SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS

A Guide for Faculty

Abstract
Trends in student persistence and retention capture the attention of academic administrators, but the greatest opportunity for supporting students' success occurs in each faculty member's classroom. This guide presents an overview of strategies that every faculty member can implement to fuel their students' academic achievement.

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Author's Note

This faculty guide draws upon ideas in my books *Higher Education by Design: Best Practices for Curricular Planning and Instruction* (Routledge, 2018) and *Pivoting Your Instruction* (Routledge, 2021), incorporating components of my ongoing engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Readers interested in exploring the educational theory behind the strategies in this guide and understanding how they fit into the bigger picture of curriculum and instruction will find the books an informative resource.

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Contents

Supporting Student Success: A Guide for Faculty

Student success is characterized by solid and effective teaching, strong levels of student engagement, deep learning, and value-added skills development.[1]


Student persistence and retention represent a growing area of concern among institutions of higher learning. Every college or university's success is tied to its students' academic achievement, often measured through graduation rates and students' time to degree completion. Although strategies to enhance student persistence and retention often exist at the institutional level, students engage with higher education in the classrooms of individual instructors. Therefore, the purpose of this guide is to outline strategies that educators can implement on campus and online to support their students in completing their courses and finishing their degree programs successfully.

Roadblocks to Success

First, let's look at the reasons why students might <u>not</u> be successful. We presume students drop classes because they're failing academically, but is this true? A study by Oakton Community College[2] revealed that only 20-30% of students discontinue their studies due to academic difficulties. The other 70-80% leave for a variety of other reasons:

- Financial: they cannot afford tuition, fees, books, and other expenses.
- Instructional: they don't understand what to do in their courses and do not ask for help because they perceive their instructors as inaccessible.
- Social: they are unable to make friends or find a social group on campus.
- Institutional: they do not understand how to navigate educational systems such as course registration or financial aid.
- Personal: they lack time management or study strategies or struggle to balance academics and personal responsibilities such as work and family.

Academic

Personal · Financial

Institutional · Instructional

Social
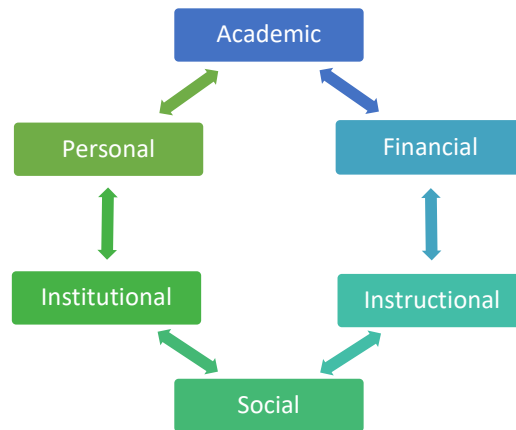
The graphic above shows these six areas connected by double-ended arrows because none of the factors influencing students' success exists in isolation. For instance, students' problems with time management will affect their academic performance because they don't do their work on time; they won't be able to find time to establish peer relationships that meet their social needs; they don't get the full benefit of instruction because they show up late to class or forget to attend class altogether; courses failed due to the students' poor time management then increase the students' financial burdens. Each problem is connected to the others, becoming an insurmountable obstacle that causes them to abandon their studies altogether.

So, where does the instructor enter this equation? Our role is to teach our students the skills and knowledge of our subject area, of course. However, if our goal is truly to support student success, we must also pay attention to who our students are as individual human beings. Like us, each of them has a unique set of strengths, weaknesses, needs, and aspirations. We are the link between the student and the institution, and we become the face of the institution to our students. Think of this: what's the first thing that comes to mind when you look back at your own experiences in higher education? The institution you attended? The content of your courses? Your friends and the activities you did together? Or the professors who either made learning a joy or a burden? Most of us would say the latter two – we remember the *people* who shaped our college experience: the relationships we formed with friends and the professors who inspired us to pursue our career goals. Knowing this, we can recognize that individual instructors certainly possess the ability to impact their students' persistence and retention directly.

The Big Six

To consider the matter from another angle, the Gallup-Purdue Index report (2015) identified six essential experiences that strongly influenced whether students felt that their colleges prepared them well for life. Just 3% of those surveyed strongly agreed that they had received all six.[3] Four of the six directly relate to their experiences with faculty.
- Professors who made them feel excited about learning
- Professors who cared about them as people

- A mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams
- The opportunity to work on a long-term project
- Taking part in an internship or job where they could apply what they were learning in the classroom
- Being extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations during college

Let's look at each of these factors more closely. First, we should never underestimate the impact of our attitude and demeanor as instructors on students' experience in our classrooms. Our passion for our discipline is contagious – the more excited we are about what we teach, the greater the positive effect it will have on our students. Sharing our ongoing research or creative practice, bringing interesting examples to class that we've gleaned in our professional development activities, such as an article from a new professional journal that we can't wait to share with students, and simply demonstrating enthusiasm for our course content can dramatically affect our students' perceptions about the instruction they have received in our classrooms.

Next, no matter how upbeat or enthusiastic we might be with the whole group, our interactions with individual students can make or break their learning experience. Students need to know that we care about them individually. No matter how insignificant it might seem to us, every interaction can have a marked impact on students. For example, when a student emails the instructor about a late assignment, we must choose whether to remain firm on our stated policies or react with empathy and kindness. We might be within our rights to insist upon imposing a penalty, but compassion has a much more significant effect on students and their subsequent views of their experience in our classrooms.

Mentorship is another area with a powerful positive impact. Students who major in our disciplines should have opportunities to connect with a faculty member who is a kindred soul – someone who understands their hopes and dreams and will work actively to help achieve them. Mentorship goes well beyond standard duties for student advising, where we meet with students only to help them select the courses they need to take in the next semester, or we make obligatory contact with students who are in danger of failing. Mentors, in contrast, take a personal interest in the student. They ask what the student plans to do after graduation. They work with the student to explore graduate programs, complete grant applications, or write their resume. They write letters of recommendation, celebrate their students' successes, and help them through their disappointments. They express sincere belief in their students' potential to succeed. The more skillful we are in building appropriate mentoring relationships with our students, the better the chances that students will view their educational experience positively.

