on futility, we took an alternative tack in our quest to understand their thinking and behavior — we interviewed 23 repentant or otherwise reformed former passively failing students. As group, these students once exhibited all or many of the characteristics of passively failing students, but for various reasons, they “saw the light,” changed their errant ways, and are now passing, and in some cases even excelling, in their courses.

Our discussions with passively failing students made one thing clear: There is no single underlying explanation for passive failure. In fact, we found seven likely reasons for why some students passively fail: lack of personal direction, parental and peer pressure to go to college, laziness, lack of confidence and embarrassment, family or relationship problems, alcohol and drug problems, and heavy involvement in social and athletic activities. These categories are not mutually exclusive; students often mentioned two or more of these explanations in describing their individual situations. Nonetheless, for clarity's sake, we discuss each category separately. Interestingly, some of these students lacked the study skills necessary to succeed academically earlier in their college years, but others did not — they simply choose not to apply them.

Lack of Personal Direction

By far the most common reason given by students for their past passive failures was that they “just didn't know what they were doing in college.” They had no focus and no clear goals. They didn't know why they should take any particular class or what specific course of study they should pursue. Rather than tolerating this uncertainty and using the first or second year of college to work assiduously toward completing their general education requirements, they seemed uninterested in general education courses and overwhelmed with the myriad choices in choosing a major.

Parent and Peer Pressure to Go to College

Another common reason why students fail to become engaged in their courses early in their college career is that they simply didn't want to be in college at the time. Students may enroll in college because of strong parental urgings to attend college following high school or because of pressure from their peers. However, attending classes confirmed their initial feelings that they did not want to be there, and soon they stopped attending most or all of their classes. Some of these students found one or two classes interesting, but not sufficiently enough to inspire them to continue attending other classes.

Laziness

Many students noted that grades did not motivate them either to attend class or study. Thus, they attended and prepared for class only to achieve some minimal level of success. Many of these students hoped for Cs in their courses, but they grossly underestimated the effort necessary to achieve even this level of mediocrity. When faced with the fact that they must devote more time to their studies, they were unable to overcome the inertia that had already been established in the first several weeks of the semester.

Lack of Confidence and Embarrassment

In some cases, we found that students started out with good intentions, and at least for a short while, studied hard for their courses. Unfortunately, these efforts did not pay off, and these students received low or failing grades, which in turn caused them to lose

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confidence in their ability to do well in their courses. As a result, they developed a sense of inferiority, became discouraged, and found it difficult to face their teachers and their classmates because they were embarrassed about their performance. From their perspective, the easiest way out of this situation was not to seek help from their teachers, but to stop attending class altogether — effectively avoiding any potentially embarrassing situation with both teachers and peers.

Family or Relationship Problems

Several students reported that major distractions involving family members or significant others distracted them from attending to their school work. Events such as parental divorce or separation, grave or terminal illness of a family member, or breakup with a romantic partner demanded so much of their emotional, social, and intellectual resources that the importance of school work seemed trivial by comparison. They found it impossible to remain focused enough on their studies to pass their courses. Embarrassed by their performance and intimidated by the thought of talking with their teacher — a virtual stranger — about the nature of their family or relationship problem, these students simply withdrew from the academic world.

Alcohol and Drug Problems

Another common impediment of achieving any degree of academic success among passively failing students is alcohol and drug use. Simply put, these students become heavily involved in the party scene and leave little to no room for studying or attending class. Indeed, for some students, the physical effect of using drugs and alcohol prevents them from attending class and undercuts their motivation to attend their classes (e.g., being drunk during class time or suffering from a hangover).

Heavy Involvement in Social and Athletic Distractions

Finally, some students become passive college failures because they are so heavily involved in on-campus social organizations or athletics that there is little to no time or energy left over for the demands of class work. For these students, academic commitment becomes less important than extracurricular activities. In some cases, class work may even be the lowest priority. Ironically, these students cannot see the direct link among passing grades, staying in school, and the opportunity to remain involved in social and/or athletic programs.

