A lot of attention has been given to retention efforts at the University in recent months. Most of that attention has been directed to academic and faculty advisors, with requests to reach out to students with a little guidance and support. It makes perfect sense. Advisors are on the front line of the University’s retention initiatives because they are on the front line in terms of student interactions. They are not alone, however. We are all on that front line.

Experts offer several ways to categorize actions performed by college teachers that positively impact student success and persistence towards graduation. Vincent Tinto, a well-known authority on issues of student success, recently authored a white paper for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation entitled, “Taking Student Success Seriously in the College Classroom.” In it, Tinto focused on student success in the classroom, and specifically, four attributes of effective classrooms: Expectations, support, assessment and feedback, and involvement (a.k.a. engagement). This article will use these categories but will move beyond Tinto’s words to those of the Ole Miss community, in recognition of excellence in teaching.

Support. Understanding develops incrementally. A student must first learn nomenclature and terminology before s/he can learn to understand and then express ideas using those terms. Effective teachers support student learning by introducing new content in incremental layers.

“One former student said that sitting in his (John Neff) class is like ‘watching a play narrated by a brilliant historian.’” – Ole Miss News, April 3, 2009.

Learning is more than simply a cognitive process, however. Learning requires effort and effort requires motivation. Thus, learning is driven by emotions. Inspiring teachers use emotions effectively to motivate and encourage students.

Expectations. Effective teachers set clear, consistent expectations whose level is realistic but on the challenging end of the continuum. Working to accomplish challenging goals creates a sense of intrinsic reward in us all.

“Professor (David) Willson was always prepared, kind/personal, but very demanding. His caring made me want to do all I could to please him.” – Mantle 1(1), 2007.

“She (Ethel Young-Minor) holds you accountable for the student she knows you are.” – Daily Mississippian, April 4, 2011.

Another aspect of expectations is addressed in the question, “why do I have to learn this?” While we might love our subject and be motivated to learn about it just for the pure joy of deeper understanding, surprisingly some students need another reason to
The Ubiquitous Gap
Nancy Rhea Wiggers, Learning Specialist

The gap between performance and expectation is a conversational topic for students and faculty alike. Faculty commiserate over minimal performance demonstrated by students; students commiserate over unrealistic expectations held by faculty. Whatever your perspective, closing the gap defines academic achievement. The question to solve is – how to close, or at least narrow, that ubiquitous gap.

Often students arrive at the university unprepared for the requisite independence necessary for academic success. They leave an extremely managed environment, fixed schedule, daily classes, and numerous small, often formative, assignments. The study strategies most applied involves reading over and memorizing information prior to unit tests. The university embodies a different culture in which much of this management rests on their shoulders. Unfortunately, it takes a while for students to recognize this cultural change.

The University of Mississippi, like many universities, offers resources to facilitate students’ transition to the university environment: summer programs for incoming freshmen, orientations for new students, academic skills workshops, etc. As informative as these resources are, they are usually presented out of context and students often cannot apply these resources in a specific context.

University faculty, as expert learners, are invaluable resources for students not only for content, but for the necessary strategies to learn and use content meaningfully in a university setting. Faculty can demonstrate and highlight practices associated with higher education in the field. Sample instructional practices include

- modeling academic strategies in class
- explicitly demonstrating relationships and applications across courses and disciplines
- illustrating how content builds upon prior knowledge and contributes to future learning
- explicitly and repeatedly relating content, assessment, and feedback to course objectives
- constructing objectives which explicitly address learning expectations beyond content

Transferring skills and knowledge outside of the classroom is not immediate and oftentimes requires guidance along with the opportunity. Students need to see, not imagine, learning strategies at work in a meaningful context. Faculty are in a unique position to demonstrate this and constructively narrow the gap between their expectations and student performance.

The Center can assist faculty with these endeavors, either by providing academic workshops to individual classes whereby academic strategies are presented contextually with class content or by meeting with faculty to help relate specific strategies to course content. Please contact our office for additional information and/or assistance.

References:

Summer Happenings at the Center

JumpStart Program. During the second summer term, the Center will be working to help ease the transition for over 100 incoming freshmen in the JumpStart Program. Recognizing that college requires a higher degree of self-direction and self-monitoring, the Center will work to teach these skills using content from the two courses students will be taking in July. We welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the Division of Outreach and Continuing Education in this endeavor!

