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UNH Professor Offers Advice to Students on How to Avoid Poor Academic Performance

Erika Mantz
UNH Media Relations

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Media Relations

August 27, 2016

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1. Lack of intrinsic interest in the subject matter

Be honest: Are you *truly* interested in what you are studying?

Some follow-up questions:

- Did you choose your major or did someone (e.g., your parents) “encourage” your decision?
- If someone asked you why you chose your major, what would your honest answer be?
- Which classes did you enjoy the most? Were these classes in your major? If not, why not?

2. Focusing on quantity of work/studying vs. quality

Be honest: When studying, do you measure your progress in terms of number of hours spent, pages written, definitions memorized, etc. or in terms of your ability to actually understand *and apply* what you’re learning?

- Toss out the ancient advice you’ve probably been given about spending X amount of hours studying for every hour in class. Time has nothing to do with it – one class might take 10 hours a week, another might take two. You’re done when you know what you need to know.
- Don’t memorize. Unfortunately you’ve probably had classes where you could get by regurgitating PowerPoint slides (the worst things that ever happened to classroom education by the way!) **That’s not learning, it’s memorizing.** Even in those classes, you’ll usually find it far more interesting to actually learn the material and you won’t have to gamble on the probability that you’ll be tested on more than just rote memorization.

3. “Missing the forest for the trees”

Be honest: Do you approach your classes from a big picture perspective (how does it all fit together, what is the real world applicability) or do you get lost in the details?

- Let’s use foreign language instruction in most U.S. schools as an example. Countless US students have aced every foreign language class they ever took but can’t put a sentence together in that language. They can conjugate every verb in existence but can’t ask for directions. Quick: how many verb tenses are there in English? Who the hell cares? (there are 12 if you do care) By focusing on the big picture you learned English AS A TODDLER and for the most part you learned verb conjugation and other details subconsciously. The same applies to almost every subject – focus on the big picture and the details take care of themselves.

4. Evaluating your current work based on past grades

Be honest: Have you ever questioned a grade because it was lower than grades you got in high school or in lower-level college courses?

- Telling an instructor “You’re the first person to ever give me a (fill in the bad grade)” has an effect roughly similar to asking a police officer “Do you know who I am!?” In both cases you’ve taken an adversarial stance against someone who you really want on your side and you’re reminding us of the flawed social systems that led you to say that.
- Harsh reality: Many U.S. high school teachers are forced to give out good grades and some college professors do it in the sad hope of “buying” good student evaluations. Eventually you’ll find a class with real standards. Don’t view it as “unfair,” be relieved that someone’s finally treating you like an intelligent adult and offering you a real learning experience.

5. Learned Helplessness

Be honest: Have you ever “given up” in a class after struggling early in the semester?

- After doing poorly on an early test or assignment, many students shift into “I just need to pass” mode. In this state all of the mistakes mentioned above start to happen. The truth is that you’re *supposed* to get better as the class goes along. Otherwise we’d give you a final exam on day one and call it a semester. Early failures are far better than early overconfidence because they give you insight into how to fix your problems with plenty of time to spare.

Paul Harvey is an associate professor of management at the University of New Hampshire’s Paul College of Business and Economics. He earned a Ph.D. in organizational behavior from Florida State University and studies the impact of perceptions and emotions on workplace behaviors and performance outcomes. He teaches management courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels in addition to executive development programs for managers and employees at a variety of companies.

Editors and producers: The following piece can be printed as is, with credit to Professor Harvey, or he is available for interviews. UNH Media Relations has an on-site ReadyCam broadcast studio available through VideoLink (617-340-4300) for television interviews and an ISDN line for radio interviews.

Media Contact: [Erika Mantz](#) | 603-862-1567 | UNH Media Relations | [@unhnews](#)

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