TEACHING UNPREPARED STUDENTS

Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education

Kathleen F. Gabriel

Foreword by Sandra M. Flake

Sterling, Virginia
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I

UNPREPARED AND AT-RISK COLLEGE STUDENTS

Myth or Reality?

Not everything that is faced can be changed.
But nothing can be changed until it is faced.

—James Baldwin

The number of academically unprepared and at-risk students enrolling in colleges and universities is increasing. In a national survey of college professors conducted by the Chronicle of Higher Education, 44% of college faculty members reported that their students “are ill prepared for the demands of higher education” (Sanoff, 2006, p. 1). Results from the American College Testing Program (ACT) in 2006 support the professors’ perception. These results show that 49% of high school graduates do not have the reading skills they need to succeed in college (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005, p. 1). For those who attend college, about 25% of first-time students at 4-year colleges and universities require at least 1 year of remedial courses (Adelman, 2004; Horn & Berger, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005, p. 1).

These statistics may be surprising, but they do not fully describe the attitude of many of today’s college students. As Weimer (2002) explains,

Students now arrive at college less well prepared than they once did. They often lack solid basic skills and now work many hours to pay for college and sometimes a car. . . . Many students lack confidence in themselves as learners and do not make responsible learning decisions. . . . Having little
self-confidence and busy lives motivates many students to look for easy educational options, not ones that push them hard. . . . Obviously, these descriptions are not characteristic of all students, but most faculty quickly agree that teaching college students today is far more challenging than it once was. (pp. 95–96)

For at-risk or unprepared students with inadequate reading and writing skills, college placement tests serve as a barrier to registering for the college English and math classes needed for general education requirements, thus forcing the students to take remedial courses to prepare them for these college-level classes. However, at many institutions, these same students are not prevented from enrolling in social science, humanities, and some science courses, where they can quickly falter. When assessing all students’ abilities and attitudes in several specific areas, “faculty members say that students are inadequate writers, have trouble understanding difficult materials, fall short in knowledge of science and math, have poor study habits, and lack motivation” (Sanoff, 2006, p. 1).

While reforms at the high school level have been proposed, many universities and colleges have already established summer programs that target academically at-risk students, first-generation students, and others who traditionally have had low levels of retention and/or college graduation rates. These summer programs seek to set these students on the right path for succeeding in college since “most student attrition occurs during the first year of college” (Wankat, 2002, p. 173). Many colleges have increased their tutoring center services, hired retention specialists, offered developmental courses for unprepared students, and expanded first-year experience programs that target the incoming students.

Still, the statistics of success rates for at-risk students are bleak. Kuh et al. (2005) report “seventy percent of students who took at least one remedial reading course in college do not obtain a degree or certificate within eight years of enrollment” (p. 1). They also report the following:

More than one-fourth of 4-year college students who have to take three or more remedial classes leave college after the first year (Adelman, Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) 2005; National Research Council 2004). In fact, as the number of required developmental courses increases, so do the odds that the student will drop out (Burley, Butner, & Cejda 2001; CCSSE). (Kuh et al. 2005, p. 2)

Many of the at-risk students are doomed to failure either because they are academically disqualified by university officials or because they decide to leave the university with a low grade point average. The cost of losing these students can be high for the students, their families, and the universities that lose them. When universities lose students to academic failure, they not only lose human potential but also real dollars and cents in the form of lost tuition monies, additional resources expended on recruiting replacement students, and so on.

As colleges and universities have examined which students are and are not completing degree programs, the resulting studies reveal that for historically underserved students, graduation rates are significantly lower.

Although greater numbers of minority students are entering college than in previous years, fewer continue to earn degrees compared with non-minorities. Poor college completion rates and the racial-ethnic gap in graduation rates mean that too many students are not acquiring the desired knowledge, skills, and competencies needed for the 21st century. (Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup, & Gonyea, 2007, p. 5)

The cost of losing students is worrisome to college officials. In response to the revolving-door scenario, many colleges and universities have added retention coordinators and specialists, and increased academic support beyond the traditional tutoring and writing centers.

Even though the odds are against at-risk and unprepared students, there are those who do make it. Not only have academic support programs improved the chances of success for at-risk students, but so have the actions of individual faculty members. In his study Blose (1999) notes that in selective institutions where faculty and staff have high levels of expectations for all their students, then “regardless of individuals’ prior academic history . . . students tend to respond and behave as the faculty expected in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 84). When professors “treated the students as
academically capable, and held them to high standards” (p. 84) in an environment of respect, students—all students, even those who were admitted as underachieving or unprepared students—achieve an increased level of performance (p. 84). Thus, low retention and graduation rates for unprepared and at-risk students can be improved, and faculty can have a major impact on accomplishing this.

