

Helping Students Plan for a Successful Conclusion to a Challenging Semester

Learning how to become a successful college student always presents challenges for young adults, and those challenges have been compounded during the COVID pandemic. Many instructors continue to see students struggle this semester, missing class frequently, failing to prepare or participate in class, and failing to submit required course work on time (or at all). While it is tempting to use rewards and punishments as a way of encouraging students to engage in more productive learning behaviors, policing behaviors is not likely to help them and in fact reinforces the notion that we, not they, are in control of their learning and their success. Similarly, just telling students what they should do won't help them adopt more effective learning strategies. A better approach to ensuring students succeed is to help them make explicit to themselves the connection between their approach to the work of our courses and their learning.

Below are some examples of strategies that will help guide students to take greater control of their learning and their success. These strategies will have the best effect for students if they have some class time (5-10 minutes) to do this planning work. Note that these strategies don't involve extra work for you but will make a big impact on students' motivation and learning.

Challenge: Students aren't coming to class.

Rather than telling students that it's important for them to come to class or grading attendance, help students see the connection between attending class and their success in the course. This means guiding them to make a plan for how they will use what they are learning in class to help them succeed in the course. Here are two things you can do to encourage attendance by helping students see the value of coming to class.

1. Have students make a plan for how they will make sure they get to class regularly for the rest of the semester. They can do this by writing responses to prompts like the ones below.
 - How does coming to class keep me focused on the work I need to do to be successful in this course?
 - What are the best strategies I have for motivating myself to come to class? How can I use those strategies to make sure I attend class regularly for the rest of this semester?
2. Have students commit to keeping a class journal or log for the remainder of the semester in which they track their attendance, note one important thing they learned in each class they attended, and explain how what they learned will help them on an upcoming assignment or assessment.

Challenge: Students aren't coming prepared or participating in class.

Rather than telling students that it's important for them to prepare for and participate in class or rely on grades to motivate those behaviors, help students see the connection between the work they do in class and the work they will be asked to do on course assignments and assessments. Here are three things you can do to encourage preparation and participation by helping students see the value of that work.

1. Have students share and use their preparation to do meaningful work during class. For example, if students were assigned practice problems to complete before class time, have them share their solutions to some of those problems with their peers to compare their approach.
2. As part of preparatory or in-class work, have students articulate how doing this work will help them be successful in the course. They can do that by responding (in writing) to prompts like the ones below.
 - How does the work I am doing on this [homework assignment / learning activity] relate to the work I will be asked to do on the upcoming [test / paper / project]?
 - How was the work of this [homework assignment / learning activity] difficult for me? How does recognizing this difficulty help me think about what I need to work on as I prepare for the upcoming [test / paper / project]?

3. Take time at the end of each class period for students to reflect on their learning and plan for how they will use what they learned to complete upcoming assignments or assessments. They can do that by responding (in writing) to prompts like the ones below.
 - What is one thing I learned today in class today that will help me do [thinking or skill] in upcoming assignments?
 - How will I use what I learned to prepare for the upcoming [test / paper / project]?
 - In what ways did the work I did in class today help me get better at [important thinking or skill that an upcoming assessment requires]?

Challenge: Students aren't submitting assignments on time (or at all).

Sometimes when students don't submit course assignments, it's because they don't see the value of those assignments for their learning. In other cases, they may believe that they really aren't prepared to do the work the assignments require. Students who have fallen behind may be feeling panicked or anxious and therefore be unwilling to seek the help they need. To help them engage in the work our assignments require and to increase the likelihood that they will complete and submit that work, students need to consider why those assessments matter and how they have already been preparing for that work.

1. When you give students information about major assignments or assessments, have them reflect on the value of the work they will do on that assessment by responding (in writing) to prompts like the ones below.
 - How will completing this assignment help me to think in new ways?
 - How will completing this assignment prepare me for work I am required to do in other courses or in my major?
 - How does the work of this assignment relate to goals I have for myself in college? Beyond college?
2. When you give students information about major assignments or assessments, have them take time to plan for how they will approach the work of those assessments in order to be successful by responding (in writing) to prompts like the ones below.
 - In what ways will this assignment draw on my strengths? How will I use these strengths to be successful?
 - What do I expect will be most challenging as I complete this assignment? What resources (e.g., teacher, peers, course materials, outside resources, etc.) will I use to help me work through this challenge?
 - What are two things I will do this week (by date) to begin working on this assignment?
 - If I am not able to complete this assignment on time, what options will I discuss with my instructor (choosing a late submission date, choosing to submit part of the assignment on time, *other options that work for your course*)?

If you'd like support in implementing any of these suggestions in your courses, we invite you to [schedule a consultation](#) with ITLAL. You may also want to visit [Teaching A to Z](#), a series of research-based articles that offer more ideas about how you can support your students' success. In addition, we are preparing a series of workshops for Spring 2022 that focus on supporting student learning, beginning with an Instructional Leadership Academy focused on [Course Design to Foster Student Success](#). Watch the [Workshops and Events](#) page on the ITLAL website for more information about upcoming workshops.