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Helping Honors Students in Trouble

Angela M. Salas
Indiana University Southeast

Although I am no expert in effectively helping troubled students, I hope that the Indiana University Southeast Honors Program serves as a place of refuge and support for all its students, most particularly those who are in any sort of trouble. Because my students, whether in the honors program or in my English classes, are reluctant to acknowledge the existence of any difficulties, I have found the Noel-Levitz College Student Inventory (CSI) and Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI) helpful in bringing to light impediments to their success and happiness of which I might otherwise be unaware.

Since 2007, when the honors program began, we've administered the CSI to each student registered for an honors class at the beginning of the fall semester, and at the start of the spring semester we administer the CSI or the SSI. Thus, some students take two inventories in a year, and some do not; some students take the SSI, and some do not; but all honors students take the CSI at least once. Once we get the results of either survey, I ask the office assistant to begin scheduling appointments for me to meet with each student, share the report, and discuss ways that the honors program and I can help solve any of the problems the results reveal. We employ a triage system, approaching those students who seem most troubled first. In the fall of 2009, I met with more than forty of our eighty-plus students, and in the spring, I met with nearly as many students.

When the CSI or SSI reports come back to me, I am always surprised at how much I have missed. I see each student regularly, and I teach most of our first-year students during their first semester, so I generally think that I know which students are doing well and which need intervention. I am constantly proven wrong.

Here are some surprising discoveries I have made during follow-ups with students:

1. A young person who seemed almost catlike in her self-possession and grooming had no fixed place to live following her parents' divorce. She was clean and tidy but was living out of her book bag and car.
2. A student who reported working forty hours a week and having a low sense of family support was paying her parents' mortgage and utility

bills and taking a full course load. She wanted to become a physician but was realizing that she might not make it through her science courses if she continued to work full-time. Yet, that mortgage needed to be paid.

3. A student who worked too many hours reported low family support and seemed on the verge of falling asleep in class was actually supporting herself and her teenage brother. Her father, however, continued to claim both children on his taxes, so she was ineligible for financial aid and was paying full tuition.
4. A very aloof student had Asperger's syndrome but did not want anyone to know.
5. A person who never turned anything in on time had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.
6. A young person whose work had suddenly dropped in quality was taking a nineteen-hour course load, was overwhelmed by it, and was too ashamed to drop any of those hours. He had gone without sleep for three days before coming to my office for his scheduled appointment. I had known him for three years to be a steady and proud young man, but he wept during our meeting.

Because I am not a trained personal counselor and do not have the wisdom of Solomon, I cannot solve all or even many of the problems our students have. On the other hand, I am able to help them problem-solve, prioritize, and re-think their reluctance to get help. I can also put them in contact with personal counseling services, our most resourceful financial aid officers, solid academic advisors, and other resources. While I cannot put families back together, I can help students develop their campus support network and seek the help they need as their parents divorce.

For instance, the young woman who had been supporting her brother is now legally emancipated because our financial aid officers helped her navigate that process. She now has access to financial aid and to help in raising her brother, who has recently finished high school. Students with Asperger's are, with help from Counseling Services and me, becoming integrated into the honors program, and they report having friends. One of them gave a conference presentation about Asperger's at our regional honors conference, and she did a lovely job. Her father, whom I met at our Spring Recognition Event, reports that she is "blossoming." The student with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder provided the university with sufficient documentation about his diagnosis to be protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act. He can now pursue his courses slowly without running afoul of requirements for satisfactory academic progress.

Even though I am known as an attentive teacher, I am always stunned by how successfully students manage to bluff even me while experiencing pain, insecurity, and loss. While I certainly wouldn't argue that every campus should use Noel-Levitz products, it seems clear that it would be profitable to find *some* way of getting beneath the glittering surface that so many students offer up out of the mistaken belief that their human imperfections should be hidden.

If dreams deferred can explode, so, I think, can troubles left unattended. Finding ways to see below the surface, perform emotional triage, and connect students to resources, on and off-campus, seems like the proper thing to do even if these attempts are themselves flawed by the human imperfections of those administering such interventions.

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