Faculty Matter Tip #8: What to do when students do poorly on your midterm

At this point in the semester, your students have probably taken midterms designed to gage their mastery of course contents thus far. For some of you, the results may be somewhat surprising, and even disconcerting. In our last Faculty Matter Tip, we pointed out a number of resources on campus that your students (and you) might turn to, for additional academic support. In this week’s missive, we take a slightly different tack:

What if the problem is that, despite your best intentions, YOU mis-estimated the difficulty of the exam, and a very large proportion of your students did poorly? How can you keep students from becoming discouraged, from giving up, and from dis-engaging? How can you help them get back on track?

Research linking students’ motivation, the effort they are willing to put into studying, and their success points to the importance of their sense of efficacy – that is their sense of control over their academic fate.

- When students feel that they know what it would take to do well, they are far more willing to try hard than when they feel it is all a mystery and a matter of luck.
- When they can’t figure out a “formula for success’, they are much more likely to get discouraged and disengage. Then they – and you – can get caught in a vicious circle.

Assuming your students did not do as well as they (or you) had hoped or expected, what can YOU do to help them (re)gain a sense of control in your class?

Begin by trying to figure out what went wrong:

1) Might you have missed cues prior to the test that students were not “getting it”, that their command of the material was too weak
and ephemeral, and that they needed more time *learning* the material before they could effectively prepare to be tested about it?

2) Was your guidance about what and how to study clear and accurate?

3) Did you underestimate how much time it would take a reasonably well-prepared student to complete the test?

**Pros and cons of different solutions:**

If you think the answer to (1) above might be “yes”, **consider revising your course timeline a bit, and spending some time re-teaching the materials they seem to have not “gotten.”** If students’ ability to succeed with *up-coming material* depends on their mastery of material from *earlier in the course*, it is important to allow time to help students understand and learn what they clearly hadn’t fully grasped by the time of the test they took. **It may be worth "sacrificing a day"** to make sure students have a firmer grasp of the material and to make sure you are not going to expect them to build upon a shaky foundation.

If you think the answer to (2) or (3) above might be “no”, **consider spending some class time clarifying expectations and then offering some version of a “re-do” of the midterm.** This will give students the chance to show you - as well as themselves - what they are capable of learning and producing when they are truly prepared.

**Many common “solutions”** (such as simply *adjusting the test grading scale*, or providing opportunities for *extra credit unrelated to the material students were tested on*, or permitting students to *throw out their lowest test grade*) **may provide some relief** (in the form of more points and better grades), but they **do not provide opportunities for students** to revisit and ultimately master the material in question, and so they do not result in students developing a *sense of efficacy* in the class.