



Why Do Students Fail? Students' Perspective

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Introduction

Regardless of the effort and support colleges and universities provide to help all students succeed, in the United States alone more than 370,000 students flunk out of college every year for various reasons. As reported by the University of Alabama's Center for Academic Success, "The impact of college failure can cause lasting damage to self-esteem, and the consequences can influence an entire lifetime" (University of Alabama Center for Academic Success n.d.). This high failure rate is a national tragedy, and it contributes to the low graduation rates of U.S. colleges and universities. In 2009, only 29.2 percent of students graduating with an associate's degree had earned it within three years, and 55.5 percent of those graduating with a bachelor's degree had taken up to six years to finish (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2009). The issue of students failing college is a concern both for students and for the instructors who teach them. Therefore, it is important to determine the factors that contribute to student failure.

All too often, instructors feel frustrated or feel a sense of personal failure and blame their own teaching for the failure of students in their classes (Tennen and Hagar 2007; Dawley 2011). While helping failing students find a way to succeed is part of the instructor's responsibility, there are multiple factors that contribute to student failure; the instructor's pedagogical instruction and materials are only two of many. Students themselves are more responsible for their own learning success and failure than their instructors are. In *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain (2004) argues that there is no better way to find out if students think that something has helped and encouraged them to learn than to ask them.

The Study

In a study we conducted with 739 students from two-year (212) and four-year (527) colleges, we asked the subjects to provide their own perspectives on why students fail college courses at the undergraduate level. We organized the results into seven categories: academic preparedness, attitudes, external factors, instruction and instructional materials, motivation, relevancy, and study habits. The analysis of the study revealed surprising outcomes; in this paper we share the results and discuss the implications of the findings for students, instructors, curriculum, and academic leaders. We propose that being aware of how students themselves perceive the causes of student failure in academic settings is a necessary first step in clinically analyzing the complexity of the problem and in finding workable solutions that could lead to helping students productively.



Methodology

The methodological research strategy used in this study consists of four main integrated stages:

1. Constructing, distributing, and collecting the survey for the study
2. Preparing the raw data of the survey for study and analysis
3. Analyzing the data
4. Interpreting the results and making sense of the findings

Stage I: Constructing, Distributing, and Collecting the Survey for the Study

As shown in Table 1, we prepared a survey containing one open-ended question: "From your own perspective, why do you think students fail classes?" Additional personal questions—related to college level, academic majors, and gender—were included as optional. While the data generated from the use of open-ended questions are not easy to compile and quantify, they are often the best way to find out what is needed. Such questions can provide substantial and detail-rich information, especially when constructed in a way to obtain usable answers and elicit further explanation.

Initially, we surveyed ten students and used their answers as the basis for a survey that contained multiple-choice options from which students could select, but we decided that this would not work, simply because students' answers about why students fail classes cover a wide range of reasons. We were concerned about the objectivity of the outcomes and decided against this approach to ensure that we did not limit students' options and thus miss important reasons. In addition, we did not want to give any suggestions to the students. Thus we agreed on the single open-ended question shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The Question of the Study and How It Was Presented to Students

Dear Student: We are working on a study to identify what we can do to help students succeed in class. We would like your help in answering the following single question.				
As a student, and from your own perspective, why do you think students fail classes?				
Optional				
Major	Science		Non-science	
College level	2-year college		4-year college	
Gender	Female		Male	

Stage II: Preparing the Raw Data of the Survey for Study and Analysis

We distributed copies of the final survey to 900 students from two-year (300) and four-year (600) colleges located in the midwestern United States. Of these 900, 739 surveys (212 + 527), or 82.1 percent, were completed and returned.

After the surveys were collected, a copy of each survey was distributed to three independent reviewers. Each reviewer read and identified key words, phrases, and/or sentences that indicated



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answers to the posed question. Upon completion, the three reviewers shared and compared findings. Table 2 shows the methodological strategy and mechanism that the reviewers followed and applied for accepting a given answer.

