



It is now well established that the success rate for students placed in developmental education is far too low. At the Community College of Baltimore County, we found only about 33% of students placed in our upper level developmental course ever passed the credit-level composition course. The Community College Research Center, based on a study of 256,672 first-time, credential-seeking students at fifty-seven Achieving the Dream colleges, reports similar results:

Results of the study indicate that fewer than one half of the students who are referred to remediation actually complete the entire sequence to which they are referred. About 30 percent of students referred to developmental education do not enroll in any remedial course, and only about 60 percent of referred students actually enroll in the remedial course to which they were referred. The results also show that more students exit their developmental sequences because they did not enroll in the first or a subsequent course than because they failed or withdrew from a course in which they were enrolled.

After surveying our students at CCBC for five consecutive semesters, we are convinced that most students who do not succeed do not for one or both of these reasons:

- Life problems become overwhelming.
- Affective issues—mostly centered around fear, anxiety, and a suspicion that they are not “college material”—cause them to give up.

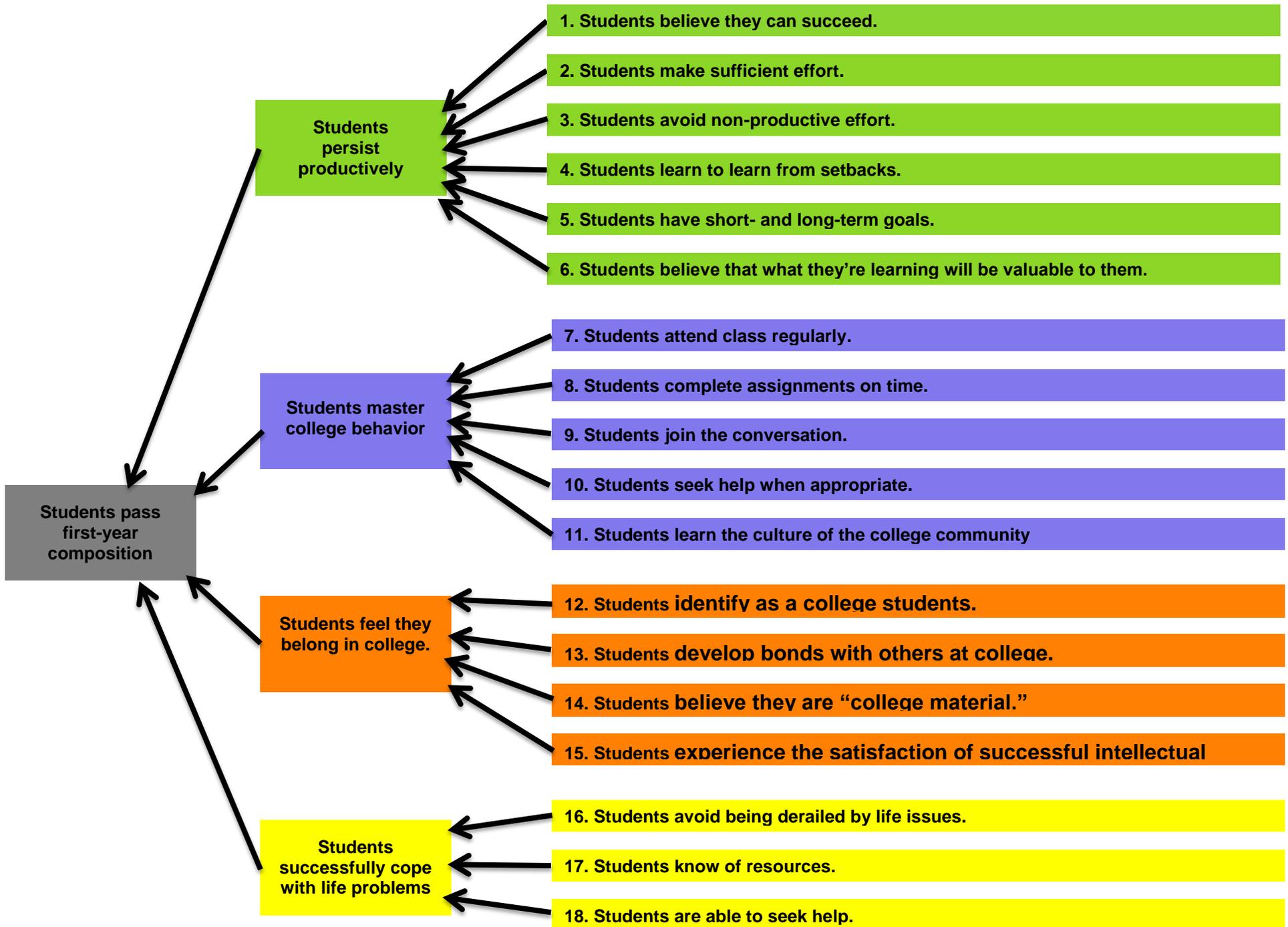
Very few writing faculty have any preparation for addressing these non-cognitive issues. And yet, we have found that there are things we can do to reduce the chances that students will give up because of these non-cognitive factors. In this document we will discuss strategies that have worked for us.

