

Role Modeling to Under-Prepared Students

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Many college campuses are experiencing an increase in under-prepared students, a diverse group varying with ability, educational background, ethnicity, income, and life experience. By definition, “under-prepared” suggests that there are some areas of academic skill deficit. There are a variety of strategies that can be used to help students recognize the areas that, if addressed, will contribute to their college success. Effective role modeling is one such strategy. It serves to not only help the students recognize where they might want to make changes in order to increase the likelihood of success but also demonstrates the skills needed to do so. Before identifying the necessary and desirable student characteristics that can be addressed via role modeling, a definition of “under-prepared” student needs to be provided.

Who are the under-prepared?

With the practice of open enrollment policies beginning at many post-secondary institutions in the 1960's, colleges assumed a greater role in serving the needs of under-prepared students. Dotzler (2003) noted that although the 1960's saw the beginning of widespread experimentation and study in developmental education and pedagogy, classroom practices have not changed significantly since then, except for the use of technology. He further notes that college curriculum typically is based on the premise that students have completed college some prep courses while still in high school, yet many students continue to arrive on campus under-prepared to succeed in the college environment. This position is supported by Weiner (2002) who noted that many students complete high school and arrive confidently on a college campus, only to find that they are academically under-prepared for course work in the first semester. There are a number of reasons for this widespread trend that has been observed in most post-secondary institutions. “Under-prepared” is used here to refer to any student whose academic skills fall below those determined to be necessary for college success and/or any student whose college readiness skills do not adequately prepare them for the rigors of college study and learning. “Academic skills,” as used above, refer specifically to reading, writing, and math skills upon entrance to college. “College readiness skills” include the use of strategies that lead to effective study, problem solving, critical thinking and decision making in order to progress satisfactorily through college level course work. Throughout this chapter many of the desirable characteristics and skills of successful college students will be identified. These will be contrasted with the skills of many under-prepared students. Most important, role-modeling strategies will be suggested in terms of their effective application with under-prepared students. Why students are under-prepared has been addressed in depth in a separate article by this author (Dzubak, 2005). However, given the number of under-prepared students, the question has often been raised as to whether educational standards have been lowered in our high schools, especially in the areas of reading, writing, and critical thinking. Current students are best prepared to process data, facts, and chunks of information but those skills do little to prepare them for success in the typical college classroom. Some students appear to be largely unaware of their academic shortcomings despite weaknesses in analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information. Although there are efforts being made in the high schools to improve student learning and better prepare them for college and the world of work, as noted in such activities as the federal No Child

Left Behind (NCLB) and state exit exams, our students still lag behind internationally in the key subject areas of math and science. There are a number of skills and characteristics that describe effective college students. There are also a number of characteristics that typically describe under-prepared students. These serve as a “common denominator” when anticipating services that will be needed by this group of students. The following information can serve as a guide when working with any student but focuses on the needs of under-prepared students. The challenge is to identify which characteristics apply to each student and to effectively use role modeling as a teaching and learning tool.

The Impact of a Role Model

Our words matter - Our actions matter even more. What we say and what we do demonstrate ethical, professional, and interpersonal messages that leave a strong impression with students. The campus community sets the example of behaviors that students can model in order to effectively engage themselves in the campus as well as to prepare themselves to be academically successful. Role modeling does not necessarily occur with specific intent. That is, faculty and staff typically perform day to day activities according to a certain personal standard or self expectation, but often without the conscious intention of being a model for students. Even when one is clearly aware of the potential impact of one’s behavior on students, it is not often with the intent to “teach” or to impart specific knowledge. Rather, our behavior reflects our attitudes, values, and decision making skills, as well as reflecting those of the campus culture. In this respect, campus personnel constantly serve as role models for the student body and leave an impression, whether or not it is intended. For tutors or anyone working face to face with students there is even greater potential to effectively role model desirable behaviors. Our responsibility as members of the campus community includes more than just helping students to learn how to learn. It is to help them acquire the skills that will prepare them to become independent students and responsible adults. What follows is a compilation of some of the characteristics and skills that can be observed in successful and engaged college students. The desirable skill or characteristic of successful students is first identified. This is followed by what is often considered to be problem or deficit area among under-prepared students. A solution that can be modeled for the under-prepared student concludes each short section.