How professors teach and interact with at-risk students makes the difference. There is a relationship between students’ intellectual development and student and faculty interaction (Halawah, 2006). Professors can develop a rapport with their students both in and out of the classroom, and have a “significant positive influence” on students’ intellectual and personal development (Halawah, 2006, p. 677). And, as most professors already know, posting office hours and waiting for students to come is not enough. In their study of educationally effective colleges, Kuh et al. (2005) found that “the most successful schools balance academic challenges with various types of support so that students are not left to fend on their own to figure out how to succeed” (p. 181).

As educators, we have an obligation to all of our students, including those who arrive unprepared. As members of an institution and as individual professors, we must use a myriad of actions that will provide unprepared students with real opportunities for success. If we do not, we are simply setting these students up for failure and, at the same time, only pretending we have somehow fulfilled a moral obligation of providing opportunities to our diverse population in today’s society. Astin (1999) writes,

The education of the so-called “remedial” students is the most important educational problem in America today, more important than educational funding, affirmative action, vouchers, merit pay, teacher education, financial aid, curriculum reform and the rest. . . . I would argue that providing effective “remedial” education would do more to alleviate our most serious social and economic problems than almost any other action we could take. (p. 10)

While most institutions have academic support centers that strive to ameliorate the problems of low retention rates of at-risk students, many professors are looking for answers to address the growing number of unprepared and at-risk students who are enrolled in their courses, who underperform, and who are reluctant to seek help. “Much of the existing literature focuses on developing general theoretical models of help-seeking, but few offer concrete suggestions for interventions” (Chung & Hsu, 2006, p. 254).

The purpose of this book is to provide professors (and their graduate teaching assistants) with teaching strategies and methods that will promote student engagement and improve performance for all the students in their classes, but especially for those who are at risk or unprepared, without sacrificing high standards or expectations.

Overview

In chapter 2, “Philosophical Foundations,” I explain that articulating a teaching philosophy can help clarify beliefs and principles about teaching. After a teaching philosophy is established, it can be used as the guiding principle for developing teaching goals for each course that we teach. In this chapter, I describe the five guiding principles that constitute the foundation of my teaching philosophy, wherein my ultimate goal is to provide opportunities for success for all college students, focusing particularly on giving unprepared students a real chance to make it.

In chapter 3, “The First Week of Class,” I discuss how we can augment students’ enthusiasm and motivation by clearly explaining and identifying the goals and objectives of the class and the specific procedures and expectations that students must meet to succeed. As professors, we must do this in the first week of class. Our message should be communicated verbally and in writing (e.g., the syllabus) so that our students, as well as ourselves, can refer to the expectations throughout the semester. Chapter 3 addresses the various components of a learner-centered syllabus and how it can be used as a guide for student success. If a positive and interactive tone is set during the first week of the semester, the benefits will be reaped throughout the rest of the course.

Providing opportunities for interactions with your students and among your students (i.e., student-to-student contact) is another important ingredient for retention. Chapter 3 also deals with creating an atmosphere for promoting appropriate and engaging behavior and discusses techniques for
creating a positive classroom environment that embraces diversity and promotes inclusion and respect for all. A variety of methods that professors and graduate teaching assistants can use to help students appreciate the benefits of diversity in our society are included.

In chapter 4, “Begin With Consistent Contact,” the connection between attendance and retention is examined. Retention begins with a student’s success in his or her courses, and achieving success is tied to regular attendance. Several studies show that students who go to class regularly earn higher grades and are more likely to stay in college. This chapter discusses six steps that we as faculty can easily implement that will increase class attendance of all students, regardless of how prepared they may be for college. Furthermore, the ways these steps reinforce Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education are examined.

Chapter 5, “Learning Styles and the Science of Learning,” sets forth several types of learning style inventories students can take that will help shed light on individual learning style preferences. This chapter covers three specific models. Such knowledge can empower students and increase their sense of responsibility in the learning process as they discover new study techniques and methods for different types of learners. In addition I discuss learning approaches and science of learning research. Knowledge of learning styles, learning approaches, and the principles from the science of learning not only helps students but professors also, as we too can evaluate our own teaching styles and make sure that we have a variety of approaches and assessments that play to various student’s respective needs.