But first a few cautionary words. Even though we are encouraging faculty to engage with students over these non-cognitive issues, we also recognize that few faculty have any formal preparation in these areas. Consequently, it is important that we not take on the formal role of financial counselor, legal advisor, marriage counselor, or medical consultant. Rather, we suggest that faculty think of themselves in a less formal role. Imagine that a nephew or niece or even a next door neighbor came to you for advice. You wouldn't say, “I'm sorry, but I am not a lawyer or a marriage counselor. I cannot help you.” What most of us would do is listen carefully and offer any insights we do have in an informal role and, if it seemed appropriate, offer a suggestion of an expert who might be appropriate. This is closer to the role we are suggesting for responding to students with non-cognitive issues.

Another issue that faculty must sometimes wrestle with is how much compassion is appropriate. Because we care about our students and are understanding of the stresses in their lives, we sometimes cut them some slack. We give extensions on due dates and allow them to make up work they have missed. The difficulty is determining whether this compassion is, in fact, encouraging behaviors that will be problematic in the long run. Making the right choice between compassion and “tough love” is not always easy, and few of us will always get it right.

To address these non-cognitive issues, we have developed the diagram on the following pages.

While the specific content in this handout is based on our experiences with our students at the Community College of Baltimore County, we would like to acknowledge the Carnegie Foundation, particularly the work of David Yeager, as having inspired the way we are addressing non-cognitive issues and for the format in which our ideas are presented.



Students persist productively

1. Students believe they can succeed.

Faculty discuss the concepts of fixed and growth mindsets. Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck has pointed out that there are two ways to think about our abilities. Those with a “fixed mindset” think that their ability is set from an early age: “I’ve never been good at writing” or “I’m just not athletic.” Those with a “growth mindset” believe that they can improve their abilities if they work at it.

As Dweck explains, “the belief that intelligence is fixed dampened students' motivation to learn, made them afraid of effort, and made them want to quit after a setback. This is why so many bright students stop working when school becomes hard. Many bright students find grade school easy and coast to succeed early on. But later, when they are challenged, they struggle. They don't want to make mistakes and feel dumb — and, most of all, they don't want to work hard and feel dumb. So they simply retire.”

Faculty praise effort rather than ability. When talking to students about their work, we encourage a “growth mindset” One way to encourage a growth mindset is to avoid saying to students, “This is a very good essay; you’re a good writer.” Instead, we might say, “This is a very good essay; you must have worked hard on it.” Praising effort rather than ability will encourage students to adopt the attitude that success results from effort, not their innate ability.

2. Students make sufficient effort.

Faculty create incentives to encourage student effort. One way to do this is to create a system in which points are given for meeting the requirements of the course. Points are given for attending class, for completing work by deadlines, for participation, and for the quality of papers written. In a world in which students feel pressure from every sector of their lives—from their jobs, their family responsibilities, and from many other sources—if we do not create rewards for the work we know they need to do, it is likely they will do the work that is rewarded in the rest of their lives.

Some faculty create challenges for the class. “If everyone turns in the next paper on time, I’ll bring in cookies for the class.” Some faculty create groups that compete for a reward. The group that has best attendance for the month gets the cookies.

As in the previous section, faculty praise the effort that went into successful work.

Faculty assist students to work well in groups. By asking students to work on tasks in groups of three to five, faculty provide an opportunity to students to play a role in encouraging each other to make sufficient effort. If a group is having the “slacker” problem—one or two members of the group are not doing their share of the work, faculty can intervene to discuss how the group might deal with the problem. In classes making use of a point system as discussed above, faculty can award each group a number of points and ask them to allocate those points among the group members according to their effort.

Faculty can create classroom activities designed to motivate students to make greater effort. Discussions of how much time it takes to complete assignments may help some students to become aware that the amount of time they have been devoting to assignments is not adequate. Videotapes of students who have been successful—perhaps recent graduates—discussing how much effort they made can help. Even discussions of the socio-economic forces that have worked against their success to date can help students realize how much effort they need to make to avoid being victims of those forces.