Desirable Characteristics, Potential Problems, and Role Modeling Solutions

- Active Learning – A Student Needs to be Involved

Problem: Passive learning is not effective for most students! Many high school students were successful despite engaging in primarily passive, rather than active, learning. They could copy notes from the board, perhaps avoid reading textbooks, procrastinate, cram, and still they managed to receive passing grades. However, they will have to become more actively engaged in their learning if they are to be successful as college students.

Solution: Tutors, especially, can teach and model active learning strategies. Have tutees (and tutors!) take a learning styles inventory. Teach them how to maximize their learning strengths while also remediating an area of relative weakness. If they

are visual learners, demonstrate the number of strategies that can be used to maximize visual input. Do the same for the the other learning styles; auditory, tactile, kinesthetic and haptic (Please refer to the chapter on Learning Styles). Explain why multisensory and active learning are so important to effective information processing and memory. Demonstrate a multisensory study strategy in your office or during a tutoring session so that students are able to understand what it is to actively use multiple learning strategies. In short, the more actively engaged the student is during study and tutoring, the more information they will process and store in memory.

- Time Management – One Clock Fits All

Problem: We all have the same amount of time every day and we all have a 168 hour week. It has often been noted that since high school students are so busy they must be effective managers of time. That could be true for some students. However, many high school students are so heavily “programmed”, or scheduled, they are not actually making decisions about how they use their time. Instead, they are simply moving from one pre-scheduled activity to another. Once in college, learning to allot enough time for out of class study as well as juggling work, sports, family, etc. takes planning and effort. Another aspect of the problem is what to do with their newly acquired “down time” when they have no classes and nothing specific scheduled in that time slot. Many under-prepared students find it difficult to effectively manage their time, they waste too much time, and/or they use it unproductively.

Solution: Students can certainly be taught how to more effectively organize and manage their schedules and allow enough time for study, work, leisure, family, etc. They can be assisted in learning how to effectively use a day planner as well as making a “to-do-list” of daily and weekly activities. Once they learn the value of time management, prioritization of their activities will become easier. Time management and organization are critical components of college success as well as to effectiveness in the working world. As tutors and college personnel, modeling timeliness and punctuality has a greater impact on a student than just talking about it! Set an expectation for punctuality and reinforce it. In addition, tutors and staff can assist students as they begin to make use of a day planner, include use of course syllabi as this activity occurs, and encourage them to pencil in times for classes as well as for study, work, and leisure. Effective use of a day planner is one of the keys to success for any student, but especially so for an under-prepared student who is struggling to manage time.

- Motivation – It’s Within the Student

Problem: Many under-prepared students are burdened with low intrinsic-motivation for academic pursuits. Perhaps through high school they thrived on extrinsic motivation and did not learn that the likelihood of academic success is largely dependent on their own internal drive. That is, to be self driven with high personal expectations will increase the likelihood that they will do what is necessary for them to be successful. Without that internal drive, the world of college academics will likely remain a significant challenge for the under-prepared student.

Solution: As noted in Gorham and Christophel (1992), one of the assumptions of educational psychology is that student self-motivation is one of the most important characteristics that contribute to their learning. Perhaps the person who will make the greatest impression on an under-prepared student with motivation problems is the one who once had the same problem but recognized its ramifications and changed. In other words, another student might have a greater impact on an under-prepared student than faculty or staff. A student might be able to say: "Last year I was at the same point you are now. I wanted to be successful but didn't know how. But I was shown what I needed to do and, with a lot of work, I made it through the year. I know you can do the same." Modeling high expectations, explaining what needs to be done and how it can be done, and supporting the student's efforts will increase the likelihood of success. Initially, even a small success will have a positive impact on student motivation. Tutors and staff need to "be there" to support students when they struggle, as success comes only with effort and with some failures along the way. When feeling overwhelmed with academics, words of encouragement from faculty, staff, tutors, or other peers might be all that is needed to maintain a sufficient level of motivation to persevere. Tutors, in their one to one capacity, have the opportunity to make a particularly strong impact on their tutees by providing words of encouragement while also demonstrating the skills needed to be successful.

- Self Efficacy and Self Esteem – Belief In One Self

Problem: Some under-prepared students arrive on campus unaware of their lack of satisfactory academic preparedness, yet they still maintain a high level of academic self-esteem. Their self-esteem is based on whatever successes they had in high school. When they do recognize shortcomings, some of these students quickly adjust to what they need to do to be successful. However, other students who are not aware that their skills are weak and that their high school performance has left them under-prepared often develop a sense of low academic self esteem consistent with a mediocre or poor experience. Many under-prepared students also demonstrate self-efficacy. That is, they have not acquired a belief in their ability to be academically successful through their own efforts.

