



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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A Structured Approach for Improving Student Success

After teaching general psychology for the past 20 years to approximately 6,000 students, I have found that student success can be significantly increased by employing a variety of structured support strategies. While the following techniques can be used at both community colleges and universities, the most dramatic enhancement of learning can be seen at the community college level, where large numbers of students are at risk because of personal difficulties and insufficiently developed learning skills. The following strategies have been extremely useful:

1. **Presentation of a comprehensive syllabus**—Structure begins on the first day of class as each student is given a six-page syllabus which clearly details all course goals, objectives, and procedures. At the end of the syllabus is a listing of each lecture with appropriate readings.
2. **Lecture outlines**—At the beginning of the semester, students can purchase a packet of lecture outlines from the college bookstore. The outline has blank spaces in which the students can add more information. Some students prefer to fill in these forms during the lectures; others prefer to complete them as they are reading the textbook. These outlines are designed as a supplement to the lectures and text rather than as a substitute.
3. **Coach classes**—Prior to each exam, several two-hour coach classes are scheduled. These review sessions are led by former students who have been selected for their academic performance and charisma. These sessions leaders are compensated for their efforts: a small remuneration and the intrinsic growth they experience from this teaching-learning situation. The leaders review the study-guide material with the students, and they essentially are given free rein to develop their own teaching methods.
4. **Completion of academic intervention forms**—If a student does poorly on the first exam, I complete a form which our college employs to activate an array of support services. I can refer the student to a counselor, reading lab, writing lab, math lab, or handicapped services coordinator. A week or two later, I receive feedback from the appropriate referral source.
5. **Meetings between class instructor and counselors**—To further facilitate the intervention, I meet with the counseling staff after the first exam and make them aware of all those students who are experiencing difficulties. We discuss probable reasons for the student's poor performance and develop additional plans.
6. **Peer tutors**—I also refer any student showing signs of academic problems to a peer tutor. This individual is typically a former psychology student who has had some tutor training. In addition to focusing on content material, the peer tutors serve as good role models and provide valuable tips on improving study techniques.
7. **Encouragement of student feedback**—I make it a practice to strike up conversations with students before class, after class, and during chance encounters. Typical questions are: "How's everything going?"; "Are you keeping up with the reading?"; "I was concerned about your performance on the last test!" Instead of simply waiting for students to come to my office with their problems, I try to become aware of theirs as soon as possible.
8. **Religious attendance taking**—In years past, I was often very casual in attendance taking, especially after the first few weeks of the semester. My experience has been that religious attendance taking gives a sense of seriousness to the classroom experience that is reflected in student persistence and performance.
9. **Flexible sections**—Since I normally teach four sections of general psychology each semester, I often allow students to permanently or temporarily switch sections when they have scheduling conflicts caused by work, health, or family issues. Sometimes we even work out arrangements with other instructors so that students can keep up with the class.
10. **Sample essays**—Each of my exams contains 40 to 50 multiple choice questions and one essay. Prior to the exam, I give students sample essays that have



been assigned the grades of A, B, C, D, and X. This feedback serves to make them more aware of my level of expectation.

11. **Structured form for grading of research paper**—At the end of the course, each student submits a seven-page research paper which surveys a topic within the field of psychology. Each paper is returned, with a checklist, rating the paper on content, organization, style, and mechanics (21 ratings in all). Areas of weakness are commented upon in greater detail. Students pay attention to this feedback and profit from the comments.

With these support strategies, I retain a very high percentage of my students (e.g., approximately 86% of my 150 students during the 1989 fall semester). A high retention rate *can* be attained while maintaining excellent academic standards.

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Using Student Assistants in the Classroom

With heavy teaching loads, an all-too-common lack of funds for adequate support staff, and poorly motivated students, one question that arises is how faculty might obtain better teaching assistance within rather severe parameters.

Of course, there is no adequate substitute for having sensible teaching loads, receiving generous funds for hiring good support staff, and teaching students already well-prepared academically and highly motivated. But one strategy has proved helpful in addressing at least some of these concerns—using selected students in the classroom as student assistants. Assistants can list announcements on the blackboard; follow up on student absences by telephone or letter; set up audiovisual equipment in the classroom; confirm the visits of classroom speakers; copy materials for teacher and student use; coordinate small-group study activities; perform a variety of office tasks; work with students who need special assistance outside the classroom; and so on.

Over the last four years, I have successfully utilized assistants in my political science classes at Brookdale Community College (a suburban college with approxi-

mately 10,000 daytime and nighttime students, and an average 30 students per political science class). Student assistants help with selected duties, give me feedback on various aspects of my teaching techniques, and serve as role models for other students.

During one of the first sessions of each class, I identify prospective assistants. I ask individual students about their interest in assisting, and then I meet with each of them after class for an interview. Selection criteria include: that they be political science majors; that they have a strong academic record at BCC; that they be friendly and outgoing; and that they be mature and responsible.

Once selected (for the semester, but subject to rotation if their work proves to be unsatisfactory), they must attend a weekly meeting of all student assistants (to evaluate the successes and failures of class sessions and assignments, and to discuss how subsequent sessions and assignments can be improved) and must meet with me for 10 minutes before each class session in which they will assist (to receive last-minute instructions).

The rewards for student assistantship are many, as evidenced by the enthusiastic response each semester by qualified students applying for the job, as well as comments once the work has been completed. Assistants develop a strong sense of responsibility; they may be all the more encouraged to pursue a career in political science; and the work serves as a source of peer stimulation and learning for the class as a whole (often serving to break down stereotypes when members of various ethnic and gender groups serve as assistants). Finally, successful assistants receive an additional grade for their services, as well as letters of recommendation when transferring to another institution or entering the world of work.

This strategy must be employed with considerable planning and care. Special attention must be given to defining suitable work conditions and responsibilities for assistants, and selecting appropriate awards.

Widely varying needs and circumstances dictate how and when student teaching assistants can be used most appropriately. Yet in a general sense, assistantships can be a mutually rewarding and beneficial experience for assistants, students, and instructor.

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