Table 2. Methodological Strategy and Mechanism Applied for Accepting a Given Answer

	Outcome Condition	This means:	Result
1	An answer selected by the three reviewers.	All three reviewers agreed.	The answer was accepted with no further analysis to use in the study.
2	An answer selected by two of the three reviewers.	Two of the three reviewers agreed.	The answer was critically discussed, but the one who disagreed with the answer had to convince at least one of the two who selected the given answer. a. If at least one of those who selected the answer agreed with the one who did not, then the answer was rejected and is not included in the analysis. b. If neither of the two who selected the answer agreed with the one who did not, then the answer was selected and is included in the analysis.
3	An answer selected by only one of the three of the reviewers.	Two reviewers disagreed with the third reviewer.	The reviewer who selected the given answer had to convince the other two with the reason for selecting the answer. a. If at least one of the two agreed with the answer, the answer was selected and is included in the analysis. b. If neither of the two who disagreed changed his or her mind, the answer was rejected and is not included in the analysis.
4	The answer was not selected by any of the reviewers.	There was no agreement among the three reviewers.	The words, phrases, and sentences that were not selected by any of the reviewers were revisited and discussed. Then: a. If one of them was selected by the three reviewers, then it is included. b. If one was not selected by the three reviewers, then it was rejected.

After the reviewers agreed on the key words, phrases, and sentences that indicated answers to the posed question, those were compiled into a list with the number of times each answer was mentioned or identified. The final list from the two-year college student surveys contained eighty-four different types of answers, with a total of 596 identified given answers. The final list from the four-year college surveys contained 109 different types of answers, with a total of 2,088 identified given answers. The total of identified answers from all participants in the study was 2,684 (596 + 2088).

Stage III: Analyzing the Data

We gave copies of the final list of key words, phrases, and sentences that indicated answers to the posed question, which were listed with the number of times each was mentioned, to six independent colleagues, three of whom have Ph.D.s and three of whom have master's degrees. We asked each of



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the six to read the list independently. Then we gave each a copy of Table 3 and asked each to group the key words, phrases, and sentences on the list into categories, subcategories, and specific reason.

When all six had finished this task, we collected their tables and then sat with them and discussed how they congregated the students' answers into categories, subcategories, and specific reasons. Then collectively, we agreed on using the categories, subcategories, and specific reasons to group the students' answers. Based on the survey answers given, we divided the reasons for student failure into seven main categories and fifteen subcategories. As seen in Table 4, the categories included motivation, study habits, instruction, external factors, academic preparedness, attitudes, and relevancy issues. The subcategories included (but were not limited to) level of interest, lack of conscientiousness, laziness, study habits, managing time, instructor's interaction and materials, counseling and tutoring, perceptions of the class, outside influences, cost of education, academic challenges, stress, course rigor, pride, attitudinal concerns, and disconnect of course work.

Table 3. Example of a Table That Was Given to Independent Colleagues to Sort Students' Answers into Categories, Subcategories, and Specific Reason

	Category	Subcategory	Specific Reason	Time Mentioned	Notices
I					
II					



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Table 4. Identified Categories and Subcategories of Students' Answers to the Posed Question

	Category	Subcategory	Notices and Observation
I	Motivation	Level of interest	
		Lack of conscientiousness	
		Laziness	
II	Study Habits	Study habits	
		Managing time	
III	Instruction	Instructor's instruction	
		Perceptions of the class	
IV	Academic Preparation	Academic challenges	
		Stress	
		Course rigor	
V	External Factors	Outside influences	
		Cost of education	
VI	Attitudes	Pride	
		Attitudinal concerns	
VII	Relevancy Issues	Disconnect of course work	

Finally, we asked ten additional colleagues to help us during the process whenever we encountered a phrase or sentence in a given student's answer that did not directly fit into any of the identified categories or subcategories.

Results

I. Participants' Personal Portfolio

Out of 900 surveys distributed to students, 739 completed surveys were collected, an 82.1 percent rate of return (see Table 5). As shown in Tables 6 and 7, a slightly higher number of females (52.2%) participated than males (35.6%). The number of participants majoring in science (46.4%) was nearly equal to those in non-science majors (47.6%). There were more four-year college students (527 or 71.3%) than two-year college students (212 or 28.7%). While there were more non-science majors (302) than science majors (196) from the four-year colleges, there were more science majors (147) than non-science majors (50) from the two-year colleges. Finally, a total of 2,088 responses were identified from answers provided by the four-year college participants, and a total of 596 responses were identified from the two-year college participants (see Table 8).