Chapter 6, “Embracing Learner-Centered Education,” familiarizes readers with learner-centered environments. As community colleges and 4-year institutions seek ways to improve their retention and graduation rates, many have recognized that shifting the pedagogy focus from professor centered to learner centered can benefit all students, especially those who are at risk. This chapter defines learner-centered teaching and lists specific steps professors can take to become learner-centered teachers, including establishing course goals, developing desired learning outcomes, creating a learner-centered syllabus, preparing for resistance, and establishing a learning community.

These initial steps will guide professors as they plan lessons and activities that will engage students so that they can fully participate in achieving the desired learning outcomes. This chapter stresses the importance of considering students’ prior knowledge or lack of knowledge. “If we ignore or avoid prior knowledge, it will hinder our teaching” (Zull, 2002, p. 108). To help students connect with new material, they must make connections that make sense to them. This chapter not only discusses ways to spark such connections, but it also suggests strategies for helping students find ways to catch up to the new material being presented.

Chapter 7, “Interweaving Assessment and Teaching,” describes the benefits of ongoing assessments. As professors, we often ask our students if they have any questions. Usually, the response is silence. Yet, after the first exam is over, professors and students may be disappointed or frustrated with poor results. However, by using different types of assessment techniques and activities before (and in between) exams, professors and students can receive specific feedback on whether students are grasping the material, and on the students' progress in applying, analyzing, synthesizing, or transferring the ideas of the course content. An early warning of problems allows the teacher to intervene quickly to avoid discouraging at-risk students. Chapter 7 also reviews the importance of using different types of activities that not only engage students and increase their participation in class, but also give the professor and students feedback as students prepare to demonstrate what they are learning.

In chapter 8, “Techniques for Promoting Academic Integrity and Discouraging Cheating,” I present new ways to combat cheating and improve one’s grading systems. During class many professors have encountered the question, “Is it going to be on the test?” While most professors find this question frustrating (or infuriating), it also shows that many students are obsessed with their grades. Because of this obsession, the students appear to be focused on doing well on tests and not necessarily on learning the material. In addition, professors have to contend with cheating on tests and/or students who plagiarize papers. This chapter covers a variety of issues related to grading student performances and, at the same time, provides suggestions for discouraging cheating. By using rubrics, Universal Design strategies, and
introducing a vocabulary strategy that can help our students—and particularly those at risk—improve their reading and listening comprehension, we can help students improve the way they prepare for tests, write their papers, and complete other summative assignments. At the same time, we will be promoting student engagement and academic integrity.

Conclusion

I have tried to make this book “professor friendly” for both the veteran and beginner teacher. You can choose the chapters that will best fit your needs, or you can read the book in its entirety. Each chapter offers specific tools and interaction techniques specifically for at-risk or unprepared students relating to the specific subtopic. The table of contents is intended to guide your selections. This book is not a panacea for all problems presented by at-risk and unprepared students, but it is hoped that the concepts and ideas will support your efforts in reaching out to these students. Take the ideas you like, and tweak the ones that don’t quite fit your teaching style, but above all, realize that you can make a difference in helping at-risk students learn how to become successful college students.

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

Yes, They Can!

I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.

—Boozer T. Washington

Almost all colleges and universities have mission statements that are “clear and focused” and state “those things that the institution professes to achieve within its unique environment and with the particular resources it has available” (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 100). Closely related to a college’s mission statement is its operating philosophy, which guides the college as it seeks to accomplish its institutional mission. Kuh et al. (2005) define the operating philosophy as follows:

[It] is composed of tacit understandings about what is important to the institution and its constituents and unspoken but deeply held values and beliefs about students and their education. (p. 27)

Within universities and colleges, various departments often will also devise a mission statement, which fits in with or complements the overall mission of the school. Mission statements and philosophies can set the theme of the school, just as a professor’s personal mission statement and teaching philosophy will manifest itself in the professor’s teaching style and the way she or he interacts with students.
Some universities specifically include in their mission something about at-risk students. For example, Winston-Salem State University and University of Texas at El Paso “emphasize that every person has the potential to learn [and the institutions are] dedicated to expanding educational opportunity for students who by traditional measures are not expected to succeed in higher education” (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 28). Whether or not a university has included such a declaration as part of its mission statement, many individual faculty members are interested in ensuring opportunities for at-risk students and have included this as part of their personal mission statement and teaching philosophy.