Long-term projects including problem-based learning or project-based learning provide a more impactful and meaningful educational experience than our standard approach to instruction through lecture, reading, and discussion. Projects are still more impactful when they can mobilize as many of the "Six Cs" as possible,
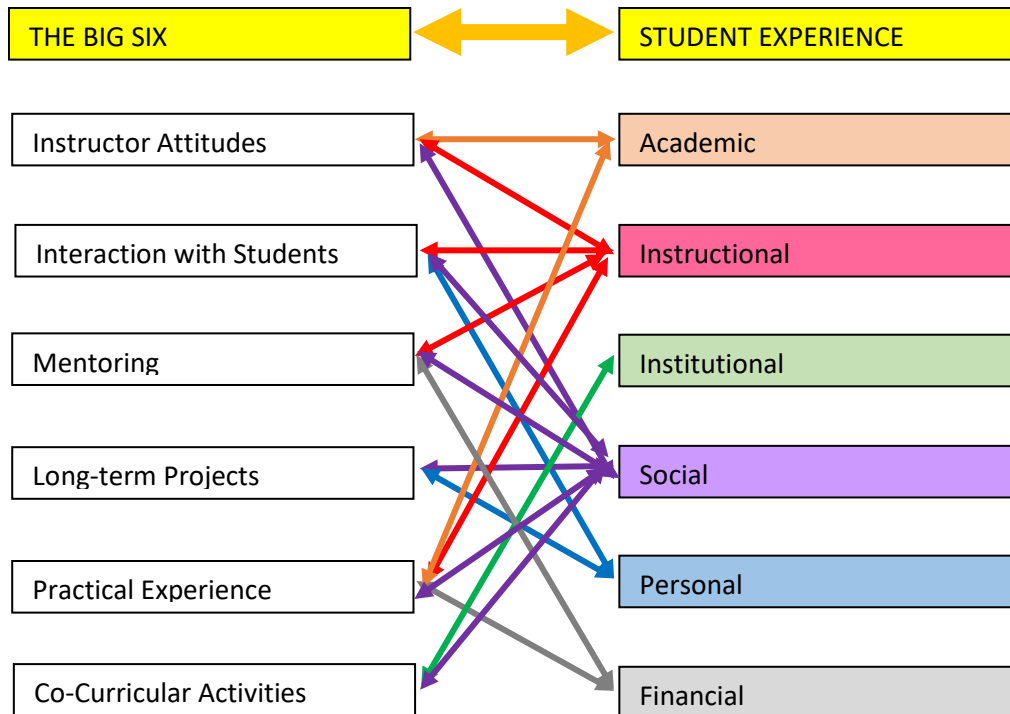- Collaboration and the ability to work well with others

- Communication across contexts and audiences
- Critical thinking and the ability to solve complex problems
- Creativity and innovation
- Content area knowledge
- Confidence in one's own abilities

Students can learn these skills regardless of the area in which they choose to major. "Broad learning skills are the key to long-term, satisfying, productive careers. What helps you thrive in a changing world isn't rocket science. It may just well be social science, and, yes, even the humanities and the arts that contribute to making you not just workforce ready but world ready."[4]

Providing students with practical experience through internships, externships, co-op, and practicum requirements allows them to apply classroom and studio learning to settings they're likely to encounter in the workplace after graduation. These requirements often exist at an institutional or departmental level, but individual courses can also incorporate real-world connections to the workplace. Students might engage in job shadowing, or the instructor might require a certain number of volunteer or community service hours with an organization related to the course's content, as but two examples. The more we can build connections between the classroom and the workplace, the greater the likelihood that students will see our course content as meaningful and personally relevant. Furthermore, such opportunities help build the student's professional network, broaden their understanding of career options, and introduce them to workplace norms, all of which are essential to success in life after graduation.

Co-curricular engagement isn't directly under the instructor's control, but it's worthwhile to promote it to our students. Research by scholars such as Astin (1993), Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, and Burkhardt (2001), Kuh (2008), Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2009) demonstrates that students who participate in purposeful co-curricular activities experience positive effects on their academic success, retention, and persistence. George Kuh (1995 and 2011) also reported positive outcomes such as an enhanced sense of belonging, capacity for humanitarianism, and growth in interpersonal and intrapersonal competence.[5] Furthermore, students tend to sign up for co-curricular activities sponsored by faculty members they know. Students who have a good relationship with a professor who happens to sponsor a club or student organization are more likely to participate, especially when the professor encourages them to do so.

| THE BIG SIX | ⟷ | STUDENT EXPERIENCE |

Instructor Attitudes	Academic
Interaction with Students	Instructional
Mentoring	Institutional
Long-term Projects	Social
Practical Experience	Personal
Co-Curricular Activities	Financial

The "Big Six" correlate with the factors influencing students' academic success, persistence, and retention.

It's no mistake that the Social category connects to all areas of the "Big Six." Each of those components of a high-quality educational experience increases social interaction and builds relationships, strongly influencing students' engagement with the institution and facilitating greater commitment to their studies.

Student Success Strategies

Although some potential roadblocks are less directly correlated or are not directly under the instructor's control, we can identify useful strategies to support students with whatever challenges they face.

Financial

The financial issues that prohibit student retention tend to be an institution-level matter of tuition, fees, grants, scholarships, or work-study. Nevertheless, both mentoring and practical experiences connected to the classroom can link students to resources or opportunities that may ease their financial pressures or result in a better future after graduation. Instructors can also ease the financial pressure on students in our courses.

- We can allow students to purchase an earlier edition of the course's required textbooks rather than insisting they obtain the latest version, often resulting in substantial savings.

- We can modify expectations for projects requiring specialized materials and allow students to purchase lower-cost supplies than the premium items instructors prefer.
- When we know that a student is experiencing financial hardship, we can direct them to appropriate support services on campus directly related to the source of their difficulty. For instance, a student who is not coming to class because she does not have childcare could be referred to the college's Early Childhood Development program, which might offer childcare or maintain a list of available students who babysit.
- Most institutions offer support services that students don't use, either because they're unaware that these resources exist or don't understand how to access them. Providing the student with relevant information about these services is a good first step, but a better choice is to contact someone at the office of the campus resource provider and request that this individual reach out to the student directly, or even to walk with the student to the appropriate office and help them make a connection.

