Supporting Student Success and Persistence

The process of learning involves a series of increasingly complex interactions with unfamiliar concepts and processes. The challenges of learning in higher-ed evoke stress, which can be motivating or debilitating depending on the nature of that stress and the environment in which it is experienced (Zhang et al., 2024).

Imagine how much more stressful the experience might be for first-year students with no higher-education experience. Then consider the greater potential stress for students with no relatives who can provide some insight into what to expect (23% of 2025 SLU freshmen were first-generation college students). Acknowledging this reality and taking steps to support students' persistence can go a long way toward successful student learning. Consider these basic foundations of student persistence and success:

- **Establish a shared understanding of "success."** Students and instructors define success differently. Faculty tend to focus on academic success, reflected by successful completion of assessments, while students' definition of success tends to be more emotion-based, with emphasis on enjoyment and a sense of control over their own evolution (Lowe, 2024). Taking time to clarify how student work can prepare them for future endeavors (classes, jobs, etc.) may help students better connect academic success to their feelings of personal growth.

- **Attend to students' feelings of academic belonging.** Student belonging has many facets, but the most relevant for teaching and learning may be the feeling of "academic belonging" that comes from feeling a sense of being in the "right" course or major. Academic belonging can be threatened if students feel unable to meet the demands of a course, causing self-doubt about their place in that course (Kahu et al., 2022). Emphasizing the opportunities for growth through experiencing challenges and providing feedback that emphasizes the student's capability can help support academic belonging.

- **Support student self-efficacy through supportive feedback.** Students' beliefs in their capabilities to complete a task are known as "self-efficacy beliefs" and predict several outcomes, in addition to feelings of academic belonging. In one example, first-year students higher in self-efficacy were more likely to persist in courses and achieved higher GPAs, with self-efficacy having a larger effect than stress (Zajacova et al., 2005). One way to support student self-efficacy without sacrificing rigor is to be intentional about the nature of feedback. Feedback may cause students to question their capability, and it may be received differently by students with different expectations, experience, and personal characteristics. Pairing critical feedback derived from clearly defined high standards with

messaging about instructor confidence in the students' potential to reach those standards increases motivation, trust, and self-efficacy (Yeager et al., 2014).

- **Normalize making mistakes, frustration, and the process of learning.** For first-year students especially, the feeling of attending classes may be best described as "awkward." Academic awkwardness stems from the newness of the experience and the tendency for students to often be surprised by the challenges ahead of them. These awkward feelings may also be paired with assumptions that other students know their way around better, creating feelings of social and academic isolation (Williams & Roberts, 2023). How you talk about the process of learning in your class can be just as impactful as teaching about your content. See this resource guide on non-content communication for more details about communicating to reduce the awkwardness of the academic experience.

- **Recognize when you might not be the person who can help a student with academic or personal challenges.** Students may experience distress that has nothing to do with your class or outside stressors may be the catalyst for observable struggles in your class. In instances where it is clear a student may need support that is beyond the learning occurring in your class, be prepared to use the many university tools available to provide that support. Acknowledge that you may not be the best person to address their current need, but still try to support the student by pointing them to support resources they may not be familiar with. There is a collection of teaching resources, including details about acting on student concerns, available at this Teaching at SLU resource page.

  The process of effective learning is stressful by design. Learning doesn't happen without repeated and varied practice applying unfamiliar information in new ways (Brown et al., 2015). Student persistence is highest when students feel capable and "at home" in their courses. Identifying the awkwardness of the student experience, supporting academic belonging, and providing feedback that supports student self-efficacy will increase persistence as students better recognize the value in overcoming challenges as they pursue their own version of student success.

Resources

Brown, P. C., Roediger, H. L., & McDaniel, M. A. (2015). Make it stick: The science of successful learning. Harvard University Press.

Kahu, E. R., Ashley, N., & Picton, C. (2022). Exploring the complexity of first-year student belonging in higher education: Familiarity, interpersonal, and academic belonging. *Student success*, *13*(2), 10-20.

Lowe, T. (2024). What is the meaning of student success in higher education?. *The Buckingham Journal of Education*, *4*(2), 91-102.

Williams, H., & Roberts, N. (2023). 'I just think it's really awkward': transitioning to higher education and the implications for student retention. *Higher Education*, *85*(5), 1125-1141.

Yeager, D. S., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., Brzustoski, P., Master, A., ... & Cohen, G. L. (2014). Breaking the cycle of mistrust: Wise interventions to provide critical feedback across the racial divide. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *143*(2), 804 - 824. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033906

Zajacova, A., Lynch, S. M., & Espenshade, T. J. (2005). Self-efficacy, stress, and academic success in college. *Research in higher education*, *46*(6), 677-706.

Zhang, S., Rehman, S., Zhao, Y., Rehman, E., & Yaqoob, B. (2024). Exploring the interplay of academic stress, motivation, emotional intelligence, and mindfulness in higher education: a longitudinal cross-lagged panel model approach. *BMC psychology*, *12*(1), 732. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-02284-6

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by email.