

Hill Street Blues: Are you serving your underserved population?

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Abstract: Academic prowess is not necessarily the hallmark of the college bound individual. As increasing numbers of high school graduates come to realize that a higher degree is necessary to ensure an adequate standard of living, university faculty often faced with academically unprepared populations. This paper provides participants with methods to motivate and encourage academic success in populations that have previously not had access to higher education.

Key words: education; underserved; at-risk

1. Introduction

Academic prowess is no longer the hallmark of the college bound individual. As increasing numbers of high school graduates come to realize that a higher degree is necessary to ensure an adequate standard of living, university faculty are often faced with academically unprepared populations. The author teaches in the location that inspired the television series, *Hill Street Blues*. Many of the students come from low-income or impoverished households or are single mothers living in poverty. While most are motivated to change the course of their lives, many do not have the skills necessary to succeed academically.

Most institutions of higher learning have made an effort to serve the academically underserved students. Programs for academic success and remediation exist to assist students with difficulties in the basics of comprehension, writing, and study skills. While laudable, these efforts in and of themselves are not enough. Course instructors play a fundamental role. By observing students, professors can assess students' levels of motivation and take adequate measures to encourage and provide opportunities to increase this fundamental aspect of learning.

Ideally, motivation to succeed should be intrinsic. Educators create this by providing assignments that enhance self-worth, encourage autonomy, and capitalize upon the human need for relatedness. By definition, underserved populations' interests and needs have not been met in the traditional academic realm. By using assignments that tap into students' distinctive culture, background, or area of expertise, teachers heighten motivation thus propelling students further into academic endeavors.

2. Underserved populations: Establishing the need

Underserved populations are traditionally those who receive inadequate care from the health system due to geographic, demographics or economic circumstances (Weitz, 2000). Higher education also has underserved populations: individuals who arrive at the institution without the necessary prerequisite skills, supportive role models, and required cultural capital essential to graduate. These are the at-risk students, who due to their

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resiliency, managed to persevere academically through the K-12 system. In the K-12 setting, poverty is most frequently the culprit. School performance correlates with socioeconomic status. Students with high socioeconomic status are more apt to have higher academic achievement; those with low socioeconomic status are at-risk for dropping out (Lee & Bowen, 2006). These students fall further and further behind their more wealthy peers as they progress through the grade levels (Jimerson, Egeland & Teo, 1999). When researchers track achievement discrepancies among students from various ethnic groups, the differences in their socioeconomic status, as opposed to their cultural and ethnic differences, are to blame (Murdock, 2000).

Underserved populations often also experience cultural mismatch with regard to their home environment and the university setting. This psychological inconsistency further deters students who may already be struggling academically. The graduation rate nationwide for African American students in higher education is 43%, a figure of 20 points below the 63% for white students (*The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2007). Latinos graduate at a rate of 47% and native Americans 37%. Most of the first time degree-seeking students who manage to graduate from a four-year institution, take six years to complete their program of study (Carey, 2005).

Nationally, the focus of education during the 21st century rests upon the ability for the United States to compete in the global economy; therefore, the failure of possible graduates comes at an inopportune time (Spring, 2007). While America previously provided the most educated workforce, our current rate of graduation has not notably increased. Meanwhile, Canada, Great Britain, Japan, and Korea, countries that ranked below the United States in terms of college graduates, now have significantly increased the rate of those graduating from higher education institutions with a B.A. The well-compensated jobs that require extensive knowledge and skills may now, for the first time, be possible careers for those in countries that previously lagged behind us educationally (Carey, 2006).

3. Motivation affects success

Eminent psychiatrist, Dr. S. Blanton (1958) stated, “The truth is that all of us attain the greatest success and happiness in this life whenever we use our native capacities to their greatest extent”. Educational psychologists would credit the correctness of this phenomenon to motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Humans typically choose to engage in activities in which they excel, and excellence in achievement is significantly impacted by prior knowledge (Sternberg & Detterman 1986). The more individuals know about an undertaking, the more intelligently they will behave. The more personally satisfying that experience, the more apt one is to pursue similar experiences in the future (Ormrod, 2008).