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Table 5. Distributed and Collected Surveys for the Study

College Type	Distributed Surveys	Collected Surveys			Total Collected	Rate of Return
		Female	Male	No Reply		
2-Year	300	126	62	24	212	70.7%
4-Year	600	260	201	66	527	87.8%
Total	900	386	263	90	739	82.1%

Table 6. Participants' Information Portfolio I (Gender)

College Type	Student Participants (n = 739)						Total	
	Female		Male		No Reply		#	%
	#	%	#	%	#	%		
2-Year	126	17.1%	62	8.4%	24	3.2%	212	28.7%
4-Year	260	35.1%	201	27.2%	66	9.0%	527	71.3%
Total	386	52.2%	263	35.6%	90	12.2%	739	100%

Table 7. Participants' Information Portfolio II (Academic Major)

College Type	Student Participants (n = 739)						Total	
	Science		Non-science		No Reply		#	%
	#	%	#	%	#	%		
2-Year	147	19.9%	50	6.8%	15	2.0%	212	28.7%
4-Year	196	26.5%	302	40.9%	29	3.9%	527	71.3%
Total	344	46.4%	352	47.6%	44	6.0%	739	100%

Table 8. Participants' Provided Total Answers

College Type	Participants (n = 739)		Participants' Provided Answers (n = 2684)					
			Provided		Used in Study		Not Used	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
2-Year	212	28.7%	596	22.2%	596	22.2%	0	0%
4-Year	527	71.3%	2088	77.8%	2088	77.8%	0	0%
Total	739	100%	2684	100%	2684	100%	0	0%

II. Participants' Responses to Inquiry Question

General results

Based on analysis of the students' answers, the reasons for student failure were grouped into seven main categories and fifteen subcategories. All responses fell under one of the fifteen identified



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subcategories. While the category or subcategory in which some responses belong could be disputed, distinctions could generally be made for the seven categories and the fifteen subcategories. Table 9 shows a summary of students' answers.

Table 9. Participants' Provided Total Answers Based on Identified Categories (n = 2684)

Category		2-year College		4-year College		Total	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
I	Motivation	167	6.2%	762	28.4%	929	34.6%
II	Study habits	145	5.4%	320	12.0%	465	17.3%
III	Instruction	91	3.4%	184	6.9%	275	10.2%
IV	Academic Preparation	55	2.0%	259	9.6%	314	11.6%
V	External Factors	58	2.2%	241	9.0%	299	11.1%
VI	Attitudes	77	2.9%	206	7.7%	283	10.5%
VII	Relevancy Issues	3	0.1%	116	4.3%	119	4.4%
	Total	596		2088		2684	100%

As shown in Table 9, Category I deals with motivation and related issues, which were mentioned a total of 929 times (34.6% of responses). It includes reasons that pertain to students' level of interest, laziness, and lack of conscientiousness. Category II deals with study habits and related issues, which were mentioned a total of 465 times (17.3% of responses). This category pertains to students' study skills and learning and work habits, including taking many classes.

Category III lies entirely with instruction and related issues, mentioned 275 times (10.2% of responses). It deals with the instructor's interaction with the class and the students as well as with the students' perceptions of the class. Category IV includes the student's academic preparedness, which was mentioned a total of 314 times (11.6% of responses). It deals with academic challenges, stress, and course rigor.

Category V includes external factors that students have nothing to do with, which were mentioned a total of 299 times (11.1% of responses). It included outside influences and the cost of education. Category VI, which deals with students' attitudes, was mentioned a total of 288 times (10.5% of responses). This category includes one's own pride and attitudinal concerns. Finally, Category VII deals with all of the other relevancy issues related to students' disconnecting with course work, which was mentioned a total of 119 times (4.4% of responses).

Analysis and discussion

The participants provided us with many reasons for why some students fail at college work. Based on analysis of the answers provided, the reasons for student failure were grouped into seven categories and fifteen subcategories. All responses from the students surveyed fell under one of the specific fifteen identified subcategories. To get a sense of the results and what they meant to students, after we completed compiling the results, we discussed our findings with two separate groups of students. One group was from a two-year college and the other group was from a four-year college. The feedback



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from the face-to-face in-depth discussion with the students helped us in our analysis of the results. Furthermore, using the “root-cause analysis” mechanism to facilitate the analysis, we found out that all of the categories could be tied to one or more of the following general areas (see Figure 1 and Table 10):