Background

There are college professors who are interested in working with unprepared college students. I know this from personal experience. When I graduated from high school, it looked as though I would not be able to get into the local state college—or survive there even if I did get in. I had low to average high school grades; my initial application to a local college was denied. Following an appeal, I was finally accepted in late July, only one month before school started, under the “special admit” category. I still remember when my freshman-year English professor handed back my first college essay with a large red F on the top. To add insult to injury, my professor asked me, in a very sarcastic voice, “How did you get into college?”

Fortunately, this experience proved to be an aberration rather than the norm during my college education. Other teachers believed in my ability, and with a lot of hard work and encouragement, I learned how to learn and succeed in college. After college graduation, I was accepted in a teacher-education certification program.

As a high school teacher, I wanted to have an impact on students, especially academically nonproductive or low-performing students. It often happens that some colleagues warn new teachers that older students who have trouble in school are the hardest to reach and that it is probably too late for them to catch up. Primarily because of my own academic experiences, I have always disagreed with this notion, and still do. Even in college I believe it is not too late to learn how to learn. Nevertheless, it takes more than just wishful thinking. As Wyoming Tyus, three-time Olympic Gold Medal winner, put it in a 1988 speech, “You need to have the three Ds: Drive, Determination, and Desire.” College teachers can inspire and support at-risk students, but only if these students reciprocate with their own efforts.

Lessons From the Best

In the past as now, many great teachers connect with students and teach them in a way that no other teacher has throughout those students’ lives. These teachers have a unique ability to open the minds of students and allow them to believe that they really can learn and do what so many before have told them they could not do: excel in the classroom. Before my first year of teaching, I decided that I could borrow, learn from, and expand upon the methods and techniques of these special teachers.

One person I learned about was Annie Sullivan, whom I consider to be one of the greatest teachers of all time. Annie Sullivan is known as the miracle worker, and in the film of the same name about her life and work (Penn, Coe, & Gibson, 1962), many of her teaching techniques and beliefs are revealed. To this day, she continues to influence my teaching philosophy by shaping and reinforcing my guiding principles.

The Miracle Worker is about Annie Sullivan’s famous pupil Helen Keller, who was deaf and blind. Before Annie arrived, Helen’s parents had failed to provide any discipline or structure in their daughter’s life, primarily because they felt sorry for her. However, Annie had high expectations for her student because she believed in her ability to learn. She held Helen accountable for her actions, something that no one had ever done. The Miracle Worker shows how Annie Sullivan’s teaching methods changed her student’s life.

One particular scene in The Miracle Worker influenced me greatly. At noon at the family dining room table, 8-year-old Helen eats by grabbing food off her parents’, brother’s, and grandmother’s plates. The family ignores her and actually encourages the behavior by moving to the side as she moves around the table. However, when Helen reaches for food on Annie’s plate,
Annie blocks her from doing so. The other adults are offended that Annie will not accommodate the “poor child.”

Instead Annie asks them to leave, and the first lesson begins. Annie tries to have Helen sit in a chair and eat with a spoon, but Helen fights back. A wrestling match ensues with Annie pulling Helen into a chair and putting a spoon into her hand. Helen resists—she throws the spoon across the room as she kicks, hits, even bites Annie. Annie finds more spoons, and there is more pushing and pulling. The struggle goes on and on.

As the family waits anxiously in the yard, they can hear the commotion from the dining room. Finally, at about four o’clock, it is quiet, and Annie appears with her hair a mess and her glasses bent. She announces to the family that Helen ate from her own plate, with a spoon, and she folded her napkin. Annie said, “The room’s a wreck, but her napkin is folded” (Penn et al., 1962).

I realize that working with academically at-risk college students is not the same as working with someone who is physically disabled, like the young Helen Keller. Nonetheless, the general teaching philosophy of accountability, high standards, and expecting appropriate behavior is one that I embrace and have tried to uphold throughout my teaching career. Even when faced with adversity, Annie Sullivan stuck to her principles with true grit and a kind of fortitude all teachers need to have. “Folding a napkin” has become a symbol for me—it represents high expectations and standards, perseverance, and settling for nothing less.

Philosophy Crystallized

While developing a teaching philosophy, we as teachers can learn from watching other professors, as well as by drawing upon our own teaching and learning experiences. Once a philosophy is developed, it can be used as a foundation to guide one’s style of teaching and interactions with students. When students fail, or teachers fail to reach them, we should try to figure out why by asking, “What could I have done differently?” When students succeed, we may ask, “What things or conditions helped the students achieve that success?”