Underserved populations have characteristically not had the educational experiences that lead to success. Their past experiences often lead to rejection of formal schooling, as opposed to its pursuit (Martin, Marsh & Debus, 2001). However, educators can create learning opportunities that capitalize on students’ backgrounds by drawing upon the three key factors which impact psychological well-being: self-worth, autonomy, and relatedness. By linking students’ prior experiences with these three basic psychological needs, educators can profoundly impact their students’ motivation, well-being, and success.

4. Carlow’s population

Carlow University is a primarily women’s centered institution in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1929, the goal of the school was to continue the mission of mercy founder, Catherine McAuley.

McAuley, who was herself a victim of poverty after the death of both of her parents, became the fortunate recipient of a fortune at the age of 44. With inherited wealth, she built a house that was used as both a school for children and a shelter for girls in need.

McAuley's belief that education could enhance the lives of women and children living in poverty continues to this day at the 16 mercy educational institutions. Approximately 95% of the women attending Carlow University receive financial aid. A portion of those recipients reside in Pittsburgh neighborhoods that are categorized as poverty stricken and characterized by crime. *The Hill District*, romanticized by the 1980s television show *Hill Street Blues*, is one such neighborhood. Single mothers and their children who reside in the hill, and neighborhoods like it, make up the majority of what is termed underserved populations. Without an education, these women and their offspring will continue to reside in environments of poverty and violence. In the fall of 2007, 452 of Carlow University's full-time undergraduates received Federal Pell Grants. This represented 39% of Carlow's total full-time undergraduate population that semester. Pell is the foundation of federal student financial aid and is awarded to the neediest students, based on a review of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. These students who have managed to enroll and participate in a post secondary education exhibit a quality known as resiliency. Resilient students obtain coping skills and characteristics that assist them in overcoming their difficult circumstances (Werner & Smith, 2001). Through the Carlow School of Education's Urban Educator's Program, several of these low-income and underserved students hope to later be role models for their K-12 students. This is one method of how the Mercy Mission can change society.

Merely getting into college, however, does not guarantee that the dream of a better life will materialize. Academic success often hinges on students having adequate support. Carlow's Center for Academic Achievement offers tutoring and assistance with study skills to academically under prepared students. The Department of Campus Ministry at Carlow provides for students' pastoral and spiritual needs. It provides opportunities for service, as well as worship, which reflect the values of the university. Carlow's Student Life Division employs a variety of education and student developmental models to integrate commuter and resident student activities, provides meaningful opportunities for learning professional leadership skills, and places student activity programming into the hands of students. While these opportunities provide support, Dr. Blanton might advise that success is more likely to occur when individuals continually use their native abilities. By meeting students' basic needs in the classroom, professors motivate their students academically and model the methods with which they, in turn, can later inspire their future underserved students.

5. Three key motivational components in learning

Human beings have a variety of needs that must be met in order for them to perform optimally physically and mentally. Early educational theorist Abraham Maslow (1973) theorized the following hierarchy of needs exists: physiological, safety, belonging, and self-esteem needs. Maslow believed that when these needs are not met, humans are less apt to actualize their potential. With the exception of physiological needs, Maslow's hierarchy encompasses psychological requirements, a desire to feel content and comfortable. In the educational environment, psychological well-being plays a critical role in the motivation to learn.

What support can instructors provide to ensure these at-risk populations graduate? All students are motivated by something. Learners can find inspiration in subject matter, social interaction, challenging activities or even extracurricular activities. By tapping into students' interests, educators encourage motivation. Three facets of

motivation can be of particular use to those serving underrepresented and at-risk students in the classroom: self-worth, autonomy, and relatedness.