- Individual students’ abilities and efforts (1991 or 74.2%)
- Individual students’ abilities and efforts but with strong influence from outside factors (119 or 4.4%)
- Class learning materials, instruction, instructors, and school environment (275 or 10.2%)
- Factors outside students’ control (299 or 11.2%)

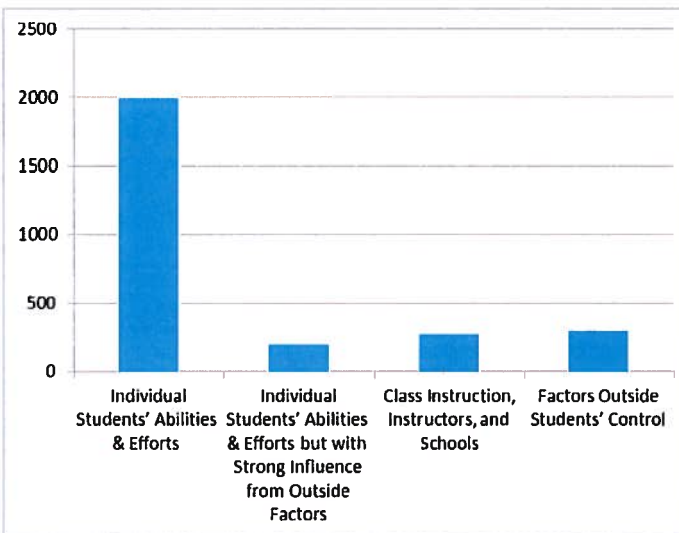


Figure 1. Graphical Portrayal of Root Cause Analysis

Table 10. Using Root-Cause Analysis, All the Categories Can Be Tied to One or More of Four Areas ($n = 2684$)

Category		Tied into			
		Individual Students' Abilities and Efforts	Individual Students' Abilities and Efforts but with Strong Influence from Outside Factors	Class Instruction, Instructors, and Schools	Factors Outside Students' Control
I	Motivation	929			
II	Study Habits	465			
III	Instruction			275	
IV	Academic Preparation	314			
V	External Factors				299
VI	Attitudes	283			
VII	Relevancy Issues		119		
	Total	1991	119	275	299



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Root cause analysis

In analyzing students' responses to posed questions, we found that students mention multiple factors and see the issue of failure from multiple angles. In addition, when some students mentioned the same key words or phrases, such as motivation, study habits, and academic preparedness, in their answers, the explanations sometimes led to different roots. Table 11 provides two examples of these tendencies.

Table 11. Examples of Root Cause Analysis

Cause	Root	Factor
Failing is related to the fact that students are not motivated because:	Instructors failed to make classes interesting to capture students' attention.	Instructor Factor
	Students are not interested in education.	Motivational Factor
	Classes are not interesting, especially those that have nothing to do with their majors and planned careers.	Relevancy Factor
	Students think they are smarter than instructors and could easily pull grades up, as in high school.	Attitude Factor
Students' efforts cause students to fail because	Instructors failed to see that students' efforts were not enough and did not provide the right advice and assistance.	Instructor Factor
	Student did not put enough effort into attending classes and doing their schoolwork.	Motivational Factor
	Instructor refused to count students' efforts in class as worth a grade, like quizzes and exams.	Instructor Factor
	Instructor refused to count students' efforts in class as worth a grade regardless of failing to complete homework or pass the exam.	Academic Preparedness Factor
	Students did not accept that college needs more effort than high school if students are to succeed.	Attitude Factor
	Students had not yet realized college life and work are different from high school and require different types of efforts to succeed.	Attitude Factor

Motivation

Students most frequently mentioned lack of motivation and related matters (929 times, or 34.6% of responses) as the reason why students fail classes. If a student does not have the self-drive to succeed, or see the benefit from successfully finishing a given course, then he or she will not try to invest in the class and thus not succeed. Realizing why he or she needs to succeed becomes the key to making a decision to invest in a given course, and that key is needed to unlock the door to success. Self-motivation also helps to empower students to be in control of their own education and keeps them from giving up when they are faced with academic, social, and personal difficulties.

There is also a correlation between lack of self-motivation and lack of perseverance. Students with strong self-motivation apply their perseverance, mental capability, and energy to do everything in their power to learn the required knowledge and skills needed to succeed in new courses and programs, no



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matter how hard a task is. As one student said, "If you don't understand it, memorize it; the bottom line is, you have to own it and deliver it when needed." Motivated students invest time and energy to work through every task and repeat things over and over until they master those things and go forward. When these students realize that they need help, they do not become timid about getting appropriate assistance but go for it aggressively.