I am convinced that no single teacher, class, or support program can be a panacea for all students. Even the programs or colleges that demonstrate high levels of success cannot help every at-risk student. Some professors will inspire some students and will become those students’ favorite college professors. The very same professors will have students in their classes who seem impossible to reach. No matter what kind of challenges we have with the different types of students who come to college, we should be consistent with our teaching philosophy. Even if we don’t write down a mission statement or teaching philosophy, most of us have basic beliefs about students and teaching that will guide us as we develop policies and practices. Clarifying one’s teaching philosophy in writing can be helpful, and it is highly recommended for all teachers. Furthermore, if you have not already done so, consider expanding your teaching philosophy so that it specifically includes at-risk or unprepared students.

Guiding Principles

By purposely considering the unprepared students who traditionally have had low success rates in colleges and universities, we professors can have guiding principles that include all types of students we might have in our courses. The five guiding principles I try to follow as I teach and work with all students—at-risk students in particular—are

1. All students, including those who are unprepared or at risk, can become lifelong learners.
2. Significant change requires commitment and time.
3. Struggle is a necessary and important part of life.
4. Students must accept responsibility for their learning progress.
5. Professors should never do for students what students can do for themselves.

These principles serve as the foundation and core of my teaching philosophy.

Principle One

The belief that at-risk students can become lifelong learners is the key to the other four principles. Even in college it is not too late for students, at-risk or
otherwise, to change their academic habits. In fact, it is never too late to
discover one’s own abilities. Some students are more open to this discovery
than others.

If students believe that “one is born with a certain level of ability in an
area and it cannot be changed . . . [they] will accept their failure . . . as
evidence of the hopelessness of their situation” (Dweck & Leggett, 1988, as
cited by Svinicki, 2004, p. 162). However, students who have this frame
of mind can be influenced and can change their viewpoints. Svinicki (2004)
points out that teachers can change students’ beliefs about their ability by
modeling and by talking to the students about their efforts. She writes, “If
we focus on what can be done and on effort, rather than focusing on some
inborn ability, we are both modeling an appropriate belief and encouraging
students to reframe their thinking” (p. 162). In addition, by employing
learner-centered teaching methods, engaging students, and providing them
with corrective feedback on their work, students will be able to chart their
own progress and academic improvements.

Once at-risk students discover that they can be successful, they can make
tremendous improvements and become excellent (or very good) students.
Throughout my teaching career I have had many, many rewarding
moments—but the most rewarding ones are when students call or e-mail
many years after they have left my class. Seeing students who started college
unprepared improve enough to be successful in college, then graduate,
continue to grow in their careers, and even go on to graduate school is gratifying.
Recently I received a wonderful e-mail from a former student who is now in
his thirties and about to go back to graduate school for his master’s degree.
He wrote, “Can you believe it? Who would have ever thought that I would
be doing this—and to beat all, my employer is paying my tuition.”

One of the best calls came from a student who was particularly challeng-
ing for me when he was a freshman. Now Chancy works with at-risk high
school students, just as he once was. He called one day to tell me how “bad”
some of the kids behave when he first meets them. As we discussed various
training methods and activities that he was going to try, I could not resist
reminding him that he once was similar to the students he was now helping.
Of course he already knew, and we had a good laugh about it.

The unprepared students who were part of the academic support pro-
gram I directed had very low achievement scores when they started college.
None of the students had reading or writing skills that were considered
equivalent to the average college freshman’s, and some had reading skills as
low as the fifth-grade level. In every class I have ever taught in college, there
were always some students with academic deficiencies. However, most of
these students made significant improvements by the end of the semester.

For those who also participated in the academic support program,
improvements were even more dramatic—most improved their reading
scores by as much as three to four grade levels during their first year of
college. Even though some were still behind, even with this kind of progress,
they had made a tremendous leap in a short period of time and were begin-
ning to believe that they could succeed in the college environment. One of
the students who saw his scores improve by three grade levels at the end of
his first year told me, “I never expected that I could do that! I feel pretty
proud.” He is simply one example that shows it is never too late to discover
one’s abilities.

Principle Two
The second guiding principle of my teaching philosophy is the belief that
significant change requires commitment and an investment in time from
students and professors. It is imperative that students be expected to attend
class, pay attention, and participate. Weimer (2002) reminds teachers that
even when they invite students to meet with them, some will not come, and
professors must understand that we “cannot help students who do not want
help” (p. 111). However, those who do take the time to seek advice from
their professors and assistance from tutoring centers or other types of aca-
demic support programs will often surprise themselves with their academic
abilities.