Institutional

Institutions support co-curricular activities and foster internships or practical experiences for students, both of which are high on the list of strategies to enhance student persistence and retention. On the whole, though, institutional factors tend to exist outside our sphere of influence as individual instructors. We can, however, offer students help in navigating dauntingly complex institutional systems and connecting them with needed resources. We can also support institutional initiatives regarding student persistence and retention. Oakton Community College, for example, initiated "The Persistence Project" that connects students to volunteer faculty in 15-minute one-to-one conferences at the beginning of each semester. Persistence Project faculty make students feel welcome, help them get involved on campus, and encourage them to continue their studies.[6]

Institution-level strategies for increasing persistence and retention are somewhat beyond the scope of this guide. However, faculty interested in initiating action in this area could investigate and then advocate for structural changes such as:
- Establishing student cohorts or learning communities
- Increasing use of early alert systems
- Simplifying and streamlining business systems (registration, student accounts, financial aid)
- Strengthening academic advising
- Broadening student support services (writing center, math tutoring, peer mentors)
- Reconsidering expectations for faculty advising to include concrete strategies for mentoring and direct intervention with students at greatest risk of discontinuing their studies.

Personal

How can faculty best support students with personal challenges? It's true that we cannot be their parent, nor should we try to be. Rather, we can build supports into our courses as we anticipate common problems. When we proactively prepare to meet students' needs, we facilitate their acquisition of needed skills for academic and professional success. Some might argue that our job is to

teach the content of our courses, not to teach life skills to students. But choosing to focus only on delivering instruction undermines students' persistence in our courses: we may think we're upholding professional expectations; instead, we're damaging students' motivation to participate and increasing the likelihood they will drop or fail the course. Projecting a persona of being focused only on what we're teaching makes us appear uncaring and unapproachable – the direct opposite of attitudes proven to enhance students' success.

The following strategies address just a few areas where students struggle. A comprehensive list of personal challenges is not possible in a brief guide such as this, but the common denominators for every action instructors might take are found in demonstrating empathy and compassion and in proactively anticipating potential problems and solutions. Students need to know that we are concerned about them as people and that we are human, too: we understand what it's like to forget a deadline, lose an important document, or be delayed on the way to an appointment.

- Time management
    - Provide students with a course calendar that lists the due dates for every assignment and assessment, including readings, meetings, and other expectations.
    - Break large projects into step-by-step instructions, with interim due dates and specific deliverables, rather than a single due date at the end of the term.
    - Meet individually with students who struggle with time management and develop a plan of action that helps them with their specific challenges. When we can identify why they're having a problem, we can find strategies to address it.
- Disorganization
    - Post all course materials to the LMS or course website so that students cannot lose or misplace important documents.
    - Provide templates for assignments that help students organize information in the manner that you prefer.
    - Provide samples of well-organized papers with annotation calling out the features that students should emulate.
    - Keep a supply of duplicate materials for those who forget or misplace items (pencils, rulers, paper, Post-its)
    - Communicate frequently about upcoming due dates, such as sending an email that says, "By Thursday, you should have finished the annotated bibliography for the research paper and have started working on the outline. Both components are due at the start of class next Monday."
- Punctuality and Attendance
    - Make your expectations clear from the first day of class, with concrete policies that explain your rationale for insisting on punctuality. Students who understand *why* they should be on time and what could happen if they are habitually late will be more likely to meet your expectations.
    - Emphasize punctuality as an important aspect of professionalism.

- o Incentivize punctuality by making the first ten minutes of class fun and interesting.
- o Award bonus points to those with perfect attendance.
- o Understand that life happens. Students cannot always attend class or are unavoidably detained by circumstances beyond their control. Adult learners and those with families and full-time jobs have many demands on their time and attention. Students who commute to campus may experience travel troubles related to traffic and weather. All of our students deserve our understanding when they encounter problems, just as we expect our direct supervisors to grant the same grace to us.
- o Provide alternative assignments for those who miss class. The alternative should be less attractive than attending class but should allow students to earn participation points equal to attendance. As an example, students could write a 2-page precis on the same topic as the day's lecture, or they could read and summarize an article from a professional journal related to your course content.

Instructional and Academic

Our actions as instructors directly affect our students' academic performance, so these will be addressed in tandem. Demonstrating empathy and compassion remain crucial to students' success in our courses, nurturing their motivation to persist to the end of the course as we strive to impart a high-quality educational experience.

Instructional Delivery

The norm for instruction across higher education continues to center on lecture. Although it is the baseline expectation for both faculty and students, lecture has been proven time and again to be among the least effective instructional methods at our disposal.[7] Better still, we can incorporate strategies for engaged learning that meet students' needs for social interaction, build their relationships with us and support their acquisition of 21st-century skills and competencies.

Lecture and Discussion
When traditional lecture and discussion remain your primary methods of instruction, you can support students' learning with a few simple strategies.
- Research shows that most adults can only maintain their focus for about 25 minutes.[8] Build short breaks into your lecture: ask students to turn to the person next to them and discuss an important idea, insert media content to vary the presentation, or just allow a five-minute stretch break.
- Use stories, anecdotes, examples, and other conversational devices to hold students' interest and provide a personal connection to your message. The more you allow them to know who you are as a person, the more engaged they will be in your course.
- Incorporate collaborative learning activities such as turn-and-talk questions built into lectures or jigsaw activities where small groups take responsibility for creating a presentation about an aspect of a reading assignment, topic, or case study.

- Establish discussion groups or study groups that require students to meet regularly to work collaboratively as they complete assignments or prepare for exams.
- Hold productive discussions:
    - Allowing frequent opportunities to discuss course content builds social interaction, which helps cement student learning of important concepts.
    - Encourage participation but do not call on students who have not chosen to contribute. That only increases anxiety and does not create engagement. It's also unkind and disrespectful to try an catch inattentive students in a "gotcha" moment.
    - Create small groups for discussion where students will feel more comfortable sharing their ideas than speaking in front of the whole class. Provide support for the discussion by displaying topics or questions on the board and asking a group representative to report their response to the whole class.