Solution: Success breeds success. Whether students have high or low academic self-esteem, if their skills are weak they will inevitably experience poor performance unless they do something to strengthen those skills. Success begins with small steps that will lead to a gradual strengthening of academic self-esteem. For example, completion of homework, a positive conversation with faculty, encouraging words from a tutor, or passing a quiz all contribute to feelings of control and success. Role modeling and discussing the skills and behaviors needed for success, whether via peers, tutors, faculty, advisers, or a mentor, will help students who are in need of skill development. If one expects to do poorly, one can predict that will probably happen. As noted by Maxwell (1997), students who value themselves are better able to understand theoretical concepts. That ability to comprehend is associated with their confidence and self-expectations. Tutors and staff can teach and model the skills under-prepared students need to be successful, reinforce student effort, and demonstrate genuine concern for them as individuals. Expectations of success,

combined with the necessary skills and behaviors, will lead to improved performance. One characteristic of positive self-esteem is having the confidence to ask for help when it is needed. That, especially, is a difficult step for many under-prepared students. However, once connected with supportive tutors and staff, focusing on strengths and skill development will provide them with the strategies they need to be successful students.

- Educational and Career Goal Setting – Where Are You Going?

Problem: Goal setting helps students to prioritize, organize, and identify a purpose for being in school. Yet, under-prepared students often have not thought beyond getting into school and have not spent enough time carefully thinking about their major or career goals. One of the primary functions of goal setting is to establish a specific purpose for what they are doing in school and to help them identify with their personal, academic, and career goals. These can certainly be modified over time but to have no goals will inevitably lead to academic struggles and/or soul searching later on. Under-prepared students often need some assistance in identifying and setting their own goals.

Solution: Goals help to provide a sense of purpose and to make the connection between the “now”, being in school, with where they want to be after graduation, increasing the likelihood of their commitment to the rigors of academic success. Ask an under-prepared student to take the time to write immediate, short term, intermediate and long term goals. Immediate goals might include what needs to be done in the course of the current day or week. Short-term goals could include through the month or even the entire semester, even to the point of projecting a desired grade point average. (Suggest that students use a day-planner and show them how to use a syllabus, penciling in important dates; exams, quizzes, drafts due for a paper, etc. for each class.) Intermediate goals might include choosing a major and include the next year or two of academic planning and internships. Long-term goals can be projected over 2 – 5 years; what career they hope to be engaged in and also include their personal goals. Once goals are identified, there is an ongoing process of “tweaking” and adjustment as the individual and his/her goals change with circumstances and interests. In sum, help students make and understand the connections between where they are now, which direction they want to go, and how they plan to get there. These purposeful goals will impact student commitment to the rigors of academics.

- Decision Making – It’s Their Choice

Problem: Many under-prepared students have had limited experience making significant decisions. In the past, parents, teachers, coaches, and others have often made the decisions for them. This, in combination with a lack of goal setting experience, leaves students feeling a sense of loss of control after they arrive on campus. They struggle with learning how to identify and evaluate a problem, identifying options, and choosing a course of action leading to problem resolution. Not knowing how to make effective decisions, under-prepared students are inclined to make uninformed ones.

Solution: Effective problem solving and decision-making strategies can be learned via role modeling, role-playing, and discussion. Students should be encouraged to meet with a mentor, faculty member, or advisor to discuss problems as they arise and receive guidance in problem solving and decision making strategies. The complexities of college life require that every student make thoughtful and frequent decisions that establish a strong connection among learning, choosing a major, and identifying career goals. Tutors, faculty, and staff can model effective decision-making as they discuss situations that the student encounters, helping to identify options, and planning strategies for successful resolution. However, as noted by Hodges (2001), some students might need to be required rather than just encouraged to participate in academic support programs. Once again, it is the asking for assistance that is so difficult for many students.

- Academic Perseverance – Keep it Going

Problem: Acquisition of skills leading to academic perseverance is often started early during middle school but for the under-prepared student, the behaviors leading to perseverance might not have been developed. Many under-prepared students had not been expected, nor did they need, to sustain a commitment and effort to ensure their academic success. Once in college, these students often become easily discouraged when they encounter unexpected difficulties related to their classes.