Whether students come to class disinterested or lose interest in the subject during the class, lack of interest in the subject discourages students from staying in the class and/or working hard to achieve a good grade. In addition, lack of interest prevents students from being enthusiastic and taking the class seriously. If students have low self-esteem, do not care how well they do, and/or do not care about their own education, then their classes will not be a priority for them. With this attitude, students plant the seed for failure in their current and future courses.

Laziness was also reported as one of the main contributing factors for student failure. Participants explained that when students are lazy, they do not exert much effort in a class and simply give up when they encounter the first obstacle. Some participants stated that students do not exert enough effort and do not bother to find out—either from the instructor or fellow students—how much work is needed to pass a given class. This is a form of unconscious laziness that students do not realize is part of their own character and behavior.

Finally, under the category of Motivation, participants reported a lack of conscientiousness as a factor for student failure. They stated that most students who fall behind tend to give up easily and find it very hard to catch up, and thus go for the easy way out: run away and give up the whole thing.

To succeed, then, students need good reasons for taking a given course and for being in school. Students also need to care about themselves and their education by setting expectations and achievable goals for themselves. Those who do care seek help and ask questions when needed. By doing so, they ensure their own success and that their education meets their individual needs. Students in this study did realize that motivation is essential for success, but they also realized that they need help in becoming and staying motivated in classes and education. In short, we can conclude that academic success is not governed by a student's cognitive abilities alone. Students need to be motivated to want to learn and work hard to make faster gains and learn better than those who are bright but less motivated (Blue 2012).

Study habits

All too often, faculty members feel frustrated to see their students struggle with course content simply because of poor study habits and time management skills (Tennen and Hagar 2007). In our study, study habits and managing time are combined in one category, Study Habits, and were mentioned 465 times (17.3% of responses) as factors contributing to student failure. There is a connection between poor study habits—including poor study skills, poor time management, and an inability to identify and establish priorities—and the increased potential rate of academic failure among students. These days, many students do not seem to know how to study or just do not study or do homework regularly. Participants thought this was due to students' lack of concentration and/or not paying attention to schoolwork simply because of the lack of experience or too many outside distractions that compete for students' attention.



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Furthermore, as some participants reported, many students are not accustomed to managing their time because they have no idea how much time and energy college work demands. Many of them become stressed when they discover that their college work requires much more time and effort than their high schoolwork did or when they realize that what was acceptable in high school is not acceptable in college.

They so often overcommit themselves, either by taking too many courses or by waiting till the last minute to do their work. As a result of poor time management, a number of students lose sense of time and suffer from a procrastination syndrome. When they realize that, it is often too late for them to catch up or they do not know how to catch up. They end up feeling stressed out, produce substandard schoolwork, and perform poorly on quizzes and exams. Typical responses from students include that there is "too much schoolwork," "not enough time to study," and/or "too much reading and written work."

Everyone would agree that instructors want students to succeed and that students with good study habits achieve better grades and are more successful in their classes than those who do not have those habits. Poor study habits, time management, and study skills are among the impediments that stand in the way of learning for many students (Tennen and Hagar 2007).

When the unconscious inclination to perform a process and an act of pursuing knowledge becomes an established trend of a given student's mind or character, then the student can be characterized as having productive study habits. In this sense, study habits and time management are connected to self-motivation, because it is the student's motivation that keeps him or her from giving up when faced with difficulties. Unfortunately, however:

Most students are not aware of the value of good study skills to their success. Unless they're among the fortunate few who have taken a study skills course, note taking and studying are at best a haphazard collection of habits that have been developed over time. The first thing students must recognize is the benefit of good study habits. You can help by taking a few minutes of class time to encourage students to improve their study skills and by giving them compelling reasons why it's worth their time and effort. (Tennen and Hagar 2007)

Academic preparedness

We all know that one of the major differences between college and high school academic work is that college work requires all types of thinking (critical, analytical, creative) and in-depth readings other than just rote memory and shallow reading. It is also a well-known fact that every day, in many colleges and universities, faculty members enter classes full of students with a wide range of learning needs, levels of preparedness, and social and cultural backgrounds. This range of capabilities in the classroom is a frustrating phenomenon that drives faculty members to feel overwhelmed and drives some students to feel lost in the classroom environment.