Active Learning
- Collaborative learning[9] moves beyond standard lecture and discussion methods, increasing students' social engagement and minimizing passivity in the classroom, both of which support student retention. Strategies can include:
    - Problem-based or project-based learning: the instructor sets a problem or task for students to accomplish in a cooperative group.
        - High-quality tasks include connections to real-world situations and support students learning of course content.
        - Problems or tasks should be loosely structured and require students to seek more information than they possess.
        - Teams should include students with a variety of abilities so that higher-functioning students can support those who struggle academically.
        - Be sure students understand your expectations for participation, project timelines, instructions, and deliverables.
        - Focus on facilitating discovery. When groups ask a question, respond with a question. For example, "Where do you think you might be able to find that information?"
- Civic engagement/service learning connects students to the community, reducing their sense of social isolation and increasing understanding of their studies as relevant to their future.
    - Form partnerships with community groups, non-profits, or agencies that align with your course content. An art history course could partner with an art museum. A biology course could partner with a nature preserve, and so on.
    - Require students to complete a certain number of volunteer hours with this partner.
    - Or create a collaborative service project that the class could do together. The art history class could create a social media campaign for an upcoming exhibition at the museum. The biology class could maintain a walking trail at the nature preserve.

Communicating With Students

Beyond our public persona as an instructor and how we choose to communicate with groups, our interactions with individual students profoundly impact their experience in our classrooms and shape their educational experience for good or ill. Students who feel disconnected from their instructor, don't understand the instructor's expectations, or feel that it's impossible to succeed in the class are at greater risk of dropping the course or leaving their studies altogether.

Feedback

One of the main ways we communicate with individual students is through the feedback we provide on their assignments. The primary goal of any assessment should be an honest appraisal of a student's learning relative to a given academic task. Evaluation should include a substantive diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of the student's work, but this should occur without resorting to destructive or disheartening negativity.

High-quality feedback should include three components: recognize success, suggest improvement, and make a personal connection.

- Recognize Success: This sets a constructive tone for the rest of our remarks and allows the student to accept our evaluative statements without immediately becoming defensive or demoralized.
  - o Whether or not a student's work was successful overall, your comments should begin with a statement recognizing *something* that was good compared to the entire project. Students naturally focus on the first thing you say. When this is negative, they can easily become discouraged.
  - o If you genuinely cannot identify anything the student did well, it's still possible to recognize the student's effort or the fact that they met a given criterion for the assignment, despite merely adequate execution of this requirement.
- Suggest Improvement: Phrase your recognition of the flaws in their work as suggestions for improvement rather than highlighting their failures.
  - o The way you address deficits in students' work allows them to receive your criticism with open minds and implement your feedback to improve their work.
  - o Don't overwhelm students with negativity. You might be able to identify dozens of flaws, but try to limit your suggestions to five, at most. If the students' work is noticeably deficient in some area, provide guided instruction in the particular skill or concept with which they're struggling.
- Personal Connection: End your comments by providing additional information that extends the students' learning, making a personal connection. Some suggestions:
  - o Ask the student a question about their experience in completing the project.
  - o Share a personal anecdote related to the work.
  - o Provide some advice about how the student could implement your suggestions, such as directing the student towards some helpful resources or offering to work with the student one-on-one to rectify the problem.

Students should leave each encounter with a sense that you believe in their ability to succeed, you respect them as individuals apart from their academic skills, and you will support their efforts towards becoming better at what you are trying to teach them.

Informal Feedback and Interactions with Students
The way we choose to respond during our interactions with students has a tremendous impact on their learning experience. Let's look at this through several scenarios, considering two ways the instructor could react that either shuts down learning or fosters it.

Scenario 1: Student-A sends the instructor an email asking for clarification about how to format an assignment. The instructor is somewhat annoyed because the question reveals that the student could not have read the directions provided weeks earlier.

> Poor Response: The instructor sends a curt reply: "Full instructions were provided in the course syllabus."

> Better Response: The instructor replies to the student's email, saying, "The information you need can be found on page 5 of our course syllabus. In answer to your question, though, the paper should conform to MLA guidelines, including a heading, works cited page, and footer with your full name and page numbers. If you need help with MLA formatting, you might want to check in with the campus writing center, or you can try the OWL at Purdue at https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/

> Why this is better: this response reminds the student of the original expectation, but it also addresses his concern directly and provides additional information that might help the student to be successful.

Scenario 2: Student-B fails to turn in an assignment.

> Poor Response: The instructor marks the assignment as a zero.

> Better Response: The instructor sends Student-B an email, saying, "Dear B, I see that you did not submit the assignment that was due on Monday. If you have questions about this assignment or if there's any information I can provide that might help you to complete it, please let me know."

> Why this is better: The instructor would certainly be within her rights to simply mark the missed assignment as a zero, but reaching out to the student and offering to help is a more empathetic choice and more likely to result in the student doing the work. If this email went unanswered by the student, the instructor should also take the next step of informing the student's academic advisor of the problem.

Scenario 3: Student-C is frequently late for class, remains silent during discussions, and has difficulty staying awake during lectures.

Poor Response: The instructor penalizes Student-C's class participation grade.

Better Response: The instructor meets with Student-C during her office hours, explaining that this behavior has a negative impact on other students, reminding her that this could affect her grade, and asking for her explanation about why this has been happening. When Student-C replies that she has been very tired because of working the late shift in the computer lab, the instructor offers to help her strategize ways to maximize her schedule given the conflicting demands of her work and her classes.

Why this is better: Although it's easy to assign a low grade for these behaviors, attempting to find the cause of the problem is more likely to achieve a solution. If the conversation does not resolve the problem, it might be wise to seek the input of the student's academic advisor. Perhaps it might be possible to move the student to a different section of the course that meets at a more advantageous time of day for the student, or the advisor could advocate for a change in the student's work schedule so that she's not so exhausted in class.

Scenario 4: Student-D emails the instructor of his online class, asking for help with writing an important paper.

Poor Response: The instructor replies, "I encourage you to visit the Student Learning Center and work with a writing tutor."

Better Response: The instructor replies, "I'm happy to help you with your paper. What time might you be available to speak by phone or Zoom so that we can discuss how best to work through the problems you're experiencing?" After the initial conversation, the instructor will know what resources the student needs, which may or may not include the services of the Student Learning Center or a writing tutor.

Why this is better: Instructors of online courses often receive requests for help from their students. These requests provide important teachable moments that allow us to augment the pre-determined instruction provided through the course. We can reinforce prior teaching and shore up students' skills, competencies, literacies, and fluencies through one-to-one interaction supporting persistence and retention. When specialized support is needed, a referral is absolutely appropriate. However, it should never be the instructor's first response to a student's plea for help. Automatically referring the student to the Student Learning Center, a writing tutor, or another third party without first identifying the particular problem might cause us to miss a golden opportunity. Furthermore, it implies that the instructor is unwilling to help the student personally.

