

Faculty Matter Teaching Tip #39: Goals, grades, and the challenge of engaging students

Perhaps nothing frustrates college instructors more than when students forsake learning in the pursuit of grades and in the process fail to appreciate the power of learning for the sake of self-expression, personal growth, and meaningful discovery (Covington, von Hoene and Voge, 2017, p1).ⁱ

By this point in the term, you have probably graded and returned at least one piece of work from your students. You may have been surprised (pleasantly or not) by the caliber of the work, by the amount of effort students appear to have put in to it, and by the degree to which they were willing to take advantage of the support you offered them as they prepared to submit it to you.ⁱⁱ Much of the variation in how diligently and thoroughly students approach their classes is function of the **type of goals** they have.ⁱⁱⁱ

- Students driven by **learning goals** welcome the opportunity to push themselves to explore new ideas. They tend to think of grades as constructive feedback, providing guidance about where they should direct additional effort. They are comfortable seeking additional help when necessary. They are disposed to engage enthusiastically in their courses.
- Students driven by **performance goals** tend to be concerned with appearances, and try to do what is necessary to appear intelligent, to not disappoint those whose approval they strive to obtain. They are loathe to do anything that might reveal their (perceived) lack of understanding of course material. They are likely to be very focused on their grades.
- Students driven by **work-avoidant goals** show little interest in learning, and they appear relatively unconcerned about others' impressions of them. They often look disengaged. And they are often eager to get by with as little effort as possible.

In many respects, **learning goals are the most desirable, and teaching students with learning goals can be more rewarding.**

- It can be **easiest to resonate positively to students with learning goals.** They embrace opportunities to think and talk about what they are learning; they enjoy being challenged to delve deeper into their course materials; and they take to heart constructive feedback that is designed to help them achieve their goals.
- It can be **more challenging to “connect” with students with performance goals.** They often very intentionally keep their distance and decline offers of assistance, lest their lack of confidence and their insufficient mastery of the material becomes apparent.^{iv}
- It can also be **more challenging to “connect” with students with work-avoidant goals.** They are more likely to miss class and they are less frequently prepared to fully engage in class activities when they are present. And it can be embarrassing all around once students' lack of interest in spending time on the material is revealed.
- Students with **learning goals** tend not to have significantly higher GPAs than other students, but they are **considerably more resilient in the face of challenges** (such as receiving a poor grade, or recognizing that they are not doing well in a course). They also tend to enjoy their classes more.

Fortunately, **goal profiles are malleable**, at least to some degree.

- Students with **performance goals can develop learning goals** when (1) they are given low-stakes (ungraded) opportunities to explore the material, (2) where the instructor is able to create a classroom culture where mistakes are treated as a natural part of the learning process, and (3) where students are given opportunities to reflect on what they have learned and what they did to learn it.
- Students with **work-avoidant goals can develop learning goals** when (1) their interest in the subject matter is piqued, and (2) when they are provided the opportunity to optimize their time-management and study strategies, and to rethink the alignment between their time usage and their priorities. (You can arrange for a peer mentor to provide this kind of guidance – contact Peer Connections at <http://peerconnections.sjsu.edu/workshops/index.html>.)
- And while it is likely too late to modify grading weights, policies or criteria for this semester, consider the following as you plan your courses for future terms:
 - **If possible, provide students with opportunities to revise and resubmit** at least some of their assignments, thus rewarding effort, perseverance and improvement.
 - And consider using **absolute scales rather than curves**, such that students' **grades reflect what they have learned**, and not how they performed relative to their classmates.

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You can read all previous tips on the [Faculty Matter Tips](#) page of the CFD website, and share your own thoughts and ideas on the [Provost's Academic Spotlight blog under the category "Faculty Matter"](#). **Please add your own strategies using the comment link** on the [Provost's Academic Spotlight blog under the category "Faculty Matter"](#).

Additionally, we have started a weekly Student Success Tip for students. They are will be archived here: <http://www.sjsu.edu/sfs/tips/> and shared on the Office of Student and Faculty Success FaceBook site, Twitter, and Instagram (@SJSUSuccess). Please follow/share/like them and spread the word to your students.

ⁱ Marty Covington, first author of the book, *Life Beyond Grades*, from which this quote is drawn, passed away very recently - this Teaching Tip is in his honor. He was a friend and a mentor, and a scholar whose contributions to the literature on student academic motivation have made a significant impact on generations of researchers in the fields of psychology and education.

ⁱⁱ In a series of studies of the habits and dispositions of our own students, my colleagues and I (Nadia Sorkhabi and Tamara Swanson) have uncovered a number of disconcerting patterns among students in how diligently they are willing to work in different contexts, in how likely they are to approach their professors for assistance, and why they do not avail themselves of such support when they don't.

ⁱⁱⁱ From Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett and Norman, *How Learning Works*, p 71.

^{iv} A subset of students motivated by performance goals – those termed 'performance-approach' - may present a bit differently: they may be more than willing to seek out their instructors, to ferret out how best to earn the most points – but their interest in the material itself is often rather shallow.