In sum, a general conclusion that we can offer is that passively failing students often fail to comprehend the long-term consequences of their decision to become passive failures. Regardless of the reasons for their academic woes, passively failing students lose or do not acquire the necessary motivation to attend class, complete assignments, and pass tests. At some point, passively failing students simply give up on their school work and, with apparent determination, ignore faculty attempts to get them back on track. The question, of course, is there anything faculty can do to help these students?

Reaching Passively Failing Students

The process or act of becoming a passively failing student may have emergent properties — it is unlikely that any student starts the term with the goal of failing it. It is more likely that becoming a passively student develops over time as the student experiences academic difficulty as the term unfolds. Granted, some students may be quicker to “give up” than others, but nonetheless, there may be a small window that is open for possible intervention. We offer four suggestions for taking advantage of this open window; these suggestions may be used in addition to, or in place of, the recommendations we offered for contacting actively failing students (Buskist & Howard, 2009). The idea is to open up lines of teacher-student communication from the beginning of the term and to help prevent students from developing a passively failing posture at anytime thereafter.

Connecting With Students on the First Day of Class

Most writers agree that the first day of class is critical in setting the tone for the course for the remainder of the semester (e.g., Davis, 2009, Forsyth, 2003). Setting the tone for the course includes, among other things, the teacher creating the favorable impression that he or she is a respectful and caring individual whose primary goal is to help students learn and appreciate the subject matter. Teachers generate this impression by establishing a warm and inviting conversation with students (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006); being friendly and expressing an interest in students (Goss Lucas & Bernstein, 2005); and engaging in immediacy behaviors such as using humor, addressing students by name, and smiling (Wilson & Taylor, 2001).

These sorts of behaviors would likely send a signal to all students, not just the potential failing students, that the teacher is approachable, personable, and supportive. By establishing this mindset in students on the first day of class, it may be possible to (a) diminish the hesitancy that some students have in initiating a conversation with a teacher and (b) increase student receptivity in the teacher's attempt to establish contact or communication with him or her. By creating the impression that we genuinely care for our students' academic welfare on the first day of class, students who otherwise may give up, may find reason for hope — from the student's point of view this sentiment may effectively translate into, for example, “My teacher seems like the kind of person who will understand my struggles as a student and help me confront them so I don't fail this class.”

Giving Early Quizzes

Although Davis (2009) touts the advantages of testing in the first 3-4 weeks of the semester with respect to identifying potential at-risk students, we believe that waiting this long to assess student learning and its attendant problems may be a mistake. With nearly a quarter of the semester over, students have started to establish daily patterns of activity with respect to studying, recreating, and partying — and some of these patterns may not be beneficial to academic success. As an alternative, we suggest that teachers quiz their students by the end of the first or second week of class (quizzes may be low- or high-stakes). The teacher should then contact students who score particularly poorly on this first quiz and invite them to stop by his or her office to chat briefly about the quiz. During this meeting, the teacher might inquire about the student's study habits and offer appropriate suggestions for improving them.

Early quizzing provides two advantages over early testing. First, it identifies potential at-risk students earlier in the semester than early testing does. Second, it provides the teacher an earlier opportunity to provide students corrective, but encouraging, feedback on study habits and techniques.

Inviting Students by the Office

One effective way to get to know your students quickly at the beginning of the semester is to invite each one of them by your office for a short (5-10) minute “get to know you” meeting. These meetings may or may not be worth class credit, but they can be used to talk directly about the particular subject matter the teacher is currently covering, gauge the student’s interest in psychology or a related field, inquire about the student’s hobbies and outside interests (which may be useful in helping the teacher create real-life examples to which students can readily relate), and get a global impression of the extent to which the student will excel (or struggle) with the course.

Just as importantly, these short meetings may go a long ways toward helping each student get to know the teacher and to feel comfortable talking with him or her about psychology, the course, and related issues or concerns. In particular, this tactic may be especially useful in establishing a positive connection with potentially passively failing students and thereby increasing the likelihood that these students will feel comfortable working with the teacher in becoming better students.

