

Our first contributor is a faculty member from the Psychology Department, Dr. Raymond Collings. Dr. Collings has taught college courses for more than two decades, and over 18 years here at SUNY Cortland. He usually teaches course in research and statistical methods, cognitive psychology, and developmental psychology. He has expertise in human attention and how attention affects our ability to function in everyday life, including in educational settings.

We always start with the same question... ***A student comes to you during office hours, and tells you that they are not doing as well as they would like to in your class. What advice would you give that student?***

That's a large question. Generally, I would ask the student what they mean by "not doing as well as they would like". If I am talking to an A- student who is shooting for A's, I might have a very different conversation than I might have if I am talking to a student who is failing my class. High achieving students are pretty easy to work with, because it generally involves having them look over test, figuring out where what kinds of mistakes they are making, and maybe fine tuning what they are already doing. Students who are struggling might be facing many different problems. The first thing I might want to know is if this is a general pattern, low grades across their classes, or if this is just a pattern with my class or similar courses. Either way, the first step is to eliminate the obvious things:

- *Is the student going to class?*
- *Is the student reading the book and keeping up with assignments?*
- *Is the student taking notes in class?*
- *Is the student paying attention in class?*
- *Is the student doing ALL of these things?*
- *Is the student studying enough?*

These seem like obvious things, but they are usually the things that distinguish high achieving students from struggling students. The good news is that they are the simplest things to fix. Do the readings and assignments, show up for class, turn off the cell phone, take notes, and study more.

These fixes are simple but they are not always easy. Doing all these things means that students have to give up doing other, more fun things... and that's the hard part. Students who are good at this stuff ("A" students) often have to do this stuff one day at a time. When the alarm goes off, they decide to get up, because the only way to get a good grade is to be in class, and today that is more important than going back to sleep. When they get to class, they decide that taking notes is more important than reading that next text message. They put their phone away, take out the note pad, and start writing. When they get home, they decide that getting a good grade is more important than hanging out with their friends that night. They read their assignments. What makes them consistently good students is that they do this repeatedly. Yes, they miss out on some fun social activities, but they make good grades. If they make those decisions each day, it is because making good grades is important to them each day.

The next step is to look at the scary stuff.

- *When you do not understand something, what do you do?*
- *Do you reread it until you do understand it, or do you give up?*
- *Do you skip over the confusing stuff, and focus on the stuff you understand, so that you feel do not feel so bad?*
- *When the book doesn't make sense, no matter how many times you read it, do you "Wiki" or google it to see if someone has a different explanation that makes sense to you? This might help you to understand your reading more clearly.*

- *Do you write a list of questions that you just cannot figure out, and take them to the instructor during office hours?*
- *Do you throw up your hand in class to ask for clarification?*
- *Do you seek out assistance from the Learning Center?*
- *Is “doing better” important enough for you to do these things?*

I am not meaning to imply that students should expect someone to teach them everything. Sometimes, the most important learning comes from struggling with something until the student figures it out. But, before giving up, ask for help.

If the problems are universal across classes, we may need to discuss some sensitive areas.

- *Has the student had a history of learning problems?* It is common for students who have received help with learning problems to come to college, hoping to “do it on their own”. Sometimes they can, but sometimes they crash and burn. Consider this... “doing it on their own” includes figuring out how to find and use resources. Sometimes students with undiagnosed learning problems have been able to get by until they get to college. If the student is having severe problems, I encourage them to talk to the folks at Disability Services, so see if a referral for testing is necessary. SUNY Cortland invests heavily in student services, to help our students be successful... use them!
- *Is the student not reading because the student does not have the money to buy books?* Let’s be honest. If students do not have the books, they cannot do what this thing is really supposed to be about... becoming more educated, knowledgeable, and well read. If they are struggling to gain access to books, they should talk to their professors and financial officers. What is more embarrassing... saying that you cannot afford the book or failing out of college?
- *Is the student really committed to being successful in college?* Is it a matter of not being able to motivate yourself to do what is necessary? We have many non-traditional students who have tried college before, dropped out, and came back. They usually finish their education. Sometimes academic success is a matter of timing. Maybe, you are just not in the place to be successful. I understand that, because I did the same thing. I dropped of college at age 19, and came back in my thirties. I left a C and B student and came back an A+ student. I went on to earn a PhD, and become a college professor. I was not ready at 18, but I was at 36. Sure, I missed out on many opportunities, and doing it later was hard! However, I also brought experience to the table that other students did not have. I do not recommend dropping out, but I do encourage students to be honest with themselves.

Students often bring me unique problems, but these are the most frequent challenges. They boil down to this... is being successful important enough to do all the things I need to do to be successful? If your answer is yes... do them. That includes working hard enough in and out of class, and it includes asking for the help you need when you cannot do it on your own.