Faculty help students adopt delayed gratification as a strategy. Students may be better able to persist, if they are aware of the strategy of delayed gratification—giving up some short-term benefit in order to gain a much greater long-term benefit. It may be a good idea to discuss the study conducted by Walter Mischel at Columbia University in 1996. Four-year-old children were seated at a desk where there were a marshmallow and a bell. The researcher left the room after explaining to the child that they had two options: they could ring the bell, in which case the researcher would return to the

room, and the child could eat the marshmallow. Or, the child could wait until the researcher returned on her own, in which case the child would get to eat two marshmallows. Mischel followed the children for more than ten years and found that those who were able to defer gratification were significantly more successfully academically than those who rang the bell. Asking students to discuss times when they have faced similar choices seems to help them understand the advantages of being able to delay gratification.

3. Students avoid non-productive effort.

Faculty talk about metacognition, thinking about thinking. Some faculty ask students, working in groups, to try to solve a puzzle like the Nine Dots Puzzle, a Sudoku, or the Horses & Riders Puzzle. When some groups have solved the puzzle or sooner if it looks like none will solve it, ask groups to think about how they went about attempting a solution. Then point out that what they are doing is metacognition: thinking about thinking.

Faculty ask students to think about how they're thinking as they write a paper so they recognize nonproductive effort when it happens. Some faculty ask students to keep process logs, journals, or blogs or to write reflective essays after they've completed a draft so they examine the thinking behind their writing. One of my favorites is to ask students to write about how they arrived at their thesis for a paper

Faculty lead discussions explicitly talking about strategies used to write papers or research or read. Successful strategies are important to identify, but so are strategies that are not successful.

4. Students learn to learn from setbacks.

Faculty discuss with students the two orientations toward setbacks. Martin Seligman has argued that there are two orientations to misfortune: the pessimistic person feels that a failure is personal, permanent, and pervasive. "It's all my fault, it's always going to be like this, and it's going to undermine every aspect of my life." The optimistic student, who is able to learn from setbacks, feels that it is neither personal nor permanent nor pervasive. I would add that, of course, there is room for responses in the gray area—responses that recognize that I have some responsibility without taking on all the responsibility.

Faculty might have students take Seligman's Test of Optimism and discuss the results.

Faculty may want to use the five scenarios based on the analysis of Martin Seligman to facilitate group discussion of the pessimistic and optimistic responses to setbacks.

Guided reflection on performance. Spend some time asking students to describe how they went about writing a paper. Help students understand that effort results in success.

Faculty are alert for opportunities to assist students in learning from setbacks. <Need additional ideas for this section.>

Faculty assure students who perform unsuccessfully that while the standards are high, they can succeed. Rebecca Cox's *The College Fear Factor* is helpful here. It is important that students know that we are asking them to complete challenging tasks and that we believe they can be successful at these tasks.

5. Students have short- and long-term goals.

Faculty conduct goal-setting workshops, starting with long-range goals, but also including short-range goals.

Faculty ask students to write about what might prevent them from reaching goals.

Faculty ask students to write about how they might overcome some of these obstacles.

Faculty ask students to list goals for the next year, for the next year, and for the next five years. Then ask them to write a letter to themselves five years in the future. Some faculty actually mail these letters to students after a couple of years.

6. Students believe that what they are learning has value.

Belief in the value of the work. Students are more likely to persevere if they believe the work will be valuable to them at some point. Delayed gratification, for example, works only when you believe that delaying will, in fact, result in two marshmallows.

Faculty make sure students understand the socio-economic benefits of educational credentials. Faculty might present data showing the difference in incomes, unemployment rates, or chances of being laid off as a function of credentials earned. See for example, the following chart.

