

# Teaching

*A series of practical and innovative teaching tips for college faculty* No. 18

## The Top 10...

### Ways to Build Your Students' Self-Efficacy

One of the best predictors of student success in college is that student's belief in how good a student he or she is. Unfortunately, many of our students do not define themselves as good students. We can change this perception. The key is their "self-efficacy" in regard to what is required to be a good student. For our purposes, "self-efficacy" is a student's **belief** in her or his ability to successfully complete tasks required of good students. Here's how we can change a student's self-efficacy for the tasks needed to become a good student.

- ✓ **How do you test?** Most tests are designed to show people what they do not know. A great many college tests are basically "memory tests" – yet how many current jobs require extensive memorization? Consider alternative ways, perhaps showing your students how to take notes from reading and class and then giving "open note" tests that emphasize thinking about and using information.
- ✓ Are tasks in the course designed to **build upon each other** so that the hardest material is toward the end? What exists early in your course that is hard for many students, and can reinforce their perception that they aren't capable of mastering the content or skill? We want to make students work, stretch and even struggle, but not to create failure experiences that reinforce negative beliefs.
- ✓ Do you consciously **provide more assistance to students at the beginning** of the course, especially with the important lower level thinking skills of "remembering" and "understanding"? Showing students how to take notes, study the key points, and maximize their time studying is crucial to helping them develop the feeling, "I can do this." An added benefit is that then you can explain less in class and engage them in more thinking and applying tasks.

- ✓ The more we **provide regular feedback** featuring success-oriented reinforcement and constructive criticism aimed at areas they can immediately improve, the more we give students a chance to build skills, which builds self-efficacy.
- ✓ **Grading.** Is it fair to evaluate a new instructor using the same criteria as for a full professor with 20 years teaching experience? Of course not. So perhaps you want to consider giving hard tests, but grading progressively harder throughout the course. Show students how to do well on your tests, and as they get stronger, grade harder.
- ✓ **Answering questions in class.** Often a few students provide most of the answers when we ask a question, reinforcing to others that they aren't smart enough. Consider two tactics. First, ask a question and tell everyone to think for a minute, then ask for volunteers and consciously track who answers. Second, ask a question and have two students collaborate on an answer, and then consciously call on different students.
- ✓ What happens when a student gives an incorrect answer to one of your questions? Students with high self-efficacy for their tasks are not intimidated, but how does someone react who thinks he or she is a poor student? Dig out value in the answer, use their answer to support their skill and make sure you call on them again in a future class.
- ✓ **Where do the “good students” sit?** You know. So, move students around a few times so they get to know others. Putting students in unfamiliar locations helps loosen the stereotypical behavior they have in their minds about what they do when they are in a classroom. As that happens, students are more likely to ask questions and participate more.
- ✓ Who talks to instructors outside of class? The “good students,” right? Change that dynamic. Ask all of your students to make a short appointment to see you about the course, their career interests, and why they are in college. This breaks the pattern, and may even lead some to seek you out for other purposes, which is “good student” behavior.
- ✓ **Show confidence in their ability to do well in the course.** Examine your nonverbal behavior, emphasizing positive messages. Consider how you refer to your present and past students, everywhere since negative thoughts lead to subconscious actions. Go to class early and engage different students personally, use information you know about them to connect course content to their lives. Think of six other ways.

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