Design Motivating Courses
by First Identifying Why Students are (and are not) Motivated

When we think about how to motivate students, we might assume our students will be motivated by the same goals and values that motivated us, but we will often be mistaken. When we try to motivate students with the wrong incentives, students disengage from classes and assigned learning activities, avoid doing more than the minimal work needed to get by, fail to use mentoring and tutoring opportunities we create, do not employ effective study strategies we suggest, or behave defensively, feigning understanding and avoiding tasks they believe might challenge their ability to perform. In the long run, all of these behaviors undermine students' ability to learn.

Ambrose et al. (2010) discuss three factors that influence student motivation in a course. No one factor is definitive; the three work interactively to determine student motivation. If we want to structure our course to motivate students, we must attend to all three factors:

- The *value* a student places on the learning goals.
- Whether the student *expects* he/she can achieve the learning goals.
- Whether the student *perceives support* in the class, does the student believe course activities and supportive resources will help him/her achieve the learning goals?

Ambrose et al. (2010) describe strategies instructors can use to leverage each factor and improve student motivation.

Establish the value of your learning goals

- Connect course content and skills to student interests.
- Create problems and tasks that address real-world problems.
- Connect content and skills in your course with other courses in the curriculum and describe the connections repeatedly in your course.
- Explain how skills students acquire in your course (e.g., writing clearly) will contribute to their professional lives.

Help students develop expectations that they can achieve the learning goals

- Determine the appropriate level of challenge for students in your course and design assignments at this level. Assignments that are too easy sap motivation as much as do assignments that set unrealistic demands.
- Create assignments and assessments that align with learning goals. Describe the relation between learning goals and assessments in a rubric in which you describe the learning outcomes for an assignment and articulate your expectations for performance.

Create a supportive structure and communicate the role of this structure to students

- Create early, short, low-stakes assignments to give students an opportunity to practice skills and develop confidence in their ability before they tackle a larger, high-stakes assignment.
- Provide constructive feedback and opportunities to use it. Feedback should identify strengths, weaknesses, and specific suggestions for actions students can take to improve the quality of their work.
- Describe effective strategies for learning course material and explain why these strategies work.
- Stereotypes about "talent" depict academic success as a manifestation of an unchangeable characteristic and undermine motivation when students encounter an early set-back. Students cannot alter their "talent" but they can alter their work habits. Emphasize the value of variables students can control: hard work, good time management, and practice guided by constructive feedback for success. Give explicit examples of these strategies in action.

Resources:

Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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