Solution: With role modeling, mentoring, and other academic support services, the under-prepared student can indeed learn the skills and strategies necessary for academic perseverance. Although external motivators such as encouragement, support and praise can indeed be appreciated, it is up to the student to recognize that perseverance is something he/she has control over. Perseverance, motivation, and goal setting all complement one another. They cannot be forced upon a student yet some of each inevitably makes the path to academic success a bit easier. Perseverance via sustained effort and a strong desire to succeed often results in academic success. As noted by Hodges (2001), tutoring is effective in improving GPAs if students take advantage of the service early and persist throughout the semester. However, many under-prepared students need strong encouragement before they take advantage of campus support services service.

- Independence, Autonomy and Accountability – They Are In Control

Problem: When in high school, students often had someone to tell them what to do, when to do it, and had rather inflexible schedules. This often resulted in dependency and a lack of experience making independent choices and plans. The under-prepared college student might be heard to say, “...but no one told me to...” That is probably true. All students need to acquire independence and autonomy by being provided with an opportunity to use them. At the same time, students need to be held accountable for their decisions and their behavior. However, that does not mean that “good” decisions will always be made or that the under-prepared student is able to effectively make use of the independence.

Solution: That new found independence can feel overwhelming to a first semester college student. The college culture is complex and initially difficult to navigate. However, knowing what to do and when to do it are necessary for college survival. Students can learn via observation and discussion as to where to look for information, who to ask, and how to get it done. They will soon recognize that it is up to them to learn when they can drop/add a class, register for the following semester, submit financial aid information, etc. Encourage their questions. “Not knowing” will not suffice as an excuse for missing deadlines. As importantly, tutors and staff can model accountability and taking responsibility for one’s decisions and behaviors. Although most decisions are up to the student, they will benefit from interactions with tutors, faculty and staff as they gain confidence in their judgment and independence.

- Original Thinking – Stimulating Thought

Problem: The under-prepared student too often finds himself in a position of waiting to be told what to think and/or how to think and is surprised when that does not happen. Rote memory was often encouraged and reinforced during high school. As a result, many students leave high school with very little experience in the areas of independent and original thinking. Yet those skills will be expected as they write papers, participate in class discussions, make decisions and prepare themselves for the world of work.

Solution: Giving students an opportunity to engage in independent and original thinking needs to be encouraged, modeled, expected, and reinforced. The more opportunities and feedback a student is given, the quicker one learns to rely on his/her own thinking. Ask them what THEY think and why! Inexperience and/or reluctance to think for one self will eventually diminish with an increase in confidence in one’s ability to think and problem solve.

- Communication Skills – It Works Both Ways

Problem: There are some differences of opinion regarding what and how it is appropriate to communicate with faculty, staff, and even peers. However, effective communication skills certainly do contribute to making a positive first impression. There is a grey area between formal communication and that which is considered too informal for use with faculty and staff. Whether written or spoken, there are some general rules about what is and what is not appropriate when interacting, orally or in print. Some college personnel find informal communication to be disrespectful or an indication that the student is not very serious about college. Under-prepared students will benefit from learning acceptable communication skills and the importance of making a positive first impression.

Solution: As tutors, faculty, and staff, one might want to communicate with students in the same manner we prefer they communicate with us. If a student’s mode of interaction is too informal, then this needs to be pointed out to them. Interacting with faculty generally is not the same as interacting with peers. The sooner students

recognize this and respond accordingly the sooner they can avoid making a poor impression. Since there is no formal rule for how to communicate with faculty and staff, students might benefit from knowing that to take a conservative and more formal approach might be wise. Modeling, discussing, and/or role-playing some communication “do’s and don’ts” can be fun as well as instructional.

- Respect – Appreciate its Impact

Problem: Rudeness, disruptions, and a general lack of consideration for others negatively impact teaching, learning, and maintaining a welcoming campus climate. There seems to be an epidemic of incivility and rudeness in our culture and our college campuses.

Solution: Civility breeds civility and respect breeds respect. Model it and expect it. If a student behaves in a way that is counter to the expected norm, then point that out and model appropriate interactions. Respectful communication and interactions will be expected in the workplace. They might as well be learned, modeled, and practiced on campus. Respectful behavior is seldom misunderstood.

- Diversity – Valuing Differences

Problem: Every student is a product of what he/she has experienced or has been taught. Some students have little or no experience with diversity, whether pertaining to race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, culture, or disability. Lack of exposure to differences is not an excuse for not being aware of and sensitive to issues of diversity.

