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Dr. Connie's 6 Keys to Becoming a Successful Learner

By: Dr. Connie Reimers-Hild, Ph.D.

I have learned a great deal about students by teaching and advising learners at the University of Nebraska. The fact that I was working on my Ph.D. on a part-time basis while being employed full-time broadened my knowledge about how to be a successful learner. My professional and personal experiences in the world of higher education have enabled me develop some powerful insights on what it takes to be a successful learner. I would like to share my insights with as many people as possible, so here are Dr. Connie's 6 Keys to Becoming a Successful Learner:

1. Grow Your Self-confidence

I know that there are times when every learner thinks they just cannot do it anymore. I think this is especially true for individuals returning to school on a part-time basis, for learners who have not enrolled in school for a pronged period of time or for individuals who have not had good educational experiences in the past. However, self-confidence is at the very root of success. Believe in yourself and your abilities. Learners really do have to believe it to achieve it when going to college.

2. Focus on Managing Your Time

This is a very serious issue. Students must develop a time management strategy that works for them. I personally believe that every time management strategy should have a "no" component. This means that learners must find a way to say "no" to people, issues and activities that are not contributing to their academic, personal or professional success. I realize this is easy to say and difficult to do; however, I firmly believe that learners must place their educational goals as a top priority in order to achieve them.

3. Ask for Help

Learners must talk to their instructors, advisors and fellow students. They must keep the lines of communication open and flowing and let other people know when they are struggling with something. I have always been pleasantly surprised by the willingness of others to help me when I asked for their assistance.

4. Develop Support Networks

My family provided me with a great deal of personal support throughout my entire educational career. Support from friends and relatives is critical. Further, I would encourage every learner to develop a support group consisting of fellow students. I happened to be lucky enough to be one of the original Dissertation Divas during the last year of my doctoral program. The Divas began as six nontraditional female graduate students who were all either entering or in the dissertation stage of their doctoral programs. The Divas met on a regular basis, and each Diva had to share her progress with the other Divas at each meeting.

We also supported one another by answering questions, reviewing questionnaires and protocols and helping each other jump through the last “hoops” towards degree completion. We even helped support one another through the dissertation defense process. Perhaps the best thing about being a Diva was that someone was always there to support and encourage you, and you knew that a fellow Diva could really relate to what you were experiencing. The Divas were the secret to my success.

I developed an important personal and professional network through the Divas. I now encourage all students to develop their own support groups. Support groups, if structured correctly, are incredibly helpful, supportive and fun!

5. Build Your Social Capital (The “who you know” factor)

I invested in my human capital (knowledge, skills and abilities) largely through formal education and training. However, in order to be truly successful, I also had to develop relationships and networks (social capital) with individuals who could help me achieve success.

For example, I was an older undergraduate who had to work as much as possible to pay my way through college. My undergraduate advisor was aware of my situation, so he encouraged me to leave my job as a cashier to find a job on campus that would help me gain both professional experience and important contacts. His suggestion turned out to be a great piece of advice. I landed a part-time summer job in a small department on campus. The work experience itself was valuable; however, it was the mentoring and professional development opportunities that really helped me achieve success.

I was initially hired to do field work for a professor, who I will refer to as Dr. Edwards, during the summer. I did not know it at the time, but the seasonal job with Dr. Edwards would eventually lead me to graduate school and a career in academia. Dr. Edwards was instrumental in helping me invest in both my human and social capital while in graduate school.

Dr. Edwards constantly gave me, and all of his other students, advice on issues that people do not typically learn about in the classroom. Dr. Edwards told us what to wear, what to say, what not to say and how to act, and he encouraged his students to be extremely professional at all times. One key piece of advice he shared with all of his students was, “you are always being interviewed.” It became very apparent to me that this type of information was not shared with many other graduate students. Some students would attend professional meetings in t-shirts and shorts while Dr. Edwards’ students networked with high-level individuals dressed as professionals.

My fellow graduate students used to tell me how lucky I was to have an advisor who introduced me to individuals with connections in the job market. I was extremely fortunate in this regard. Dr. Edwards had a reputation of consistently placing his graduate students in high-level positions within both academia and the private sector, and he earned this reputation by making sure his students were connecting with the right people while they were in graduate school. School is important; however, developing your networks and contacts while in school is equally important!

People should find good mentors and build relationships with key individuals both within and outside of their organizations. Students should connect with their instructors and advisors as well as their fellow students. These are the people, relationships and social networks that will help learners throughout their careers. Ultimately, it is the relationships and networks or the “who you know factor” that ultimately helps students earn jobs, grow careers and obtain the “right kinds” of qualifications, skills and experiences, which have the potential to increase their chances for success in the 21st Century.

6. Be Entrepreneurial

An Entrepreneurial Learner can be defined as, “An innovative person who pursues educational opportunities irrespective of existing resources, such as time, money, personal support and/or technology” (Reimers-Hild, King, Foster, Fritz, Waller, & Wheeler, 2005). Entrepreneurial learners take control of their destiny. They possess a high need for achievement and take risks in order to achieve their goals. Entrepreneurial “learnership” is important for all students because it is ultimately up to the individual learner to achieve success.

I was walking to the car with my Mom after I graduated with my Ph.D. My Mom had tears in her eyes as she told me how proud she was of my accomplishment. Then, she talked about Dr. Edwards and how instrumental he was in making it all happen. My Mom was right. Dr. Edwards was one of the individuals who helped me move from an hourly worker to a person with a blossoming career, and he did it by helping me invest in both my human and social capital. Dr. Edwards, my family, my friends, the Dissertation Divas and a number of other individuals helped me get to where I am today. It literally took a village to help me achieve my personal and professional goals.

Learners must build personal and professional networks to help them achieve their goals. As learners, instructors, teachers, parents, grandparents, relatives, role models, advisors and administrators, we all have the opportunity to help others achieve their goals by encouraging individuals to develop their self-confidence, knowledge, skills and abilities as well as their personal and professional networks.

Ultimately, I am the one who had to be an entrepreneurial learner to get it all done. However, I cannot stress enough the importance of networking and creating support systems. Believe me, there is nothing more motivating than hearing, “maybe it is time to realize the magnitude of what you have accomplished” when you feel like you just cannot make it across that finish line to graduation.

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