Classroom Climate

The quality of your communication with students shapes their learning experience with you. Academic rigor is valuable, but there's a fine line between upholding disciplinary excellence and being uncaring and legalistic.

Establish Expectations

Students' difficulty in understanding classroom and institutional expectations or systems is among the factors behind their failure to persist. We can mitigate this risk by establishing clear expectations from the beginning of the course. To do this, we have to imagine ourselves in our students' place, which isn't as easy as it might seem. Academia is the natural habitat of the professorate, but especially for students who are new to higher education, it can seem to be a bewildering foreign land, complete with its own unfamiliar terrain and insider language. Uttering the sentence, "I'll meet you at MSC after my class at BGC and check CPO, then grab some coffee upstairs at the Stupe," would make no sense whatsoever to someone new to the particular campus where these acronyms and nicknames were common knowledge. The only thing a new student would understand is that we're going to meet somewhere after a class somewhere else, check on something, and get some coffee. The rest of the sentence might as well be in ancient Sanskrit.

Keep students' unfamiliarity with the norms and jargon of your particular institution in mind as you think through your expectations and employ this knowledge to create supporting documents for them to use throughout the course.

- Expectations should appear in the course syllabus, be explained on the first day of class, and posted to your LMS or course website.
- Throughout the course, refer to these expectations whenever you ask students to accomplish a task. (Ex: "Remember – the expectation is that all written work will have a correct MLA-formatted heading, 1" margins, and double-spaced text of no more than size 12 font.")
- Phrase expectations positively.
  - A long list of "DO NOT" sentences sets a negative tone right from the start.
  - The same list can be presented as "[instructor name]'s Top Ten Tips for Success in [name of course]," phrasing statements in positive language and establishing a much more welcoming environment.
  - Use inclusive verbiage. The word "our" is inclusive. "I" and "my" draw attention to you, not to the course. "You" can seem accusatory and intimidating. Consider these sentences. Their overt expectation is the same, but the subtext says quite a lot about the instructor.
    - In my classroom, I do not allow students to use cell phones. (It's all about me – this is my classroom, and you will comply with my rules.)
    - You may not use cell phones in my classroom. (You're irresponsible and can't be trusted not to create a disruption. This is my class, and I make the rules.)
    - DO NOT USE CELL PHONES IN CLASS!! (I'm all about making other people follow my rules. Don't expect any compassion or understanding from me.)
    - We want to maintain an atmosphere of attention and civility at all times, refraining from using electronic devices or behaviors that might distract others. (I care about creating a classroom community where we behave respectfully to one another.)

- Make certain students understand:
    - What is required for students to be successful in your class?
    - How, exactly, can students meet these requirements? (Provide step-by-step, all-inclusive instructions)
    - What activities and opportunities are available through or related to your course?
    - How can students engage in these activities or avail themselves of these opportunities? (Provide specific instructions with key details so that they can do this without a problem)
- Express your sincere belief in students' ability to succeed in the course and your willingness to help them when they run into problems.
    - These statements should be part of your introduction on the first day of class.
    - Express your belief in their abilities each time you give an assignment, praising their efforts and urging them on to greater success.
    - Restate this sentiment whenever you help a student who is struggling.
        - Recognize their hard work, whether or not the student has met expectations for the particular assignment just yet.
        - Tell students directly that you believe in their ability to be successful.
        - Ask how you can help them and invite them to contact you with additional questions, reiterating that your goal is to support their success.
- Disciplinary expectations vary from one field to another and from one instructional level to the next. Students majoring in your discipline might be expected to possess a certain subset of knowledge that non-majors taking introductory courses wouldn't possess. However, instructors frequently complain that students are unprepared for study in their classrooms, lacking appropriate writing abilities, vocabulary, or basic skills. The difference between the instructor's presumptions of what students *ought* to know and what they actually *do* know can prove to be a significant obstacle. How can we bridge this gap?
    - <u>Teach</u> students everything you expect them to know. It doesn't matter if you think they *ought to* have already learned it. If it's clear that they don't know, it's up to you to teach them.
    - Build disciplinary writing into your course so that students become familiar with the norms of professional communications specific to your field of study.
    - Provide a list of key vocabulary that you want students to learn and hold them accountable for mastering it through a quiz early in the course.
- Expectations go both ways. Let students know what they can expect <u>from you</u>:
    - When will you answer email? Return phone calls?
    - When are you usually in your office or available online?
    - Are there hours when students should not contact you? If they leave you a message during those hours, when will you contact them afterward?
    - How soon can students expect you to post comments to an online discussion?
    - How soon after the due date can students expect you to grade their assignments?

- Most importantly, when students fail to meet your expectations, be kind. Remind them of what was expected, and provide the assistance they need to meet the expectation the next time.

Late Work Policies

Most educators establish a set of policies for late work, but how we choose to enforce these policies can either support students' engagement and motivation or undermine it. You are well within your rights as an instructor to apply a grading penalty to late work. However, your decision to do this should be motivated by your primary goal as an instructor: to facilitate the student's learning of the course content.

For example, let's say that a student asks if she can still submit an assignment a week late. Your stated policy is to apply a penalty of 10% per day that the work is late.

- If you choose to enforce the penalty, the student's work will earn an F regardless of its quality due to the 70% point reduction.
- The student will likely choose to skip doing the assignment altogether since no amount of effort could earn a passing grade. This decision will impact her success in the class because she will have missed an important learning opportunity, and it sends a message that you care more about enforcing the rules than about her as a person.
- If you approach the situation compassionately, you can allow the student to submit the work with a reduced penalty that will still provide a passing grade, upholding your standard yet promoting student learning through the assignment. It also builds the instructor-student relationship by demonstrating that you care about the student's success.

Teachable Moments

Teaching occurs every time we interact with our students, not just when we're standing at the podium.

- When you treat students with respect, you teach them that they are worthy of respect.
- When you encourage your students, you teach them that they possess the capacity to be successful.
- When you remain aloof from your students or are inactive in your online classroom, you teach them that you don't care whether they succeed or fail.
- When you respond brusquely to students' inquiries, you teach them that you think poorly of them or that you can't be bothered to help them.