In terms of frequency of mention by study participants, academic challenges came in third on the list of reasons students fail in college. It was repeated 314 times (11.6% of responses). The overall message is that a number of students fail simply because they were not capable mentally and/or not prepared academically (or both) for college-level schoolwork. Those types of students take difficult classes without realizing that they do not have the background that enables them to understand the subject and successfully complete course requirements. Possibly they have no idea of the amount and



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quality of work demanded by college or that the time and energy required by typical college work is much greater than those demanded by even the toughest high schools. As reported by the Center for Academic Success of the University of Alabama, in college, “students may actually work harder than they have ever worked before and still find that their efforts are not sufficient” (University of Alabama Center for Academic Success n.d.). This leads students to feel overwhelmed and stressed and to blame the rigor of the course as the reason for their failing. Furthermore, stress as a result of an overwhelming schedule also contributes to student failure. It is important to note that many students do not “really understand the importance of studying in college and if they let other activities get in the way, chances are they will not do very well in college” (University of Alabama Center for Academic Success n.d.).

Lack of academic preparedness does not always mean that students are not intelligent, bright, and/or hard workers. Often, students are not prepared academically because they have poor language, communication, and writing skills that they need to comprehend what they learned and communicate what they understood to others. We all could easily agree that the success or failure of a student at college is directly related to his or her ability to read, write, speak, and listen with comprehension. Many college instructors believe that it is not their job to teach language and communication skills in their courses. But while these skills might not be the responsibility of colleges to teach, and even though students should learn them at the K–12 levels, most students come to college without mastering these skills to the degree that would enable them to succeed at the college level (Blackboard Institute 2011; Casner-Lotto 2006; Cherif and Wideen 1992).

External factors

External factors included outside influences, such as the need to work while going to school and the cost of education, which are outside of the control of students. This category was mentioned the fourth most frequently as a factor contributing to students failing courses at the college level. It was mentioned a total of 299 times (11.1% of responses). Participants reported that unforeseen circumstances, including illnesses and family tragedies, are outside influences that affect students' performances, and they have no power over them. But they also reported factors such as drugs and alcohol, which are factors that are under their own control.

Cost of education and the fact that some school supplies are very expensive were also mentioned as a factor for failing classes. Some students said that because of the cost of education, they maximize the number of courses they take to save money. These students were aware that they might end up dropping some of the courses if they felt overwhelmed. These students rely on the possibility of dropping a course if they find themselves in a bad situation. On the other hand, some participants perceived this situation as bad time management and study habits. Taking more classes than what they can handle is an unwise decision because it will lead to worrying, stress, and, in turn, undesirable academic performance. So it is more an issue of management than of an education cost.

Cost of education, however, has been on the rise in the last ten years in the United States, and recently, many states have cut budgets for education significantly. This of course forces colleges and universities not only to raise tuition but also to cut the scholarships that they could offer incoming students. Clearly, it forces students who desire a higher education and cannot afford it to go to college and work at the same time.



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Student attitudes

A student's state of mind controls not only how he or she feels and perceives the world but also how to behave in an evaluative manner toward schoolwork, course learning materials, class policies, instruction, instructional materials, and instructors. Because of this, a student's state of mind has a major effect on how he or she performs and in turn succeeds in a given class. This means that there is a positive correlation between a student's state of mind, which we call attitude, and academic achievement (Russell and Hollander 1975). Thus, a student's attitude is an extremely important factor in learning (Blake and Hanley 1995) because it directs his or her aspirations and ambitions. For example, students who are not willing to ask questions and/or are not ready to say that they need help have a greater tendency to fail than those who do ask for help. By asking questions and asking for help when they need it, students help maximize their rate of success.