Throughout the years, I have worked with many students who pre-
nviously had not thrived in the classroom because they lacked the necessary
skills. Some students had simply given up on the idea of academic success
because of frustration and prior failures. Once these students gave up, they
still got through school—not by learning, but by faking it, cheating, and getting friends to help them out. Nearly every one of these students wanted to do well, but after so much failure some had written off all hope. In some cases, if students were cooperative and friendly, instructors or professors simply gave them a passing grade. The smooth path of least resistance had been followed without much participation or effort on their part. Often this made it easier for the adults around these students, but it inhibited the students’ ability to develop or progress. For these students to succeed, their commitment to learning and their teachers’ willingness to give corresponding support would have to change.

A telling example of the time and effort that students must be willing to devote in order to improve occurred when two freshmen student-athletes, Emma and Mary Anne, were referred to me by their softball coach 6 weeks after the semester had begun. When Emma and Mary Anne came to my office, I had them describe their classes and current grades. Both students had Ds and Fs in every single class, and one of the students began to cry as she gave the details of her grades. As I outlined a semester plan and set up daily times for them to come to my office, both seemed surprised at the frequency of the meetings and a little hesitant to devote so much of their time to “school stuff.” Ultimately, however, both agreed to the daily meetings. By the end of the semester, one student had raised all of her grades to Cs, and the other had raised her grades to a B, a C, and three Ds. Instead of potentially flunking out of school or digging themselves into a grade point average deficit that would have been very difficult to overcome to regain their academic eligibility, Emma and Mary Anne were in a good position to build upon their gains, maintain their eligibility, and get on track for graduation. In the spring semester, both earned over a 2.0.

Later both students expressed how grateful they were to have survived that first semester. They also said that they had put in more hours of studying than they ever had—or expected to when we first met. As Emma stated:

Coach had told us very casually that if we came to see you, you could help us, but we didn’t think that meant we had to see you every day. We thought we were going to meet with you a few times, you would give us some study tips and advice, and that would be it. Then, when you said we would start meeting every week, we thought it would be once or maybe twice a week. We had no idea that it would become part of our daily routine. We were absolutely clueless. And it was an enormous change in time and effort for both of us.

After that first innocuous meeting in my office and after surviving their first semester of college, both students went on to graduate from the university, and one went on to graduate school to earn her teaching certificate.

After being in the education field for many years, it became quite apparent to me that most at-risk students have no idea what it takes to succeed academically at the college level when they first begin. The amount of time and commitment that is demanded from them often comes as a shock. Another freshman student I worked with stated, “I have done more work in four weeks than I did in four years of high school.” But he, like others, discovered the benefits of time and dedication.

Students can and will discover their own potential by becoming proactive about their own education. Once involved, they can develop a commitment to the process. Nonetheless, it has to start with students making a commitment to come to class every single day, and to dedicate themselves to put in the substantial time necessary to succeed. At the same time, these students need at least one professor who is willing to spend time guiding them. The extra hours that Emma and Mary Anne put in also meant that I was putting in extra hours. It takes time and commitment to meet with students to guide them on how to get started, to go over course material, to provide corrective feedback on their writings, and so on. Professors who believe in giving at-risk students a chance must make time to work with them, and, of course, at-risk students must also make time to meet with their professors.

**Principle Three**

The third principle of my teaching philosophy is derived from a very basic observation: struggle is a necessary and important part of life. To illuminate this principle to my students, I have a quotation from Frederick Douglass hanging in my office that reads: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.”
Learning how to work through problems and not give up when things are not going smoothly is vital to success in all aspects of life. There are no quick fixes, and anguish may be involved. Some at-risk students may not want to go through the struggle and exertion that is necessary. Faced with the effort required to achieve academic success, some at-risk students choose to give up, resisting those who are there to help them make changes.

In a college setting, the teaching faculty, retention specialists, and others in various support centers (i.e., multicultural centers, writing labs, tutoring centers, etc.) are well aware of the avoidance behavior of students who miss tutoring appointments and meetings with their professors, and who do not show up for workshops on how to improve one’s academic skills (i.e., test taking, note taking, writing, etc.). To counter this type of behavior, Weimer (2002) suggests that professors “need policies and practices that encourage students to encounter themselves as learners, motivate them to become more than what they are, and provide the resources, experiences, and skills they need if they are to move forward in their development” (p. 111).