Developmental Studies Program. The Center will get new neighbors when Patricia Treloar and the Developmental Studies faculty and staff move to the third floor of Hill Hall. Welcome Patricia, Beth, Kim, Mari, and Nancy!
Listed below are the Academic Success Training (AST) workshops that are available to students. While they are typically run at the Center, we can work with you to incorporate them into your curriculum and/or make presentations in your classroom. For additional information, please contact Dr. Nancy Wiggers (915-1079; nwiggers@olemiss.edu).

**Time Management.** Managing time is a life skill that is crucial in academe. Unlike high school and work settings, time in university settings is less structured by outside requirements. A university student must construct a time plan to be successful. This workshop addresses means and tools for creating good time plans for academic success.

**Goal Setting.** Students who decide to not know where they are going until they get there may find unpleasant places. Successful students decide where they want to go and then create an action plan to get there. This workshop addresses strategies toward creating and achieving goals.

**Making and Using Notes.** Making class notes from which you can effectively learn is an essential skill. It involves actively listening, organizing, and thinking in order to create useful notes. This workshop involves considerations and strategies to support the types of activities and habits involved for making and using good notes for academic success.

**Strategic Reading for Recollection and Comprehension.** Reading is one of the primary means of gathering information at the university. Reading well, then, is fundamental to your success. This workshop addresses strategies you can use to improve your reading skills and associated study skills.

**Critical Thinking.** Many students are surprised to discover that the acts of memorizing and summarizing information is insufficient for university success. This workshop introduces concepts and strategies related to higher order thinking.

**Concept Mapping.** Concept mapping is a useful technique to graphically organize information. It provides students opportunities to discover the relationships among pieces of information and to create a visual representation that continually reinforces the need to see content relationships. This workshop provides strategies for creating and using concept maps.

**Preparing For The Test.** Tests are a part of academic life. This workshop focuses on test preparation in terms of time management, various kinds of tests and test items, and techniques for studying to support not only information recall, but also critical analysis.

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**The Front Line** continued from Page 1

learn. For those learners, applying the lesson to real-world scenarios could help motivate them to learn the material and could also provide them a means of categorizing their learning for future retrieval.

_I hope to get students engaged in seeking to understand the world around them, to be in a position to be savvy, curious and discerning_ — John Neff, Ole Miss News, April 4, 2009.

**Assessment and Feedback.** Tied closely with expectations is feedback. Effective teachers provide regular clear feedback to students, helping them know what they do and do not understand at the requisite depth of understanding.

_(Mark Wilder) is known throughout the accountancy student body for giving the most challenging but fair examinations in the school. When a student leaves one of his exams, he or she usually feel that his or her knowledge has been put to the toughest test possible._ — Ole Miss Accountant, June, 2005.

**Involvement.** Children are born with a natural proclivity for active learning. Unfortunately, too many students learn that curiosity has no place in a bureaucratic educational system that is overly regimented and focused on test results. While they might retain some sense of curiosity, it is relegated to life outside of the classroom.

Effective teachers engage students in learning activities, both inside and outside of the classroom. Understanding that learning is a process of building personal understanding, teachers trigger students’ curiosity and then provide them with various opportunities to interact with the content in an effort to satisfy that curiosity.

_In seminars he (Jeffrey Watt) nurtures in students the skills of writing and speaking both eloquently and persuasively. He requires them to critique each other’s reports, exchange papers, and play the role of teacher-grader._ — Mantle 1(3), 2007.

_First know the content, theory and discipline and know it well; then relate this theory directly to the performance or practice of that discipline_ — Laurdella Folkes-Levy, Mantle 3(2), 2009.

Thank you to our excellent teachers, recognized both publicly and privately, for providing our students with engaging learning opportunities, support, encouragement, challenging expectations, and clear and consistent feedback. We look forward to another year of collaboration.
The UM Supplemental Instruction (SI) Program continues to support student learning. As illustrated in the graph, on average SI participants scored at least five points higher than nonparticipants on the first two exams of the spring semester. Attendance in SI sessions has been roughly 10-14% of enrollment thus far, with Biology averaging the most participants. SI sessions continue this semester with extra sessions scheduled for final examination review, all of which are posted on the Blackboard calendars for each course. The end of the pilot year draws near. Based on the data as well as student and faculty comments, the UM SI Program has a promising future!