In terms of frequency of mention, student attitudes was fifth in the study; it was mentioned as a contributing factor to student's failure in college a total of 283 times (10.5% of responses). Student attitudes can take various forms. For example, being overly proud to the point that one is unwilling to ask for help when it is really needed can strongly contribute to the failure of some students. Another example of attitudinal factors was that some students developed a bad or negative attitude toward school and schoolwork, which prevented them from engaging in schoolwork. This usually happened as a result of an unpleasant learning experience and/or bad communication or a misunderstanding with an instructor, staff member, administrator, or even fellow students. Furthermore:

Negative Thinking. This one bad habit can wipe out all the student's good study habits. I mean if the student perennially thinks he or she does not understand the subject or that the subject is just too hard for him or her, no amount of studying or copying notes or doing assignments can really make up for this one bad habit. It will just simply block everything because the student is setting himself or herself up for failure. Accounting [for example] is already a difficult subject as it is, adding to this one's resistance to learning and everything will just really be for nothing. I'm a strong believer of mind over matter when it comes to this subject and if the student thinks he or she cannot understand the subject, chances are, he or she will never understand it. This is what one of my students did and she, needless to say, failed my subject. (Emievil 2012)

A student's negative attitude toward a subject, such as science, could also be the result of how that subject is taught. For example, the way science has been taught, both at the high school and college levels, plays a major role in shaping students' attitudes toward science (Cherif and Wideen 1992). Often, students in high school are being presented with selected aspects of scientific dogma rather than being taught the innovative and visionary character of science and the value that such knowledge has to the educational process. When they go to college, some of these students could easily become confused because the information they learn in college contradicts the information they gained in their high school science classes. This dogmatic approach to teaching science, coupled with the drastic cultural changes that students undergo as they transition from high school to college, affect students' attitudes toward and performance in college-level science courses. Though the development of desirable attitudes toward science is not the primary goal of introductory science courses, instructors usually recognize that attitude formation is one of the important aspects of instruction (Cherif and Wideen 1992; Garcia and McFeeley 1978). This is simply because there is substantial evidence that students who possess positive attitudes toward science will perform better academically (Movahedzadeh 2012; Russell and Hollander 1975); the same can be said about any subject.



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Instruction

Factors contributing to student failure related to instruction are mentioned 275 times (10.2% of responses), which make it the sixth largest number of mentions. In this subcategory, reasons included that classes are boring and/or students are not challenged, so they do not invest time in the courses nor make any effort and thus end up failing. Some participants attributed failure to insensitive instructors or faculty members who do not engage students in active learning by moving too quickly through the materials and with no chapter reviews. In addition, some students do not get along with an instructor, which results in students' failure. Instructors who are not clear in presenting information cause students to misunderstand, sometimes resulting in failure. Furthermore, some students develop the belief that the instructor would pass them regardless and thus end up doing nothing, resulting in failing the class.

Just as instructors feel frustrated when students fail, students feel frustrated too. Some students feel that the content of some instructors' final exams is purposely more rigorous and does not line up with the course content taught. It is a fact that some instructors, especially at the graduate level, have a tendency to teach what they like regardless of the course content and policies. But the question still remains: If the majority of students are able to successfully complete an exam, why is it that certain students cannot? Is the student complaining because he or she could not pass the exam and using the content as an excuse for the failure? Or did the exam really not cover what the students learned in the class, or what they were supposed to learn?

Relevancy issues

The least repeated root cause for students' failing classes at the college level was the feeling of disconnect with the course work or that the subject being taught does not apply to their fields or major. It was mentioned 119 times (4.4% of responses). Many students coming out of high school are not able to see the value in doing well in college if they cannot see the relevancy of the learning materials to their lives. When students do see the relevancy of the learned topics to their majors, careers, and daily lives, they are motivated to become involved in the learning activities rather than to be passive receivers of information.

There is growing evidence that "courses with learner-centered approaches—those approaches that use active learning strategies to engage students directly in learning processes—enhance academic achievement and promote the development of important learning skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, and the ability to cooperatively work with others" (Weimer 2012). Derting and Ebert-May (2010, 471) found that "the benefits of learner-centered teaching may extend far beyond the class(es) in which such teaching occurs."

Some argue that there is really no direct relationship between learner-centered instruction and making the learning materials relevant to students. They argue that while it helps to see the connection, it does not matter whether or not the materials are relevant; if certain concepts or course materials are required to be learned, then it is the student's responsibility to learn them. Students need to assume responsibility, and the failure to do so can transcend into failure in college and maybe in life. Unfortunately though, many students need to see the relevancy to stay engaged and motivated.