Most students have a deep need to believe that their instructor cares about them and to trust that they will be treated fairly. This belief is essential to establishing rapport, both in face-to-face or online learning environments. Positive rapport increases student enjoyment of the course, improves attendance and attention, promotes additional enrollment in subsequent courses, affects the broader classroom climate, and reduces classroom conflicts.[10]

Demonstrating care for students is reflected in a concept known as "immediacy," or the overt forms of communication that help establish a productive and positive classroom climate.[11] These behaviors might seem like they should be self-evident, but they affect how your students perceive you, enhancing the sense that you're approachable and aware of them personally.

- Gesture, smile, and make eye contact with students while talking to the class.
- Move around the room and maintain a relaxed posture or body position while teaching.
- Use personal examples or talk about experiences outside of class.
- Ask questions and encourage students to talk with each other about the answers.
- Engage in discussions based on something a student brings up, whether or not it's part of your planned lecture.
- Use humor when appropriate.
- Address students by name, whether you are speaking face-to-face or in written communications.
- Engage in conversations with individual students before or after class.
- Let students know that you are willing to meet outside of class if they have questions or want to discuss something.
- Praise students' efforts, actions, or comments.
- Discuss topics unrelated to class with individual students or with the class as a whole.

These actions show students that you're a genuine human being, relating to them at a more personal level. Witt, Wheeless, and Allen (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of 81 studies involving nearly 25,000 students, which revealed a high degree of association between immediacy and students' positive attitudes toward their instructor and the course, also positively increasing students' perception of their learning. Furthermore, instructor immediacy increased students' retention of course material.[12]

Monitor Student Progress and Wellbeing

The traditional structures of higher education sometimes don't serve students very well. As with our longstanding reliance on lectures for instructional delivery, we also tend to use high-stakes midterm and final exams for the bulk of our grading. Some institutions issue midterm grades to keep students apprised of their academic progress, with students not performing up to expectations receiving automatic warnings, and alerting their academic advisors of problems. However, midterm is too late to intervene when a student struggles academically since half of the course has already elapsed. By the time students or their advisors receive the warning, it's now well into the second half of the term or semester. There is little chance that the student will overcome the early failure and earn a passing grade in the course. No wonder students drop the course at that point! What reason is there to try if they know their efforts are doomed?

A better approach is to grade a variety of tasks over the entirety of the course instead of giving only two exams, contacting students as soon as you notice a problem with their work.

- Ideally, learning activities will tap into different skill sets. Writing assignments, creative projects, performance tasks, discussions, and reading response journals offer varied avenues of insight into students' acquisition of course content, whether supplementary to exams or as part of a comprehensive assessment schema.
- Monitor students' progress frequently, and reach out to students each time you notice a problem.
- If the student does not respond to your attempt at communication within 48 hours, contact their academic advisor and work within your institution's guidelines for issuing an Early Alert, Academic Warning, or similar institution-based system.

Our early alert systems should not only be academic. If we notice that something is amiss with a student socially, physically, personally, or otherwise, we should also proactively reach out to the student and connect them to needed resources to the extent that it is within our power to do so. Establishing early alert systems that serve the full range of students' needs is not within the power of individual instructors, although it is a matter well worth proposing, promoting, and supporting. Until it becomes the institutional norm, it is up to us to take the initiative to help students who are troubled, whatever their particular problems may be.

Online Teaching and Learning

Teaching an online class demands a somewhat different set of skills than teaching on campus. Talking and listening – the bedrock of face-to-face learning – are notably absent online, forcing us to approach instruction differently than we're used to. Online learning also differs from the traditional face-to-face environment because nearly all online interaction between the students and instructor occurs in writing, and this is subject to time delays between someone's original post and someone else's reply. Instructors can't rely on the same habits that work well in a face-to-face classroom, where the pace and conversations can evolve more organically. Instead, instructors must anticipate students' informational needs well before the first day of class and build support to handle common misconceptions or mitigate likely trouble spots.

Course Introduction

The first thing your online students should encounter upon entering your classroom is a statement summarizing the course so that they have a clear idea of what they'll learn, how they'll learn it, and why it's important to their studies. Your students want to know who you are and what you're like as an instructor. Creating a video in which you make the same introductory remarks to your online students as you'd deliver in a regular class is a good idea. Students like to see your face and hear the sound of your voice. It makes you seem more approachable and human than just being the disembodied person behind the words they read in your announcements, emails, and discussion posts.

First Discussion

Students also need to learn about one another. That's why the first assignment in many online courses asks students to introduce themselves.

- To generate greater engagement than the standard "name, hometown, major, and reason you're taking this class" criteria, you might ask a question that requires a narrative response and is related to the course content. An introductory history course, for example, might ask students, "Which event in world history has had the greatest impact on your own life?" A writing course could ask, "Tell us about the best thing you've ever written in the past. Why did you like it?"
- Our stories make us human, and sharing them is what begins to establish peer-to-peer rapport. Be sure to post your own response to the question to lead off the discussion thread.
- Along with the self-introduction, it's helpful for students to post a photo of themselves, and the instructor should also follow suit.
- Some LMS providers include an option for each user to personalize their own avatar or profile image, a feature that allows the instructor to see the face of each student alongside every one of their posts or replies rather than just their name.

Resources

Instructional materials support our course activities. On campus, we routinely give verbal explanations of what we expect from our students, but online courses require that instructors create some form of written explanation.

- The instructor needs to think through everything a student might need to be successful and then ensure that all of these resources are easily accessible within the online classroom.
- The instructor of an online course isn't necessarily the course designer, and as we teach the course, we notice places where additional instruction or explanation is necessary. Creating a supplementary handout or directing the student to online resources such as video tutorials or informational websites helps to reinforce their learning.
- Step-by-step written instructions and grading rubrics for all assignments are essential. It's also helpful to provide students with examples of what you expect in each assignment, showing them what high-quality work should look like. For instance, some students inevitably exhibit difficulty in formatting citations correctly in their research papers. You could post an excerpt from an annotated sample paper so that students can see exactly how to create a correct citation.

Anticipating problems and proactively providing solutions can dramatically improve the quality of students' work.

Discussion Boards

Discussion boards are ubiquitous in online education, requiring students to answer a question posed by the instructor and comment on a set number of their classmates' replies.