5.1 Self-worth

Self-worth in the classroom manifests itself through students' desire to preserve their sense of self-efficacy (Covington, 2000). Learners want to believe that they are competent and have self-worth (Ormrod, 2008). This desire for students to believe that they are capable of overcoming obstacles and mastering their environment can be especially deficient in underserved populations. Factors which play a role in self-worth are: judgment by others, approval by others, and regularly achieving success.

Under prepared students often employ certain behaviors in an attempt to preserve their self-worth. Professors might witness failure avoidance, a behavior typified by students devaluing assignments. Students may also forecast their probable failure or simply reframe from engaging in an assignment to avoid acknowledging they cannot perform the task. Self-handicapping is yet another method students that use to maintain their self-worth. It manifests itself in the following behaviors: extending little effort into an activity so failure is predetermined; setting unattainable goals; overextending oneself; and procrastination or cheating. By utilizing these methods, students can avoid having to admit that they may not have the intelligence or ability to perform a task.

Educators can employ six methods to enhance self-efficacy and encourage self-worth in the classroom: (1) gradually building students' skills to ensure that adequate support is available; (2) identifying successes and strengths so their students reflect and take stock in their abilities; (3) using other students with similar backgrounds to demonstrate that success is possible; (4) monitoring and providing feedback for students' performance to ensure increasing success and avoid failure; (5) utilizing small group activities for challenging assignments to provide scaffolding from peers; and (6) allowing for revisions and retakes so that students can learn from their mistakes.

By gradually building students' skills and making sure students have the proper support and tools to accomplish the tasks, motivation for learning is increased. Students attending college from low socioeconomic circumstances often do not have the necessary academic support from their home environment to persevere and succeed. To mitigate this situation, professors can provide additional support to ensure their success. Referral to University programs such as Carlow's Center for Academic Achievement (CAA) provides tutoring and editing services. The instructors in the CAA program frequently work with at-risk populations and become adept at understanding culturally relevant circumstances and providing culturally relevant models. Professors as well can draw upon students' prior experiences and knowledge to increase motivation and success. Students behave more intelligently when they can draw upon past experiences. By capitalizing on students' strengths, their motivation is increased (Sternberg, 2004). Finally, instructors can decrease anxiety and improve students' confidence by clearly explaining classroom expectations and assignments. For those individuals who have had a less than rigorous education prior to college, well-defined parameters increase confidence and predictability reduces anxiety (Juvonen, 2006).

When professors identify successes and strengths so their students reflect and take stock in their abilities, motivation increases. As early as kindergarten, many children had their successful assignments posted on the refrigerator. This form of recognition provides the confidence students need to excel in the future. While Carlow does not post tests on appliances, there are other methods the instructional staff uses to recognize and highlight achievement. Using students' products as models for assignments, providing extensive feedback regarding increased proficiency, and encouraging students to engage in peer tutoring, all cover the message of recognition

and appreciation of competence.

Relevant models can impact students academically (Powers, Sowers & Stevens, 1995). When professors use other students with similar backgrounds to demonstrate that success is possible, underserved students will be more inspired to persevere. This is particularly important for those serving low-income students. Because the majority of successful professionals are middle to high-income white men, professors must make an effort to expose students to those that they perceive to be similar to them (Eccles, Wigfield & Schiefele, 1998). One can accomplish this by linking students from similar backgrounds, selecting readings that showcase similar others achieving success, or using mentors and speakers that students perceive as being like them.

Monitoring and providing feedback for students' performance to ensure increasing success and avoid failure increases self-efficacy and worth. Repeated failure is more apt to occur when instructors do not frequently evaluate students' progress. This can easily be accomplished through frequent evaluation and the use of small assignments that build to produce larger products. By identifying students' mistakes and misconceptions early in the learning process, professors keep them from continuing to build upon faulty practices. This method also provides instructional guidance for professors. By frequently critiquing student progress, instructors have regular and reasonably accurate information with which to make decisions that guide instruction (Goldenberg, 1992). When final grades are due, multiple smaller assignments provide a more accurate portrayal of student understanding than a few exams. Multiple assessments also compensate for the potentially flawed reliability and validity of a single assignment (Ormrod, 2009).