Conclusion

Retention, which is one of the most critical issues facing colleges and universities today, is directly related to students' success and failure in schoolwork. Students who fail most often leave colleges either on their own or because they are forced to do so by school policy and regulations of not meeting course passing requirements. In both cases, it is a loss for the students and the college. From the results of this study, we can conclude that participants held themselves accountable for their own success or failure. After all, each classroom with its instructor, students, learning materials, and learning environment represents a dynamically active ecosystem in which "learning from instruction requires the learner to play an active role in order to acquire new knowledge successfully" (Shuell 1988, 276).

Motivation and study habits are mentioned most frequently as the root cause behind student failure at the college level. These two factors, as well as academic readiness and student attitudes (which are mentioned third and fifth most frequently) are fundamentally under the control of the students. The instruction, instructional materials, and instructors, over which we as faculty members, educators, and college administrators have power, came a distant sixth. This means that students are aware that the reason why students fail courses most often resides within them and is under their own power. For faculty members and administration to say that students are unmotivated and unprepared academically and mentally for college education is perceived as an unsupported indictment. But for students themselves to say that students often fail because they are unmotivated and unprepared academically is perceived as admitting self-facts and a loud cry for help.

While students do not blame us—the faculty members, educators, and college administrators—directly, and though we have only limited power over students' attitudes, academic readiness, and study habits, in the classroom setting we control the learning materials, learning environment, and pedagogy through which we can influence students' motivation, study habits, and attitudes and help them see the relevancy of what they learn to their life and future careers. But this is a new challenge for both faculty members and college administrators who have been holding the belief that they are there to teach certain topics and skills, based on a signed contract between the college and given students, that leads to specific academic degrees. Helping students to become motivated, influencing their study habits, improving their attitudes, and making the teaching materials relevant to students' lives is rarely a part of what faculty members and other educators at the college level think of when they design their courses, teaching approaches, and assessment strategies. For many instructors, if students become motivated in their classes and develop a better attitude toward learning, this is a by-product of what they mainly do with their teaching materials and approaches. However, students in this study are telling us that even though colleges and faculty are not required to teach students how to be motivated or study better, these factors often cause them to fail courses. Thus colleges and their faculty members need to help students to become motivated, to be more academically prepared, to develop better attitudes toward learning and education, and to develop better study habits. So, as faculty members, educators, and college administrators, what can we do with our curriculum, teaching approaches and strategies, and learning environment to help students become more motivated to learn and become interested in education? Do we need to do things differently than the way we have been doing them all these years? It is a fact that today's students are different from those who were in college when we were college students. It is also a fact that the challenges and the opportunities they face today are different from those that students faced only ten to fifteen years ago.



Chapter 1: Creating and Supporting Learning Environments

Why Do Students Fail? Students' Perspective

In short, lack of motivation is the leading cause behind students' failure or success in completing schoolwork. Motivation influences students' attitudes, study habits, academic readiness, and so on. Through the college learning environment, learning materials, and instructional pedagogy, faculty members, educators, and college administrators can help students invest in their courses and, in turn, succeed. Students who have a good understanding of the content being taught are generally more motivated and have a more positive attitude and thus have a greater chance of doing well in their schoolwork. And to ensure that students have a good understanding, instructors should provide students with learning opportunities that are engaging, pique their interest, and allow them to reconstruct their own knowledge. Students know it is their responsibility to do well, but many students need extra support from their college and instructors to help keep them interested and on track.

Finally, as Professor James Ricky Cox from Murray State University recently stated:

I have realized that students truly struggling with the material often need a new way of approaching problem solving and concept mastery. One successful approach has been to encourage students to draw diagrams and sketches (external representations) to help organize information and ideas. This allows them to apply their creativity and right-brained skills to tackle more analytical tasks. The most rewarding and meaningful experiences of my teaching career have been the success of students who once struggled but ultimately overcame their difficulties. In my mind, a student's journey from failure to mastery (or struggle to success) is what higher education is all about, and the only way we can make this work is by setting the academic bar high, but not beyond reach, and then providing the necessary support and motivation. If I had to establish a marketing campaign around this idea, it would sound like the Home Depot slogan: You can do it (succeed in a demanding course) and we can help (by providing a supportive and instructionally diverse environment). (Cox 2011, 6)

Readers who are interested in detailed response patterns among the various demographic groups included in this study, or in the authors' specific recommendations for strategies that might be employed by instructors, advisors, and administrators to address the issues raised here, are encouraged to communicate with one of the authors or visit our Web site: www.abourcherif.com.

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