Fortunately, professors can try a few approaches when attempting to persuade at-risk students to put in the time and effort that is needed to improve. Some reluctant students will be convinced not to miss class when they realize that they will lose eligibility status for extracurricular activities or be in danger of losing their financial aid. Often an academic adviser or counselor can also be helpful. For example, Ruben, an at-risk student who was taking a course I was teaching, asked if I would allow him to drop my class even though the “drop” deadline had passed. I contacted Ruben’s academic adviser, and we met with Ruben together. We told him that even though he was failing the class at that time, there was still time to get tutoring, put in extra time, and pass the class. On the other hand, if he dropped the class, he would lose his status as a full-time student because it was too late to add another class. As a part-time student, his financial aid would be jeopardized, and his health insurance might be canceled.

Ruben decided to stick with my class. He started going to tutoring and meeting with me during my office hours every week. Within two weeks, he was improving. He passed my class, and at the end of the semester he told me the following:

Your class—well, really, all my classes were hard. I was flunking everything. But then when the consequences were laid out and at the same time a plan of action was set up to help me, well, it gave me a little glimmer of hope. At first, I didn’t think I could do it. But then, after going to tutoring and coming to see you every week, things got better. I couldn’t believe how much it helped. I still can’t believe that I passed my classes. It was really hard, but I learned a lot.

Another at-risk student, Raymond, shared with me his doubts about his ability to actually succeed in college. After I had worked with him for about 4 months, Raymond came into my office, sat down, and announced, “I can’t believe it. I know what’s going on in class. I can do this. I’m not dumb!” His new perception did not come about easily—he had to exert himself and work hard to get there.

Despite their initial low conception about their chances of success in college, Ruben and Raymond both graduated. It was not easy. At-risk students need to be told from the outset that it will take time, effort, and hard work to be successful.

**Principle Four**

The fourth principle of my teaching philosophy is that students must accept responsibility for their learning progress. Students, like anyone else, need to have goals and know it is their responsibility to achieve those goals. Believing in a dream can be a big part of accepting responsibility. Dreams do not just happen, and they are not possible without vision and hope.

With patience and tenacity to nurture this hope, we can have a powerful impact on at-risk students. Even though unprepared and at-risk students cannot simply be talked into obtaining self-confidence, the words we use when talking to such students can make a critical difference. Positive and encouraging words can be enriching and inspiring (Urban, 2004). As teachers, we can help facilitate at-risk students’ success by inviting them to come see us during office hours to go over the material and/or go to tutoring and support centers. We can also introduce students to learning styles and specific learning strategies that complement their learning style preferences.
chapter 5 for further discussion). However, there is usually an intervening period of time before at-risk students actually gain confidence and understand that they can make it. As students start to accept responsibility for their own progress, their hopes of being able to actually succeed in academics will grow. This never happens quickly, but it can and does happen for many at-risk students, often because a professor or adviser helps them connect with the educational process.

I discovered an extra twist to this particular philosophy when working with students who were also members of an athletic team on a Division I college campus. For some, the dream of playing professionally was strong and often competed with the dream of succeeding and graduating from college. Some thought that they had to choose between the two. I never accepted that notion. Student-athletes need to know (or be convinced) that they can strive for both, and that they do not have to sacrifice academic success for athletic success.

We all believe that obtaining an education and participating in the educational system, even with all its flaws, is a key to a fulfilling life. But sometimes we forget that students may not share the vision even though they have enrolled in our institutions. The vision has to be discussed and demonstrated, whether with statistics of graduates’ earning power, revealing testimonials of alumni, or connections with the university career placement centers. These kinds of actions may inspire hope for our students but don’t absolve students from the need to accept responsibility for their own learning.

Professors can assist students with learning how to be responsible by holding them accountable. I share this part of my philosophy with my students from the first week of class so they all know that no “last-minute deals” or “extra credit” will be offered for making up missed assignments or low test scores. Grading policy and requirements are clearly explained in the syllabus and are also discussed during the first week (see chapters 3 and 6 for further discussion).

Even with reminders, a few students might challenge this policy when they have made poor choices throughout the semester. For example, Claudia, who was an at-risk student with a learning disability, had been pledging a sorority for most of the semester. With every absence or missing assignment, she would give her obligations to the sorority as an excuse. At the end of the semester, she came to my office crying and begging for me not to give her an F, which she had earned. She said, “I’m not asking for you to just give me a higher grade—I will do extra work to earn it.” As I handed her a tissue, I reminded her that having a “secret” or “special” deal would not be fair to the rest of the students but, more important, it would not be fair to her. As I handed her more tissue, I told her the following:

Claudia, you have made choices throughout the semester, and you have chosen not to come see me for help or assistance until now—even though I asked you to in February, in March, and even in April. Now it is May, and it is too late. Next semester, I hope you will make different choices. But, of course, it will be up to you to decide and act on those decisions.