In the classroom, small group activities can provide students with additional support for particularly challenging activities. Instructors encourage participation and risk-taking through collaborative efforts. The student who is shy during whole class instruction will have an increased opportunity to contribute without the anxiety that often accompanies large group interaction. Risk-taking, or attempting activities which may provide a challenge to an under prepared student, is more comfortable with the support and endorsement of a group (Clifford, 1990).

One of the most effective ways to increase self-worth is to ensure students achieve success. By allowing students to revise assignments and retake assessments, they have the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. While many in education believe grades motivate learners, grades are defined as external motivation. Research suggests that the goal-driven behavior produced by grades focuses students on the grade as opposed to the task itself (Ormrod, 2006). At-risk learners are best served by allowing them to revise and correct their initial unsuccessful attempts. By allowing students to amend their work, educators teach the critical next lesson essential for academic success, locus of control. Underserved populations frequently have a history of exhibiting an external locus of control: students who blame or credit their performance to factors outside of their control. To improve this situation, instructors must provide students with sufficient autonomy so that they realize the relationship between choice, effort and success. By designing challenging activities and ensuring that students have the proper tools to succeed, students will experience positive outcomes and be able to take credit for their success. After several such occurrences, motivation for future endeavors is increased.

Educators who have high rates of success with at-risk students tend to be helpful, concerned, and respectful, all qualities that encourage self-worth (Pianta, 1999). When students believe they can experience academic success, they focus their energy on future endeavors rather than past difficulties (Alderman, 1990).

5.2 Autonomy

Most individuals want to believe that they have a certain amount of control over their environment. Intrinsic

motivation is diminished when learners feel as if others are controlling the decisions that affect them. Underserved populations, by definition, have often not been in control of their circumstances due to socioeconomic factors. In the classroom, the following factors can impact a sense of autonomy or self-determination: choice; value to the learner; topics for study or reading; goals for learning; various aspects regarding assignments such as due dates or design, the format of the class and how the information will be presented, and the evaluating criteria for assignments or tasks.

Choice plays a critical role in motivation. When a learner's sense of self-determination of autonomy is diminished, intrinsic motivation is undermined (Deci, 1992). By providing choice, however, both the students and the instructor benefit. Students who make decisions regarding classroom functioning or activities gain a sense of ownership (Schraw & Lehman, 2001). In addition, they are also more apt to be interested in and work conscientiously toward completing their assignments (Turner, 1998). This sense of engagement also influences classroom behavior in a positive manner (Dunlap, et al., 1994).

Students find that value in topics relates to their own lives. Determining what motivates individual students will differ depending, in part, on the standards and conduct their culture or ethnic group supports (d'Ailly, 2003). For this reason, students are more motivated when professors can create academic content and activities relevant to students' lives (Knapp, Turnbull & Shields, 1990). Ideally, course content should include authentic, or real world, tasks relevant to the learner's environment. In order to draw attention to domestic violence, for example, Carlow University professors from several academic programs sponsored an interdisciplinary project where victims were memorialized and information was disseminated.

An effective way to provide choice to students is through self-selection of topics for study. Students who select their own subject matter typically dedicate more attention and are more intellectually engaged (McDaniel, Waddill, Finstad & Bourg, 2000). This method of motivating students often results in more meaningful knowledge construction. Students who select their own topics frequently do so because of their prior knowledge with the topic. This prior exposure allows students to more easily organize information, relate ideas, and draw inferences (Pintrich, 2003). By utilizing these cognitive processes, the potential for success increases (Garner, Brown, Sanders & Menke, 1992).