- Students genuinely appreciate their instructor's engaged participation in the discussion board components of the course. Discussions are a valuable opportunity to provide individualized instruction and to share your own experience and disciplinary expertise with the group.
- Instructors with 20 or fewer students in the course should try to post a comment or reply to each of their students in every required discussion. This action goes above and beyond expectations, but students notice the instructor's extra effort. However, if your course has more than 20 students, it might not be possible. In that case, your goal should be to respond to at least half of the students in the discussion overall, commenting on the posts where you notice a particularly good point being made, where you find you should address a misconception, or to recognize students who have received no peer comments on their posts.
- Make your expectations for students' participation in discussion very clear.
  - Explain what you want, how students should meet this expectation, and why it's important.
  - Provide examples of what a high-quality initial post looks like and describe how to write it.
  - Provide examples of substantive peer comments and describe how to write them.
- Students are used to treating online communication very casually. If you hold a higher standard, you'll have to teach your expectations, such as prohibiting "text speak" or insisting on the use of proper English in discussion posts. Explain that this is the norm for written communication in the professional contexts where they'll work after graduation.

Live Discussions

Live discussions (via Zoom, MS Teams, or tools built into the LMS such as Blackboard Collaborate) are extremely important tools for building rapport between the students and instructor and facilitating peer-to-peer interactions. They help students feel more connected to one another and make the course seem less impersonal.

- The earlier in the course the first live discussion can be held, the greater the positive impact.
- Ideally, the course will contain several of these sessions, which can be either formal or informal.
- However, live discussions can be difficult to schedule for maximum participation.
  - Many students choose online learning because of its flexibility, which is ideal for working adults, parents of young children, or students who prefer to work at odd hours.
  - By this same token, it's unlikely that all of your students will be able to attend a live session when scheduled due to work or family commitments.
  - It's important to provide students with an alternative learning experience if they can't be present in real-time. Or you can arrange to record the session so that students can view it later and still earn credit for their participation by writing a one-page summary and response paper.
  - Online students should not be expected to call in sick to work or miss out on a family commitment (their child's parent-teacher conference, for example) to participate in a

live online class session unless there is an exceptionally compelling reason for them to do so.

- o It's much better to exercise compassion and to allow some flexibility in how they can best meet this expectation when it might conflict with students' prior obligations, rather than imposing an arbitrary penalty for "missing class" that day.

Interaction and Communication

Our interactions online are obviously different than when we teach on campus. We have to think carefully about the words we type and consider how the student will interpret what we're saying, especially because students can't hear the tone of our voices or see our faces. If you're discussing a student's project in your actual classroom, you might offer the same criticism that you'd offer online, but in person, the student could hear that your tone and expression were kind and respectful, which softens the impact of our words. Typed into an online forum, though, the student might perceive those exact words as being much more negative or harsh than you'd intended.

The instructor's comments on discussion boards or responses to students' work are a powerful tool for enhancing students' learning. Indeed, this is where you do most of your real teaching online through the information and guidance you offer beyond the built-in components of lectures and assignments. It is also a key point of contact for strengthening rapport with your students. Successful strategies for increasing rapport[13] online include:

- Provide frequent and prompt feedback.
- Share personal information; being open and approachable.
- Demonstrate friendliness in communication (Ex: beginning an email with, "Good morning, Students! I hope that all of you had an enjoyable weekend. Our first task this week is …."
- Initiate personal contact, reaching out by phone to students who are struggling or who have "disappeared" from the classroom.
- Offer to help students improve poor work they submitted and allow them to re-submit for a better grade.
- Provide sincere and specific positive reinforcement, encouragement, and praise. Don't rely on empty comments like, "Good job!" If the work was good, say something specific about a particularly successful aspect and why you felt that this was so.
- Ensure that students know how to contact you and that they feel comfortable doing so.
  a. Office hours and communication information should be easily accessible in the online classroom.
  b. End all emails to students with a friendly invitation to contact you when they have questions or are experiencing problems.
  c. Include your contact information in your email signature.
- Respond to all student communications promptly.
  a. Email should be answered within 24 hours.

     b.   Student posts to the "Questions for the Professor" or "Problems and Solutions" or similar discussion board zones should receive responses within 24 hours.

     c.   Comments to discussion board assignments should be posted within 48 hours of the students' comment deadline.

- Use humor when appropriate.
- Admit your mistakes and offer an apology for them.
- Show care and concern, especially if students report personal problems that have prevented them from turning in their work on time or participating according to expectations.
- Address the student by name in each discussion response, email, or message – it's the written equivalent of making eye contact while you're speaking to someone in person.

The importance of prompt responses to students' questions cannot be overemphasized, especially when the student asks for information about how to complete an assignment. Students become very frustrated when they reach out with a question and don't receive a timely answer because a delay in your response means that they cannot post their work on time or complete it correctly. Moreover, lack of response makes them feel that you don't care, which engenders disengagement and disconnection – exactly the opposite of what we want students to feel.

Frequent communication supports student success, whether through email or course announcements. It shows students that their instructor is actively engaged in their learning and provides opportunities to mitigate potential or emerging problems.

- Send students an email and post a course announcement just before the beginning of each week with reminders of due dates, helpful information about upcoming assignments, and additional resources such as links to websites or document attachments like study guides or templates for assignments.
- Address common problems or misconceptions that you've noticed cropping up in their work.
- Send a quick email to students after you've posted their grades for each assignment and invite them to let you know if there are any problems.
- To simplify the task of weekly communication, keep a file of the main text of these regular email messages and announcements. Then you only need to copy and paste into the course announcement page and into a group email, making any modifications necessary before sending or posting, which considerably streamlines the process.

Disappearing and Underperforming Students

Online students are unfortunately prone to disappearing. Some just forget they registered for the class altogether, others become overwhelmed by the work involved, and a few lose track of the course in the day-to-day demands of their busy lives. When students have not been participating in the discussions, miss assignments, or have not logged into the class in an unusually long time, take the following steps.

- Send an email to the student stating that you care about the student's success in the class and asking how you can assist the student.

- If the student does not respond to the email, make a second attempt 48 hours later.
- If the student does not respond to the second attempt, contact the student's academic advisor and post an entry to the Early Alert, Early Warning, or similar system.

Academic and Instructional Strategies, Revisited

So, what do all of these strategies have in common?

- They emphasize the importance of the relationship between students and instructors.
- They support social interaction between students.
- They help ensure high-quality student learning.
- They assist in students' acquisition of crucial academic skills.
- And all of them work together to support student persistence and retention.

