Encouraging Student Motivation Series

PART 1: Motivation in the Classroom

Motivation is perhaps the most critical non-academic factor to positively affect student performance on coursework (Ambrose et al., 2010; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). Increased motivation has been linked to increased academic achievement (Paulsen & Feldman, 1999), success in handling stressful situations (Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000), and better study skills (Robbins et al., 2004).

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Ryan & Deci (2000) explain that sources of student motivation tend to fall into two broad categories:

- Extrinsic motivation: grades, degree requirements, competition, family pressure, incentives
- Intrinsic motivation: genuine interest, personal learning goals, relevance to learner

The various social and cultural contexts that a student experiences, from their personal background to the new contexts they encounter in the university, have the potential to affect the types of motivation they experience. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are also potentially reinforcing; research has shown that students who start out with solely extrinsic motivation for a course can develop intrinsic motivation as they gain competence in the subject matter (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). For underrepresented students, a recent study by Hernandez et al. (2013) indicates that a desire to develop competence rather than demonstrate performance (which is strongly related to intrinsic motivation) predicted increased GPAs for African-American and Latinx students. At the same time, social psychologists have argued that an approach that places undue value on intrinsic motivation may be tied too strongly to individualistic societies (Cohen et al., 2005).

How is motivation tied to relevancy?

Linking coursework to student interests can increase intrinsic motivation and help improve student performance (Ambrose et al., 2010). Emphasizing the relationship between coursework and students' daily lives, real-world tasks, or academic/professional lives can be especially motivating for students. Below are a few suggestions to help you get started:

Strategies	Activity Examples
Consider connecting material to students' existing interests. For example, you could link the topic to pop culture or current events.	American History example: *Discuss changing political campaign techniques between the past and present. Pull video excerpts from recent campaign speeches and have students identify the central issue being discussed and what type of persuasive technique is being used.*
Try to make course material real-world relevant. For example, you could create practical assignments that might be useful in daily life.	Engineering Example: *Ask the class how many bikes a UNITRANS bus can hold at full capacity and follow up with the question, "How would you most efficiently expand that number?"*
Illustrate how the material can transfer across subjects. For example, you could make explicit connections with other classes or areas of interest.	Psychology example: *Discuss memory structures in class and have students practice techniques to help improve memory. Ask students how these techniques could help them in their other classes, and prompt them to try the techniques in at least one other class and record their results.*

How can I demonstrate my enthusiasm for the topic?

Sharing your enthusiasm for a subject can inspire student interest and motivation to learn. Adopting a personable and engaging classroom manner can help pique student interest in coursework and help

students to meet learning objectives (Allen, Witt, & Wheeless, 2006). Students who have several positive interactions with faculty are more likely to have high levels of satisfaction with their college experience (Astin, 1984). Here are a few suggestions for communicating your enthusiasm positively to a class:

Strategies	Discussion Examples
Make yourself more approachable by sharing positive, relevant, and appropriate examples from your life with the class.	These examples should help to connect course concepts with the "real world" be demonstrating your own experiences with these concepts.
Consider starting a conversation with your students about what first attracted you to your field; then, encourage them to discuss what attracted them to the field.	Art example: *As a child, my favorite type of books to read were comic books. My favorite issue was by an artist who combined watercolor with photographs to create collages for each panel. I wanted to know how they'd done it, so I picked up a camera to start figuring it out. What drew you to photography?*
Make classwork active and engaging by switching up activities and lecture. This can help prevent your class from becoming monotonous.	Medical example: *Pass out cups of water - don't let students drink them! In some of the cups, place a few drops of one non-toxic chemical reagent. Ask students to form small groups and have one student pour a bit of their water into the others' cups. Switch up the groups and repeat three times. Walk around and place one drop of the trigger reagent in each cup. The cups that have been "infected" will turn red. Ask students to trace the path of infection and use this as a spring-board to discuss transmission vectors.*

Additional Resources

- On integrating effective classroom practices, visit the CEE teaching support website
- For academic technology support, visit either Academic Technology Services or EdTech Commons, a site designed to help support teaching with technology.
- For the TA handbook and instructional materials, visit the CEE's TA orientation webpage.

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