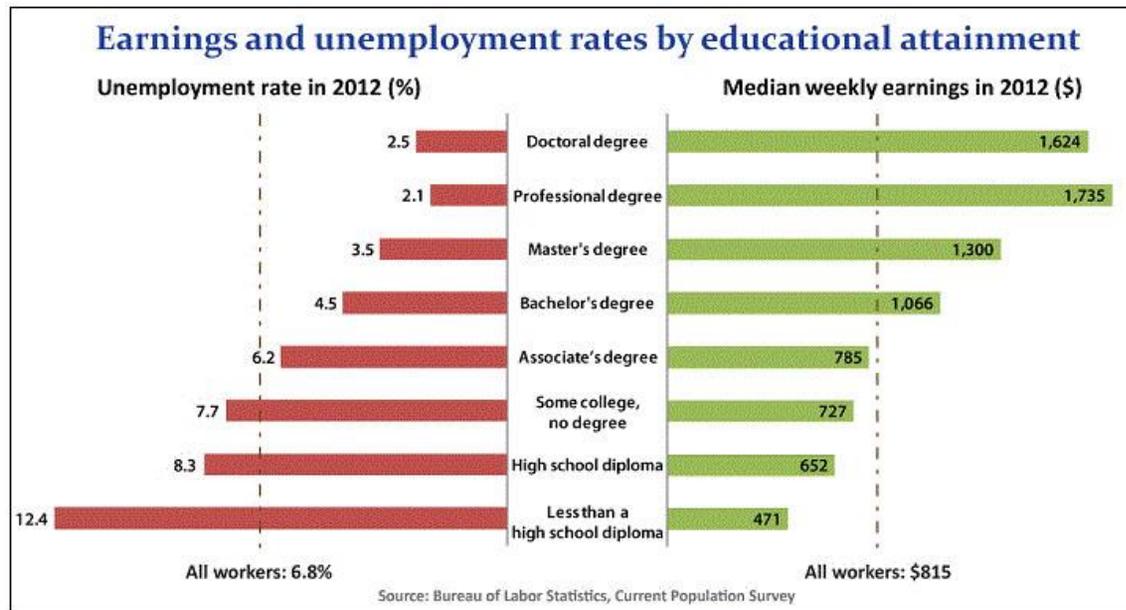


Table 1: Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, May 22, 2013.

Faculty discuss the shorter-term benefits of what students are learning. Faculty might discuss how important the skills being learned—in this case writing—to success in college courses and in most careers. Or, students might be asked to interview professors in their field about writing requirements in their courses.

Faculty discuss the less tangible benefits of a college education. Faculty might ask students working in groups to generate a list of the non-job-related benefits of a college education. Alternatively, they could ask students to write about these.

Students master college behavior

7. Students attend class regularly.

8. Students complete assignments on time.

Faculty make their standards clear. In the syllabus, in handouts and assignments, and in class discussions, it is important that faculty are clear about their standards—what is expected on each assignment.

Faculty encourage students to help each other. One way to do this is to make use of “home groups” in the class. These small groups meet together regularly in class, work on long-term projects together, and are encouraged to support each other.

Faculty provide incentives to encourage successful college behavior. As discussed above, faculty find ways—perhaps a point system—to incentivize successful college behavior.

Faculty discuss Rebecca Cox’s theory about why some students engage in behavior that seems to undermine their chances of succeeding. It’s also a good idea for faculty to be aware that much of the student behavior that puzzles us—students who leave placement tests after fifteen minutes, students who don’t show up for exams, students who turn in papers that appear to have been written with no more than fifteen minutes of effort—much of this behavior is defensive. By not trying, students make sure that their resulting failures do not reflect their abilities. “If I didn’t try, then no one can say that the test proves anything about me.”

By asking students to read an excerpt from *The College Fear Factor* and to write about it, faculty help students to understand that fear of failing can lead to behavior that almost guarantees failure.

It is important to recognize that many developmental student are deeply afraid that they are not smart enough for college. Many of them have had experience in the educational system that have caused them to have doubts about their intelligence, or more specifically, about their ability to write. For many students, the first few weeks of the semester are the crucial period for increasing or reducing their fears. Anything faculty can do, early in the semester to provide students with a positive, a confidence-building experience in those early weeks may well prevent a couple of those “early disappearances,” that we’ve all experienced.

Early alert. It is crucial that faculty act quickly when students start to “go off the tracks.” Once a student misses three of four classes in a row or falls two or three assignments behind, it is often impossible for them to catch up.

Scheduling App. Have students download a scheduling app like EasyScheduler (free). Show them how to enter the due dates for upcoming assignments, but also have them schedule the time when they will work on each assignment.

9. Students join the conversation.

Faculty make use of active learning. Frequently, forming groups of three to five students to work on intellectually challenging tasks like summarizing a reading, determining why something is the way it is, or revising a piece of writing makes it more likely that all students will become part of the conversation.

Faculty make use of on-line resources. Asking students to contribute to on-line discussions—chat rooms, discussion boards, and blogs—gives them practice at joining the conversation. Ideally students will come to see that even their formal papers are part of an ongoing intellectual discussion.

