Teaching Unprepared Students: The Importance of Increasing Relevance
By Kenneth L. Alford, PhD, and Tyler J. Griffin, PhD

It is difficult to teach if students are unprepared to learn. In a 2013 Faculty Focus reader survey, faculty were asked to rank their biggest day-to-day challenges. "Students who are not prepared for the rigors of college" and "Students who come to class unprepared" finished in a statistical dead heat as the #1 challenge; roughly 30% of the respondents rated both challenges as "very problematic." Whether students arrive in your classroom underprepared (that is, their high school educational experience did not prepare them for the rigors of college work) or unprepared (that is, they are not ready to contribute and participate in your course on any given day), the way to help them is still the same. When approaching classroom challenges, it is helpful to first identify the teaching and learning principles involved and then search for practices that follow from those principles. If you want to increase the level of engagement with underprepared or unprepared students, we have three recommendations:

1. Increase relevance
2. Increase relevance
3. Increase relevance

Students who sense a disconnect between what they are learning at college (or in your course) and their future life, as they perceive it, will never engage to the same degree as students who understand the relevant connections between their current learning and their future. One technique that a teacher can use to increase relevance is to repeatedly ask "So what?" or "Who cares?" If the teacher struggles to answer these questions from their students' perspectives, there is little chance that the students will be able to make the connection on their own. The task of answering these questions does not necessarily need to rest solely on the teacher, though. An engaging teacher will consistently work with students to construct answers to these two questions based on what they are currently studying.

Assignments

Don't just give assignments. You need to help your students understand the relevance and connection to what they are doing now, and what they hope to do in the future. This is the student's, not the teacher's, "big picture" vision. But it is the teacher's responsibility to guide their students through this process. Unprepared and underprepared students will not do this on their own, but there are numerous ways you can help. Here are a few ideas:

- Ask your students to respond, in writing, to a "So what?" question as part of each assignment or major topic within your course.
• Let students have control over course decisions and direction, as appropriate.

• Guide a class discussion on why this course should matter to them; play a devil’s advocate role, if necessary.

Often teachers will wait until the very end of a semester to talk about relevance or relevant connections. That is a mistake. You will have missed a golden opportunity. A better option is to front-load a discussion of relevance in your course. Provide students with relevancy beginning with lesson one. Then throughout your course, each time you introduce a new major topic or section, update and expand on the relevance.

**Assessment and Accountability**

Effective teachers do not rely on only one form of assessment when helping underprepared or unprepared students. Begin by assessing where students are, and then find appropriate methods to help students reach the next level of ability and motivation. That process continues by degrees until they reach their educational degree. It has been our experience that students who are held accountable to themselves, to peers, to teams, and to faculty expectations are more likely to find the motivation to complete required work and succeed as students. That accountability must be:

• **Attainable.** If you give unreasonable expectations, you will probably only increase students' unpreparedness and decrease their motivation—but the bar must continue to be raised throughout the semester incrementally, as appropriate.

• **Firm.** You must have standards. Mercy should not be allowed to rob justice, or you run the risk of losing credibility—contributing to increased unpreparedness.

• **Measurable.** Students need to clearly understand when they have met your expectations in an objective way.

As a teacher, it is essential to remember that you are not teaching lessons or subjects, you are teaching students, real people. Consequently, the degree to which you win the hearts and minds of your students is the degree to which you can motivate them to achieve in your class and throughout their college experience. Your positive effect on students can benefit them in all of their courses—not just yours and not just this one semester. What we do as teachers matters in the lives of our students. Let’s help them become lifelong learners.

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