

## Keep Them Coming Back! Strategies to Improve Student Retention

by [Sandra Tannen](#)

I teach developmental math to students who are required to take the class. These students work hard to learn difficult concepts, do not earn college credit, and usually have no interest in math. When I ask my students why they take my class the answer is never “because I have a deep love and curiosity about math and yearn to learn more.” An educator might easily experience “burn out” in such a situation. I view it as a challenge.

Basic Skills courses typically have a higher retention rate than college-level courses due to the Hawthorne Effect. The *Hawthorne Effect* refers to improved performance of any group whose members know they are being studied. This effect is usually attributed to the extra attention being paid. Basic skills classes tend to have more support services and monitoring of students. Zig Ziglar, one of America’s most prominent motivational speakers and success coaches, always said that he believed that people weren’t really lazy but simply unmotivated. I believe that if we can help students motivate themselves, we will see a rise in performance and retention.

While institutional support services (advising, mentoring, orientations, labs, tutoring, etc.) are vital, I think teachers play the most important role in determining student persistence. Teachers have the most frequent contact with students on a day-to-day basis, thereby exerting the most influence. Being on the front lines of education, we are the ones who can really make a difference. In 1993, 944 two and four year public and private colleges participated in a survey about retention. “Caring attitude of faculty and staff” was listed as the most important factor. Here’s the challenge. How do we exhibit a caring attitude without compromising our standards or expectations?

My philosophy is to first and foremost foster student accountability. I try to compel my students to motivate themselves. On the first day of class I make it very clear that their grades, success, or failures are their decision. They are based on how hard they are willing to work. They need to attend class, complete homework assignments, study, ask questions, and get extra help when they need it. I impress upon my students that learning is not something that will automatically occur because they registered for my class. Learning will only occur if they take control of what they learn and how they learn it.

Typically on the first day of class the last 3 rows are filled and the first 3 rows are empty. The students are promptly requested to move up and fill in all seats in the

front. They initially look at me and say “you want us to do what?” They quickly come to the realization that this is not an option. Anonymity does not exist in my classroom and will not be permitted. The students become involved immediately with group work, collaborative activities, board work, and presentations (yes...even in math class). Everyone is instructed to get two buddies the first day and exchange contact information with them. One is a main buddy and the other, a back-up. They are never allowed to come to class unprepared. People have asked me how I teach the same thing day after day for 18 years. When my students are engaged and involved, it is so much more enjoyable for me as well. People tend to work better in an environment where they work as part of a group rather than in isolation. After a while, they really begin to look out for one another, and they feel comfortable asking each other for help.

On the first day I also conduct a private meeting with each of my students in which they tell me why they took my class, what they hope to get out of it, and what their goal (projected grade) is for the semester. I put this on an index card in a card file. We meet again 3 to 4 weeks later or when I have enough grades to see a pattern. We discuss whether they are meeting their goal and if they want to change it (sometimes their predictions are lower than their actual achievements). Then we discuss strategies they might use to ensure that they achieve their goal. I repeat this process several times in a semester.

This goal setting method works well because it forces the students to take charge of their grade and their effort. It is harder to fail when one is held accountable and must report one’s own progress. Students who are allowed to hide quietly in the back of the classroom and never participate often cloak themselves in invisibility. Eventually, some of those students will simply disappear. Anonymity is a luxury that cannot be afforded, and it shouldn’t be allowed to exist in any classroom.

When my students are absent for more than 2 classes, I call them to find out why. Many students view their personal problems as insurmountable and cannot see a way out. In some situations, a little flexibility on my part has saved a student. At the beginning of the semester, I announce that if they ever feel they want to drop my course, I would like them to come and talk to me first. I feel it is very important that my students are comfortable about approaching me. My office is always open, and I encourage students to visit for extra help or advice.

In conclusion, some studies have indicated that certain students have issues with jobs, family, health or mental illness, that cause them to be high risk and have a greater propensity toward attrition. While the institution has little control over the persistence of these students, I believe that we, as their professors, should treat every student as if we **do** have control. Years after graduation, many students say that their favorite teachers were the ones who actually inspired and demanded something of them. In a large institution where there are hundreds of faculty members, just imagine what an incredible impact it would have if every

one of us saved even one student per semester. The results would be staggering!

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