Faculty have students "publish" their writing in various ways. Blogs (public or class wide), through pdfs, or on websites.

Faculty ask students to comment on each other's writing, through discussion boards. Students can also be asked to quote and cite each other in papers to give them a sense of being in dialogue with each other.

10. Students seek help when appropriate.

Faculty take steps to reduce students' fear of them. Early in the semester, faculty are especially attentive to the need to establish a supportive, friendly atmosphere.

Faculty encourage students to feel comfortable talking to them. can help students get over their fear of talking with us by a deliberate effort to engage each student in a one-on-one conversation, preferably in the faculty member's office. It's important that this conversation be informal and as non-threatening as possible. Having experienced a conversation with the faculty member once, the hope is that students will feel comfortable doing so again. The faculty member might ask a reticent student to help carry some materials back to his office, or noticing that a student is headed to the library, the faculty member might walk along too and begin a conversation.

Faculty are given rosters of consultants willing to work with students on life issues. Usually developed by departments or programs, these rosters include names, emails, and phone numbers of experts on campus who are willing to work with students or even to visit classes. Simply telling a student to go see someone in a certain office is unlikely to have a positive result. When possible faculty can walk the student to the consultants office, but usually that is not possible. In these cases, if the faculty member calls the consultants and sets up an appointment, it is much more likely that the student will actual visit the consultant.

Faculty conduct classroom or out-of-class activities to encourage students to become familiar with college resources. Faculty can use scavenger hunts, quizzes, walking tours, and research projects that require students to explore the college's resources.

Faculty ask students to write about asking for help. Faculty can ask students to write about a time when they needed help and asked for help and another time when they needed help but didn't ask. Working in groups students can tease out the similarities and differences between when they were able to ask for help and when they were not. An additional assignment might ask them

11. Students learn the culture of the college community

Social Capital. Students who are the first generation in their families to attend college are often lacking in resources that are referred to as social capital.

They may also be missing financial capital, but social capital can be just as crucial to success. These students frequently do not have anyone to turn to for advice, support, and encouragement when they encounter obstacles in college. If no one in their family has attended college, who can explain the many concepts and procedures that are so important to navigating the college system. Who can explain what office hours are for or what the FAFSA is or the difference between a degree and a certificate? In addition, it may be that no one they know has the kinds of connections that can put them in contact with someone who can advise them.

For us as basic writing teachers, this means we need to be much more careful in our explanations. We need to be alert to possible confusion about misunderstandings of policy or expectations. We need to be prepared to put students in contact with people at the college who can give them advice.

Because many assignments ask students to do something using one of the terms from Bloom's Taxonomy, ask students to write a paragraph explaining what each of Bloom's terms means.

Guidebook to Campus Resources. Have the class develop a guide to campus resources. Students should do the research—visit offices, get office number, hours, phone numbers, and services available. They then decide on the format for the guidebook and assemble it. A great writing activity because they are writing for a real audience, but it also helps them become more familiar with the campus.

Students feel they belong in college.

The structure of ALP. The very structure of the ALP class will help tremendously with student attachment. Students in ALP are not excluded from credit courses; they are in first-year composition; they are in college and doing college-level work. They are not segregated away from stronger students; instead, they are in a class where half the students are college-level. What happens in an ALP developmental class feels like college, including the reading of college-level texts and the writing of college-level essays. When students successfully engage in these college-level tasks, they experience satisfaction many of them have never experienced before. The small class size and the frequent use of group activities encourages bonding among the students.

Active learning. Perhaps the quality that will keep students coming to class most reliably is engagement. Once students experience the pleasure of joining the conversation, the satisfaction that comes from solving an intellectual problem or understanding a new idea, they will be more likely to continue coming to class and engaging in the learning. Too many of our students have adopted the attitude, or perhaps the pose, of indifference. Sitting in the back of the room, these students stare out the window and seldom contribute to the conversation, even when called on.

How to overcome this resistance is not easy, but we must try. The strategies that show the most promise in this area are those known as active learning. It's a lot easier to remain "tuned out" during a lecture than it is when you are in a small group that is wrestling with a difficult passage in a text.

12. Students identify as a college students.

Organize the syllabus using backward curriculum design. If students, already unsure whether they really belong in college, find themselves in a classroom that feels like the sixth grade, their apprehension, their sense of stigmatization will only increase. This is one of the reasons we advocate for a curriculum in which students do college-level tasks, read college level texts, and write college-level essay . . . with lots of support and scaffolding.

