



## The Role of Faculty in Incorporating Academic Mindset

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The focus of community colleges is ensuring student success. With this focus comes a need for tools to help students reach their goals. One emerging tool is educating students about mindset.

Findings from the Center for Community College Student Engagement (Center)'s national report, *A Mind at Work: Maximizing the Relationship Between Mindset and Student Success*, indicate that mindset plays an important role in student engagement. Students who have more productive mindsets are more engaged and have higher GPAs. Understanding mindset—and helping students improve their academic mindset—opens new avenues for improving student success.

### What Is Academic Mindset?

Academic mindset encompasses individuals' beliefs about the ways learning and intelligence work. These beliefs frame students' thinking, influence how they interpret events, and affect their success.

Students with productive academic mindsets believe that they can change their intelligence, and they have confidence in their ability to learn challenging material and accomplish difficult tasks. "When students believe they can get smarter, they understand that effort makes them stronger. Therefore, they put in extra time and effort, and that leads to higher achievement."<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, students with nonproductive academic mindsets are more likely to "stop trying when confronted with a challenge because they've convinced themselves that they're not good at math, writing, or whatever the subject is."<sup>2</sup>

A growing number of colleges are exploring ways to help students move toward a more productive academic mindset in an effort to improve student success.

### The Role of Faculty

As colleges consider introducing the concept of a productive academic mindset to their students, it's important to note that faculty will be the key to implementing this approach. Recent research suggests that organizational theories of intelligence carry more weight than personal theories of intelligence. In other words, what faculty members tell students about their ability to succeed may matter more than what students personally believe.<sup>3</sup>

The Center identified four components of academic mindset and surveyed students and faculty about them in focus groups.

### Growth vs. Fixed Mindset

Growth vs. fixed mindset refers to students' perceptions of the potential for change in their intelligence. Individuals with a fixed mindset believe qualities such as intelligence are carved in stone. Those with a growth mindset, however, believe that their basic qualities are things that can be cultivated through effort, strategies, and help from others.<sup>4</sup>

Survey results show that more students have fixed mindsets for math than for English or for their overall intelligence.

In a focus group the Center conducted with faculty members, one reported that a common mantra from students is, "Oh, I didn't think I was good at math. In third grade, my teacher told me I couldn't do math. My mom can't do math. My dad can't do math. I can't do math." While not surprising, this indicates an opportunity for faculty to help change students' mindsets regarding math.

Some strategies for inspiring a growth mindset include connecting all coursework, particularly math coursework, to students' interests and long-term goals. Additionally, when students experience setbacks, faculty can frame the conversation around strategies for improvement, rather than students' abilities or attributes.

### Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is students' confidence in their ability to be successful in their coursework. Most students encounter at least one academic setback in college. Some dig in and work through the challenge; others are completely defeated, and may even drop out. The difference is likely related to whether they attribute the problem to something they cannot change ("I'm just not good at this") or something they can change ("I can learn this if I get extra help").<sup>5</sup>

One strategy for increasing students' sense of self-efficacy is to include low-stakes assessments throughout the term, such as weekly quizzes or writing assignments, instead of basing course grades solely on midterms and finals.

A faculty member in a focus group said, "Many students feel uncertain that they can complete a class. The coolest thing about being a teacher is when the light comes on, and they realize they can do this."

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## Relevance of Academic Experience

Relevance of academic experience encompasses students' views of whether their college work is preparing them for future success. When students clearly see a connection between their college work and their future employment or other life goals, they are more engaged in their college experience. Often, this connection between where students are and where they are going is made for them through academic advising. This connection can also be made in the classroom.

To help students understand the relevance of their academic experience, faculty can explain how a course is not just a core requirement, but will be useful to students' programs of study. Faculty can also incorporate applied learning experiences into their classes, such as group work or service learning activities.

As one student said in a focus group, "I'm confident in the course material because my professors are very open and they're happy to show me how a concept applies in my day-to-day life."

## Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging includes students' perceptions of whether they are accepted members of their college community. More than 15 years of Center focus group findings show that relationships that create a sense of belonging make the difference between a student completing college or dropping out.

When students participating in focus groups are asked if they have ever considered dropping out of college, many say they have. And when they are asked what helped them stay in college, their answers, almost without exception, are about relationships. Being part of an academic community gives students an identity as a learner. Then, when they face setbacks, they interpret them as a part of the learning process rather than as a signal that they do not belong.

One faculty member said, "In my experience, the biggest contributor to students staying in school and succeeding is feeling a sense of belonging on campus. Students succeed when they have peers and faculty members they can turn to who want them to succeed."

## What Faculty Say About How They Incorporate Mindset Into Their Work:

"I've had a lot of students say pretty early on that they think they're going to fail my course. The ones that talk to me tend to stop focusing on the grade, and we start focusing on the process. How are you studying? How are you going about this? Those students usually end up being the best in class because they focus on the learning process and not just on the end goal."

"I think it goes back to showing that I care, showing that I want them to be here. I care that they are going to learn what they're supposed to, and that they're going to carry that learning on to their next class or on to their career."

For more information, contact the Center for Community College Student Engagement, [info@cccse.org](mailto:info@cccse.org).

If you're interested in learning more about academic mindsets, consider bringing an "Emotional Intelligence, Student Efficacy, and the Growth Mindset" Regional Workshop to your campus (<https://www.nisod.org/ws2/>).

## Works Cited

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