Another student who was failing came to see me before spring break and stated, “I know you are really mad at me.” I told him, “I am not mad. I totally respect your decision not to be in my class or in college. However, if that is your decision, drop your classes now before you waste any more money and my time.” His jaw dropped. “Well . . . well,” he stammered, “I want to be here, and I want you to be in your class.” I simply replied, “Then show me, John. Show me.” He did, and he passed (barely, but he did pass.)

I often post quotations on my office door that epitomize my teaching philosophy. One that relates to this particular principle is from John C. Maxwell’s (2007) book Talent Is Never Enough. He reminds his readers to “remain teachable” (p. 175). Maxwell adds advice from J. Konrad Hole, who wrote:

If you cannot be teachable, having talent won’t help you.
If you cannot be flexible, having a goal won’t help you.
If you cannot be grateful, having abundance won’t help you.
If you cannot be mentorable, having a future won’t help you.
If you cannot be durable, having a plan won’t help you.
If you cannot be reachable, having a success won’t help you. (as cited in Maxwell, 2007, p. 175)
The advice from Maxwell and Hole reinforces principle four: Students must be responsible for their own learning. As professors, we can help students accept responsibility by holding them accountable.

**Principle Five**

The final principle of my teaching philosophy is that professors should never do for students what they can do for themselves. In his book, Wooden: *A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections On and Off the Court*, legendary University of California, Los Angeles basketball coach Coach John Wooden (1997) writes, “Why can’t we realize that it only weakens those we want to help when we do things for them that they could do for themselves?” (p. 15).

However, there is a caveat with this decree. We should not assume that students know what things or how to do the things they should be doing for themselves. Furthermore, just telling students to do something on their own does not mean they are capable of doing it. We may often have to help at-risk students get started and even teach them how to do what they need to do for themselves so they develop the skills to actually become self-reliant and navigate through the university.

Many at-risk freshmen lack skills such as using the library and finding appropriate sources for research papers. Dominic, an at-risk student in my lower-division class, had trouble recognizing the difference between magazine and journal articles, and he was completely overwhelmed when trying to use the library’s online search system. Many freshmen—not just those who are at risk—have the same problem, but Dominic was still confused even after a presentation and demonstration from the university’s librarian on how to use the system. When he turned in his assignment, it was completely wrong, with all of his articles drawn not from academic journals but from news magazines.

I asked him for a meeting, and when he arrived at my office, I surprised him with a field trip to the library for a one-on-one session on finding academic journals and learning how to ask the librarian for help. Later he told me, “I had no idea how much I had screwed up the assignment. We never did anything like this at my high school, and we never had any kind of books or magazines in my home. I really thought I had done this assignment right.” I asked him why had he not talked to one of the resource librarians for help. He told me, “I was embarrassed to ask them. I guess I didn’t really know how or what to ask them. Honestly, I am kind of afraid to even approach those people. . . . I mean, I don’t know any of them.”

Instead of giving Dominic and others who used incorrect sources an F on the annotated bibliography, I had them redo the bibliographies within a few days. Once they had the proper resources, they were ready to write the assigned paper. But Dominic, and other at-risk students I worked with, discovered more than journal articles. By going to the library and talking to one of the librarians, they were able to learn how to use an extremely valuable and important resource that would be needed throughout their college career.

I also believe that professors should never lower their standards or expectations because they believe such standards or expectations are too high. I often tell my students that I will not lower my standards or expectations because I believe they can achieve what I am asking them to do.

Sometimes a professor or academic adviser compromises with students because the professor (or adviser) does not want them to fail. While we may sometimes be tempted to lower standards to demonstrate a program’s success, we also understand that the ultimate test is the students’ success. As teachers we must remember that most of the at-risk students have felt smothered in the classroom and overwhelmed in figuring out what to do about it. These students need involvement, not extrication. They should not be rescued or disengaged from their learning problems. They must be the major players in the process. No one can do it for them, but we need to provide the support and opportunity for them to gain the skills.

**Conclusion**

When working with students, there will be days when everything goes wrong. However, if we know what we believe in and have a sound teaching philosophy and a clear idea of what we want to accomplish, then the principles of our teaching philosophy will see us through the arduous times.
Having a foundation to fall back on can provide teachers with a guide, keep them on course, and help them make decisions that will be consistent with their mission. The five principles described in this chapter not only define my teaching philosophy, but have also bestowed upon me the strength and determination to face many challenges in my profession as a teacher.