Monitoring the Classroom

Finally, we recommend that teachers monitor students’ classroom behavior, especially nonverbal behavior, early in the semester (or for that matter, throughout the semester!). If a student’s posture or facial expression signals boredom, disinterest, or other emotions unfavorable to learning, the teacher may ask the student to stay after class for a brief chat. Although it is unethical to pry into the student’s personal life, there is no harm in asking the student why he or she appears uninterested in the class (or lecture topic, etc.). If asked kindly and genuinely, it is our experience that many students will open up about any issues they may be having with the class.

This tactic provides the student with important information about the teacher that may be helpful to this student in initiating future contact with the teacher. It conveys to the student that (a) the teacher actually is paying attention to the student, (b) the teacher cares about the student, and (c) the teacher wants the student to be interested in the class and to learn the material.

Helping Passively Failing Students

The advice we offered earlier for helping actively failing students improve their study habits and grades also holds for helping passively failing students. Identifying and remediating the sources of the academic struggle, providing specific suggestions for studying, and helping students set realistic and obtainable goals for academic success will likely benefit any kind of struggling student. However, because passively failing students are especially avoidant of their teachers and often suffer crises of confidence and embarrassment, additional care and gentleness must be taken when working with these students. To these students, the problem is not entirely academic; it is personal as well. As Lowman (1995) noted, the classroom is an emotionally charged environment, and for passively failing students, the classroom would appear to be acutely so.

Thus, these students may benefit by extra early attention, encouragement, and care. Such actions on the teacher’s part may make the student feel comfortable and at ease with the teacher. These behaviors also may begin to build a small sense of confidence in the student’s ability to handle the challenges that the course offers. If the teacher is able to schedule an office meeting with the passively failing — or potentially failing — student, he or she might implement any of several confidence-boosting tactics during the session:

- Ask the student how he or she is doing in other courses, or if the student is a brand new college student, inquire about he or she did in high school courses. If the student has experienced success in other courses, then you might then suggest ways that the student can apply those successful strategies to the course in which he or she is struggling.
- Review with the student his or her approach to studying for your class, offer positive comments on those aspects of this approach that are beneficial, and then gently suggest additional or alternative strategies that you know are effective in learning the material.
- Share with the student the study strategies that former students used to earn good grades in the class. Explain to the student how he or she might adopt or adapt these strategies in his or her particular case. (I (WB) keep a list of successful strategies handy to share with all of my students.)
- Ask the student about his or her personal interests and hobbies. Depending on the nature of the student’s reply, discuss with him or her how psychology might relate his or her life. Such a conversation may spark an interest in the student and boost his or her motivation to succeed in the course.
- Follow up any meeting with a struggling student with a short e-mail suggesting you enjoyed the meeting and hoping that he or she found the meeting helpful in some way for the course. You might also wish to keep close track of how this student performs on subsequent quizzes or tests (or other student assessments) and drop him or her a note if he or she scored well or at least showed some improvement over past scores. If his or her score is substandard, you may wish to invite the student back to your office for another meeting.
- If possible, try to sustain your helpful and positive support of the student by periodically checking with him or her about how things are going with the class. Such occasional contact will reinforce the care and concern you showed toward this student during the first meeting and contribute to a positive emotional classroom atmosphere.

Final Thoughts

As hard as we might work at being effective teachers, we will not be successful in motivating all of our students to be effective learners all of the time. Be that as it may, it is a cardinal rule in teaching that it is the teacher’s responsibility to do everything within his or her ability to foster a positive and supportive classroom learning environment. Sometimes that means going the extra mile (Foushee & Sleigh, 2004), and if teachers wish to understand, reach, and help their passively failing students, that is exactly what they must do, regardless of what the “going the extra mile” may require given the student and teacher’s particular circumstances.

The problem, of course, is time. With all of the challenging and pressing work that academics must accomplish during their workday, how much time should teachers devote to tracking down and reaching out to passively failing students? This question begs even a larger question: How much of the responsibility for insuring student learning should a teacher shoulder? Where does the student’s responsibility for his or her learning end, and the teacher’s begin? These are difficult questions for teachers to answer. Certainly, though, they are questions worth considering given the difference that teachers can make in the lives of passively failing students, or

for that matter, all students (Brewer, 2002).

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