

When Capable Students Fail: The Academic Sustainability Gap

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The following is from the website:

<http://www.cfkeep.org/html/stitch.php?s=2814408673732&id=73469089878229> It is easiest to find this site by googling the following: Hern "academic sustainability gap"

Sustainability Gap (Noun): The gap between students' *ability* to perform and the performance they actually sustain over the semester. Chronic condition in community colleges whereby students earn passing grades on individual assignments then withdraw or fail class. See also: Teacher confusion and demoralization.

Low Motivation and/or High Competing Demands

At the most basic level, capable students end up not passing because they don't put enough time and energy into their schoolwork. Why? Sometimes they are simply bored. Sometimes they don't want to be in college at all. Maybe they're only in the room because of parental demands, or the need for financial aid, or the requirement that they demonstrate full-time enrollment to remain on their parents' health insurance. Sometimes they *do* want to be there, but they are pulled away from schoolwork by jobs and/or family demands. Or they overpack their schedule with work and classes and under-estimate the amount of time they'll have to put in.

"Too Much Freedom":

Problems Tracking & Managing Coursework

In my office one day in Fall 05, a student said something I've remembered many times since. He was fresh out of high school, in his first semester at Chabot, and on the verge of not passing. "What's going on?" I asked. "College," he said. "There's too much freedom." It wasn't like high school, where his days had been tightly scheduled and teachers might call his parents if he wasn't doing well. It was all up to him.

Students coming from a high school environment sometimes say it seems that "college teachers don't really care" if they do the work, or that there are "no consequences" when they don't. Their self-reflections often mention procrastination. They speak of falling behind and believing they'll catch up, but the work snowballs and they can't recover. Many students fall into the gap because they haven't learned to handle the "freedom" -- or self-direction -- of the college environment.

They also fall into the gap because they don't have an accurate sense of where they stand. In some cases, they think their other grades have been strong enough that they can afford to skip a paper/test worth 20 percent of their grade (and they don't do the math to test this idea). In other cases-- often coinciding with academic insecurity and difficulties managing the workload -- students think they are worse off than they actually are and drop the course out of a false sense of fatalism.

The sustainability gap tends to shrink as students move to higher levels of the English curriculum, probably because they have to pass one or more prerequisites to get there. But when higher-level students do fall into the gap, it's often related to their strategy of robbing Peter to pay Paul. During the week a paper is due in English, they skip the assignments for other courses; during exam weeks in those courses, they arrive unprepared for English. Though successful students often use this strategy to juggle competing demands, it gets hard when deadlines and exams pile up at term's end. Peter and Paul are both broke, and overwhelmed students end up dropping one or more courses so that they can focus on the others.

Academic Insecurity & Not Asking for Help

Many students arrive at the "open doors" of a community college with an uneven or weak academic track record. Besides leaving them under-prepared, this can create deep feelings of insecurity. Students' self-reflections often refer to uncertainty about what will be expected of them in college, and doubt about their own ability to perform.

These insecurities become especially troublesome when students are having difficulty with some element of the class. They fear that they are stupid, and they don't want to look stupid in front of their teacher or fellow students.

Many of these students struggle, don't ask for help, and then withdraw or fail. Others try to bluff their way through, cheating if they have to. Either way, insecurity leads struggling students not to ask for help that -- because of the skills they already had -- might have meant the difference between success and failure.

Self-Sabotage Under Pressure

Every semester, I have students who are on track to pass the class -- getting solid grades, doing all the work, participating in class, not giving me anything to worry about. And then, usually at the end of the term, they do something to blow their chances completely. They stop attending, don't turn in the last paper, skip the final, or commit blatant plagiarism on the last paper, knowing full well that I will catch it. These moments often leave me bewildered, thinking, "Where did *that* come from?"

I'm an English teacher, not a psychologist. Still, I have a hunch. I suspect that, for at least some of these students, self-sabotage has to do with their sense of identity. Being *successful* in college is somehow more threatening to their identity than failing. And so, on the verge of success, they make sure that they fail. In Fall 2005, one student was on the verge of falling into the sustainability gap by not turning in his last paper. It was a credit/no credit class, and he had been earning grades of A and B all semester, so when he missed the deadline for the last paper, I pushed him to get *something* in to me, even if it was his worst paper all term. His grades had been high enough that even though he failed the last paper, his overall grade was still in the credit range. And I had no doubt that he could handle the rigors of English 1A.

So, he escaped the sustainability gap in English 102, enrolled in my English 1A the following term, and then almost immediately began sliding into the gap again. He remained in class all semester and continued to earn A's on tests of the assigned reading, but he did not turn in two of the three assigned essays. I gave him extensions, even an incomplete, and he never turned in those papers.

Turns out, he had done this kind of thing over and over again in his classes. During several long conversations in my office after that semester, he said he couldn't really explain why he did it, but he thought it was like a Richard Rodriguez essay he'd read in one of his many English classes at Chabot. Rodriguez writes about his feelings of ambivalence about pursuing an education, and how becoming educated brought an inevitable loss, as he moved further and further away from the culture and the people he came from. My student said he related to that. He loved the reading and thinking he was doing in college, but, he explained, "nobody talks like this back home."