Social

Social interactions are interwoven throughout all of the strategies we've discussed thus far. On campus, face-to-face interactions are commonplace. Online, students never meet their instructors or classmates in person, and our interactions are largely asynchronous. In both settings, we can establish a sense of community and social connectedness that directly supports our students' achievement as well as their persistence and retention. To review:
- Foster students' sense of personal involvement in the classroom. When they feel connected to others, they are less likely to leave because they know that they would miss the friends they've made in the class.
- Consistently send the message that you are approachable and that you care about each student's personal wellbeing.
- Build interpersonal connections between students through collaborative and active learning.

Remembering that the instructor is the primary point of contact between the student and the institution, we have an important responsibility to facilitate students' use of campus support services. When we combine the strengths of all our resources, from faculty who first notice students' problems to financial aid officers who can help students find creative solutions to funding problems, to student affairs professionals who can connect students with needed resources or support, we serve as force-multipliers for our students' academic success and continued enrollment.
- Keep referral information at your fingertips and build professional contacts with specific individuals in those offices.
- Be respectfully insistent in facilitating support for a student in need. Vague advice like, "I think you should contact the counseling office" is unlikely to make a difference. But students respond better to a more directive and friendly approach. "Let me call my friend Darcy in the counseling office. I think she'd really be able to help you. Is that okay?" [pause] "Hi, Darcy, it's Bruce. I've got a student here who's dealing with a personal issue and needs some help. Do you have a few minutes to talk to her?"

- This step takes only a few minutes, but it strongly supports the student's feelings that you care about her as a person and ensures that the first step towards connecting the student with the help she needs has been made.

Study after study shows that the more involved students are in co-curricular activities, the greater the likelihood that they will persist in their studies through graduation because they provide opportunities to build interpersonal relationships that transcend classroom experiences.
- Promote students' participation in co-curricular activities. Assure students that research shows that participating in a club or group does not have a negative impact on their study time. Rather, it enhances their collegiate experience. The relationships we form through these activities are what make college worthwhile.
- Non-traditional and commuter students may not find co-curricular groups to be a good fit because they are simply not on campus when those groups meet or have responsibilities atypical among traditional undergraduates (families, full-time jobs, long commuting times). Arranging an introduction between students with similar life situations, perhaps over an invitation to lunch or coffee with you, can help them build peer relationships.
- Every student is different. Adult learners with families may not have as great a need for peer connections at college because they already have established social systems outside of the campus. They face different challenges than traditional students, though, and may need leeway on course requirements when a child is ill, their employer demands they work overtime, or they must care for an aging parent. Knowing that their instructor cares about them and will support them through a personally difficult situation can make a huge difference in their motivation to persist in the course despite the problem they're facing.

Moving Forward

Conversations about students' persistence and retention mainly take place among academic executives and administrators who see troubling trends in enrollment data and wonder how the institution as a whole can fix the problem. On the other hand, faculty hear the words "student success" and automatically think about academics and how students might better learn the content of our courses.

Institutional solutions are worthwhile, without a doubt. But the most crucial point of connection between a student and the institution occurs in the classroom. Faculty can have a demonstrably positive impact on each of the six areas where students experience challenges to their persistence and retention. Our largest potential influence is over the academic, instructional, social, and personal factors that can derail students' educational attainment. We can also mitigate students' financial burdens related to the particular classes we teach, and we can support institutional efforts to improve persistence and retention.

The most effective solution to students' persistence and retention is one of _mind_ rather than policy. Faculty need to look beyond their longstanding habits and beliefs about what it means to be an educator, reshaping our attitudes toward our students and our subsequent actions.

Implementing this shift need not be difficult or daunting. Indeed, most of the strategies we've reviewed in this guide arise from the same basic concepts:

1. Anticipate students' informational and instructional needs and proactively provide resources that support the successful completion of your course.
2. Build social interaction between students into your curriculum and instruction, including collaborative projects and experiential learning in real-world contexts.
3. Practice positive engagement with individual students in your classroom and through the feedback you provide on students' work.
4. Demonstrate empathy and compassion for students who are experiencing problems.
5. Facilitate students' connection to co-curricular activities and student support services.

All of these strategies are within reach of every faculty member. None require costly resources, extensive restructuring of institutional systems, or dramatic changes to the disciplinary content of our courses. Solving the problem of student persistence and retention depends on the direct involvement of faculty who choose to implement these strategies in their classrooms. Only then can we hope to achieve the ultimate result we seek – ensuring that all students who enroll at our colleges and universities complete their studies successfully.

Epilogue

As a society, we suffer from a collective trope that shapes our assumptions of what a "professor" should be: someone who is aloof, disengaged, and focused on disciplinary matters far beyond the grasp of mere mortals.

Films like *Legally Blonde* (2001) or *The Paper Chase* (1973) have served to perpetuate this persona. John Houseman's character in *The Paper Chase*, Professor Kingsfield, calls a student to the podium. He hands the student a small item, saying, "Here's a dime. Call your mother and tell her there is serious doubt about your becoming a lawyer."[14] In *Legally Blonde*, Holland Taylor's character, Professor Stromwell, singles out Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) for not having done the required reading before the first day of class, then asks another student whether Elle should be ejected from the classroom for her unpreparedness.[15]

These fictional professors should not be our role models. Not only do they reinforce damaging stereotypes, but their behavior towards students is nothing short of bullying. A far better model exists in *The Dead Poets' Society* (1989)[16], where Robin Williams' character, John Keating, delivers a master class on establishing rapport with students and engaging students in learning.[17]

Nevertheless, *Legally Blonde*'s Professor Stromwell experiences a redeeming moment late in the film. Elle Woods decides to drop out of Harvard after experiencing sexual harassment from a male professor, stopping at a salon on her way out of town to say goodbye to a friend. Stromwell overhears their conversation and emerges from the background where she is having her hair done, saying, "If you're going to let one stupid [man] ruin your life, you're not the girl I thought you were." This is as close to an expression of support as we see from Stromwell, but it makes a good point: the briefest interactions between a professor and a student <u>can</u> profoundly impact student retention. Elle's first experience in Stromwell's classroom nearly destroys her resolve to stay at Harvard. Their meeting at the salon reverses Elle's decision to leave, leading to her triumphant graduation at the end of the film.

Every time we walk onto campus or log in to our online classroom, we face a choice: what kind of professor will I be today? Will my students look back at our interactions with gratitude or resentment? Will they see me as someone who contributed to their success or as the reason they decided to leave college?

To increase student persistence and retention, all we really have to do is *care* about our students. <u>You</u> are the single most influential factor in your students' success. **Use your power wisely.**

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