Solution: To become successfully integrated in the campus culture and to prepare for the world of work, students need to learn about, experience, and appreciate diversity. Tutors, faculty and staff can all model an awareness of diversity during interactions with students. Encourage participation in and attendance at activities that include a diversity component. Encourage all students, especially tutors, to join a club or organization that reflects diversity. Include a diversity component in tutor training. The more exposure to diversity that students experience on the college campus, the better prepared they are for the real world of work. We can all serve as models for diversity.

- Self Assessment – Know Thyself

Problem: Many under-prepared students often over estimate their academic readiness and are unaware of the areas in which they need to strengthen their skills. If they did not acquire the skills necessary for academic success in high school many do not know how or where to begin once they realize there is a need for change.

Solution: Self-assessment skills can be taught, modeled, and/or measured via completion of surveys and inventories. Demonstrate and expect active learning and active listening. Expect students to think independently. Teach, discuss, and model critical thinking and problem solving strategies. Expect college level writing skills

and make a referral when help is needed. Many study skills and other types of inventories are available online at no cost. Tutors can encourage tutees to complete learning style, study skills, and career interest inventories. Under-prepared students need to have some measure of their skills, needs, learning style, and interests in order to develop a plan for their success.

- Strengths vs. Needs – Understand Both, Focus on Strengths

Problem: It is easy for under-prepared students, and those who work with them, to fall into a pattern of focusing only on weaknesses or areas of need. Students are inclined to say, “I am not good at math” or “I cannot write very well”, etc. That might in fact be partially true but that will not change their patterning or result in their success.

Solution: Operate from an achievement, strength, and success based model that focuses on student strengths, skills, and successes rather than on areas of weakness. Focusing on areas of strength, but remediating needs where necessary, will lead to improved skills while also increasing student self esteem and self confidence. Focusing on strengths provides the student with options they can control, such as their study time or participation in tutoring. Model and explain what is meant by “effective study skills” rather than simply talking about it. Provide concrete examples of what the student can do to improve reading comprehension, note taking, test preparation, etc. Build on individual strengths while also addressing areas of academic need.

- Teamwork – Create Synergy

Problem: Many under-prepared students have not had sufficient opportunity to work closely with their peers or faculty in pairs or structured group activities related to class work. The popularity of team projects, group work, peer editing, etc. increases the need for students to acquire the skills necessary to effectively function within a group. A lack of “people skills” will have a negative impact on activities both in and out of the classroom.

Solution: Learning is often most effective when accomplished within a community of students. Group skills and cooperative problem-solving ability can be developed through class projects. Effective teamwork has increased in importance and often has to be learned by the students while in a college classroom, via observation, or participation in campus organizations. The professional behavior of tutors, faculty and staff, as well as “thinking out loud” to demonstrate use of critical thinking, judgment, and decision-making, serve as examples to students of acceptable and effective team skills. A tutor has a perfect opportunity to model interactive skills during face-to-face interactions with a tutee. A study group is an especially effective strategy to teach and model team skills that will contribute to effective classroom interactions.

Being a Role Model – A Summary

The above list of desirable student characteristics is not intended to be exhaustive. Obviously, not every characteristic needs to be modeled or addressed with every student. Many under-prepared students begin their college careers with an assortment of skills that will contribute to academic success and personal maturity. However, there are also skills that need to be developed or strengthened. What is known, is that the greater number of the above skills that students possess, the increased likelihood that the student will have a successful college career. In addition, all of these skills and characteristics are transferable to the world of work. Learning and practicing them on campus will be beneficial when the student begins summer jobs, internships, interviews, and that first job out of college. Role modeling and encouraging these skills and behaviors is a campus wide endeavor. Every member of the campus community is a potential role model; administrators, staff, faculty, as well as other students. Every campus has its own culture but there are more similarities than differences in terms of what are considered to be desirable student skills and behaviors. All campus personnel, as well as peer tutors, can model what is desired, set high expectations, and reinforce what you want to see maintained. As noted by Elliott (2003), a student-centered campus that includes instructional effectiveness will have a significant positive impact on student satisfaction and retention. As recognized on most college campuses, it is more cost effective to invest now and retain students than it is to invest later and attract new ones. Providing under-prepared students with the skills they need to be successful will not only impact retention, but more important, will provide the opportunity for these students to serve as role models for others.

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