Ideally, instructors hope that learners will exhibit a level of autonomy in the classroom that will serve them as they go out into the world to make choices that will guide their lives. One way in which professors can encourage this autonomy is by allowing students to set their own goals for learning. At the university level, students' values and expectations become mutually dependent. Topics and activities in which students excel have increased value due to the positive feelings resulting from achievement. On the contrary, students devalue subject matter in which they perform inadequately (Wigfield, 1994). By creating opportunities for students to set goals for their learning in areas where they perceive they have competence, professors prepare them for the goal setting that will later guide their lives.

One final aspect of encouraging student autonomy includes allowing input into daily aspects of classroom routines. Due dates, assignment designs, delivery of information, and evaluating criteria all impact students, when students feel they have a voice in the selection of fundamental course features, they become stakeholders as opposed to pawns. Most critical of these choices, and often the least accommodated, is evaluating criteria. While standardization is important for reliability and validity, research has proven that because it limits an instructor's ability to make accommodations for diversity, debilitating anxiety can result especially for those from minority groups and low-income backgrounds (Phillips, et al., 1980). When students take part in test preparation through

study groups or guides, it can assist students in conquering test anxiety and provide them with the skills necessary to master course content (Tryon, 1980).

When students have input into the teaching/learning process, they must then assume some responsibility as well. By providing students with a certain amount of autonomy, we are also asking them to accept a degree of responsibility. When students realize the part they play in the connection between choice and outcomes, they will develop an internal locus of control. They can then truly take credit for their successes and assume responsibility for their failures.

5.3 Relatedness

All people have a basic need to feel socially connected to others. The security of acceptance and respect of others satisfies our need for relatedness (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). The need for relatedness can negatively impact schooling. When students feel a lack of acceptance by their peers, their focus may shift away from scholastics. In the K-12 setting, the high priority placed on acceptance from peers often ruins academic careers (Dowson & McInerney, 2001). The phenomena of undercover honor students discussed in *A Hope of the Unseen* chronicles the academic odyssey of Cedric Jennings from an inner city high school in Washington DC to Brown University. Although Jennings, who is African American and from a low income background, perseveres through Brown's rigorous coursework to graduate, he continually refers to his inability to connect with those who do not share his background. This inability to relate causes him on numerous accounts to question if college is an environment within which he will ever feel comfortable (Suskind, 1998).

Instructors at the post secondary level can employ the following methods to meet their students' need for relatedness: provide opportunities for students to interact with each other; allow students to assist each other with tasks; design group based activities such as discussions, debates, role playing, cooperative learning, or games/competitions among teams of equal ability; highlight talents and contributions of class members; express an interest in students' outside hobbies or talents; and encourage students to collaborate with others who share their interests.

While most of the suggestions listed are self-explanatory, educators need to model for and instruct students on how to maximize the positive potential of activities that involve student-to-student interaction. Educators must exhibit respect for diverse opinions and solicit multiple perspectives for student groups to appreciate what can be gained from such behaviors. Group members should be encouraged to scaffold for members who may lack certain skills instead of merely compensating. While the skills from a course collaborative activity may be useful in particular situations, the resulting social skills gleaned from group interaction will serve students for a lifetime.

Just as homework can pose a problem for those who lack adequate resources and support at home, group activities that occur outside of course time can pose a particular hardship for underserved populations (Heymann & Earle, 2000). Many of Carlow's students take multiple modes of transportation to arrive at campus. This fact, coupled with work schedules and family responsibilities, can erase the positive social aspects of collaborative work. To alleviate this potential hardship, instructors can provide classroom time for such endeavors or employ the use of technology for students to exchange their ideas.

While many think of relatedness only in the sense of student to student, at the post-secondary level students' relationship with their instructors can be equally important. Students who believe their professors truly enjoy being with them and are concerned for their success achieve at higher rates (Patrick, et al., 2002). Educators can also provide frequent feedback to students regarding their increased competence to enhance the feeling of relatedness between instructors and learners.