Try to teach in a physical space that feels like a college classroom. Because ALP classes are small, we often schedule our meetings in smaller

rooms where we sit around a conference table, an arrangement we call a seminar room.

Avoid asking students to perform activities that feel like 6th grade. Even though developmental students may be lacking some skills that were taught in the 6th grade, to repeat drills and exercises that are typical of 6th grade will exacerbate students' feeling that they may not belong in college. This is why we strongly recommend against turning the class or even the first weeks of the class into a grammar review.

13. Students develop bonds with others at college.

Student bonding. A second strategy for encouraging engagement is to provide opportunities for students to get to know each other, perhaps even to form friendships. Early in the semester, we like to have students interview each other and then either write short biographies or introduce each other to the class as a whole. We encourage students to exchange phone numbers and/or email addresses. We frequently ask them to work together in small groups on a writing or reading task.

<We need more examples for this section.>

14. Students believe they are “college material.”

<We need more examples for this section>

15. Students experience the satisfaction of successful intellectual activities.

Faculty organize various celebrations of student writing. Sometimes portfolios of a semester's work can be assembled to demonstrate students' accomplishments. Other faculty hold TED events at which students present their own TED talks.

<We need more examples for this section>

Students successfully cope with life problems

16. Students avoid being derailed by life issues.

Creating a safe atmosphere. There is no sure formula for doing this, but ALP faculty should seek out ways to create an atmosphere in the classroom that encourages students to feel it's okay to admit they don't understand something, to ask for assistance, and even to bring up difficulties they are having outside of school.

The small class size will contribute a great deal to creating a safe atmosphere. Providing five or ten minutes at the end of a class for “checking in”—asking how everybody’s doing will also help.

Rapid Intervention. It doesn’t take much for some of our students to give up. For students who are struggling to keep up with the pace of the course, suddenly falling two weeks behind in their work may mean it is simply not possible to catch up.

Because of this, we need to be much more vigilant for students who are having trouble. We need to intervene quickly when we notice a problem with attendance, with doing the reading, with turning in assignments. The small size of ALP classes makes this kind of vigilance much easier.

Reading and writing assignments that also address life issues. It is sometimes difficult to decide whether class time is better spent discussing life issues or writing. One way to avoid this dilemma is to ask students to read texts and/or to write about some of the issues they are facing in their lives. For example, many of us ask our ALP students to write a mini-research paper on financial issues such as the new Pell Grant rules, the pros and cons of a student loan, or the pros and cons of credit cards. When we are discussing these papers, we are talking about both life issues and writing.

Providing time for class discussion of these issues. Faculty can provide classroom time to discuss the issues that may be threatening some students continuing in school . A ten-minute time for “checking in” at the end or beginning of class may provide an opportunity for a student to talk about an issue they are struggling with. Often other students will have very useful suggestions.

Finding the right balance. On any number of variables, it is sometimes difficult to find just the right balance. The desire to be compassionate and understanding illustrates this problem. Many of our students lead very stressful lives. Often, their failure to make it to class or to complete an assignment by the deadline is not the result of their not “caring” or not being willing to make the necessary effort; instead, it’s the result of sick children, the electricity being turned off, their car breaking down, or other life problems. Often, a little flexibility is in order. But for some students—especially those whose lives are so stressful that they are constantly trying to decide whether to buy groceries or pay the electric bill, those who are trying to decide whether to study for an exam or work an extra six hours—flexibility is not such a good idea. What is needed is some “tough love.” For some students, what is needed is a firm deadline and consequences for not meeting it. Finding the right balance, figuring out which student will benefit from a little compassion and which need a little firmness is not easy.

17. Students know of resources.

Social capital. See our discussion of social capital under Number 11 above.

Consultants. It’s very helpful for ALP faculty to have a list of “consultants” available to help students with these issues. Some of us even give this list out to students.

18. Students do seek help when they need it.

Making sure students seek help. The least effective way to accomplish this is simply to give the student an office location and tell them to go there for help. Too often, they don't go. Sometimes, either because the situation seems dire or because the student seems reticent or because the faculty member feels generous, the faculty member may even walk the student to the office in question and introduce the student to the person they need to talk with. Most of us, most of the time, simply don't have time to do this.

We have found an effective middle ground to be to make a phone call to the advisor or financial aid officer or department head and ask if they can talk with the student. This approach is most effective when we make the phone call on our cell right in front of the student. Now that the student knows that you have gone to some trouble for them, they are much more likely to actually show up for the appointment.