6. What are the problems associated with using motivation as a mean to serve underserved populations

Dr. Maxwell Maltz (2001) suggested, “Study the situation thoroughly, go over in your imagination the various courses of action possible to you and the consequences which can and may follow from each course. Pick out the course which gives the most promise and go ahead”. While Catherine McAuley and Dr. Maltz were not contemporaries, I believe their philosophy regarding action and consequence were similar. If we want to improve the plight of the poor, we must first meet their needs. This article is an attempt to improve the academic experience of underserved and underprepared college students by capitalizing on the three key factors which impact psychological well-being: self-worth, autonomy, and relatedness. However, as Dr. Maltz recommends, possible consequences must be acknowledged.

One concern would be whether we are setting students up for later disappointment when we cater to their needs in school? When our underserved students emerge from the college setting and again join the world that previously slighted them, will they be better able to cope with the inequities? Will they become part of the solution or will they become bitter?

Another concern is with legal implications. Does a system that supports underserved candidates slight students from dissimilar backgrounds? In 2003, several programs at the University of Michigan were taken to court over an affirmative action system that awarded additional points necessary for admission to minority students. African-American, Hispanic and Native American candidates earned 20 points on the basis of race out of a 150-point system. The university claimed that the resulting diversity due to the point system provided a better education for their students. The goal of the program was to open access and break down barriers. Many, including the President of the United States, disagreed with the practice stating that the constitution protects the rights of individuals not the rights of racial groups. White students who failed to be admitted were victims of discrimination, their lawyers claimed, because minority candidates took their place (Greenhouse, 2003). One might have to consider then, does the practice of drawing upon students’ backgrounds inadvertently slight typical students? This concern is still being actively discussed today.

Finally, can universities expect their teaching staff to consider student well-being? Is it not enough to impart the information? This question rests on whether the institution employs a sink or swim standard upon its students. Carlow University has as its mission:

...engages its diverse community in a process of life-long learning, scholarship, and research. This engagement empowers individuals to think clearly and creatively; to actively pursue intellectual endeavors; to discover, challenge, or affirm cultural and aesthetic values; to respond reverently to God and others; and to embrace an ethic of service for a just and merciful world.

Being the mission of Carlow, it follows that the instructional staff ratifies the importance of diversity that requires that the faculty embrace and support all students.

While these concerns are valid, one must consider the outcome of meeting students’ motivational needs in the university classroom. Does it result in a more prepared student who can better navigate the workplace upon graduation? Through such modeling by instructors, will students after graduation use some of the same motivational techniques with others in their lives? The Sisters of Mercy teaching faculty believes that if it can enhance the life of one student through pedagogical methods, it can potentially affect the lives of those who later come in contact with that student. In this way, Carlow University furthers the mission of its founder.

7. Using students' feedback

Have my methods met with success? How does an educator measure her success? I believe success is a dynamic quality which waxes and wanes with relationship to the agent's sensitivity and attentiveness to her students. I practice the following in order to meet my students' needs: respond to students' feedback concerning assignments and classroom activities; allow students to make suggestions and changes in the learning content and environment; and, embrace the concept that if one's curriculum is student-centered, then the course must be designed to adjust each semester to the current community of learners. Through these methods, my students know that I value them, respect autonomy, and revere community. The Ester Sestilli Excellence in Teaching Award is presented yearly by Carlow University to one faculty member. Student votes determine the recipient. I received the award in 2007. While the University's acknowledgment was satisfying, knowing that my students recognized my efforts to meet their needs and expectations eclipsed all else.

Although the census tries to use one term or another to define populations, ultimately our students are individuals. For this reason, no one method or strategy will ensure their academic success (Janosz, et al., 2000). However, by creating a classroom environment that acknowledges economic and racial diversity and provides support for underserved and under prepared students, educators increase the likelihood of success (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). In the repertoire of support, instructors should capitalize on motivation, a key element in the drive for academic success.

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