

8 Strategies to Encourage Interdependence and Help-Seeking Behavior in College Students

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What messages do our students receive from their parents, their high school teachers, their older peers, and siblings before they enter college? When I ask my first-year students the answers are, “Now you are on your own,” or “No one will help you when you are in college!” and “You are responsible for your own work.”

Notice something here? All these messages focus on the individual’s sole responsibility to succeed in college without the help of others. You are independent *now*.

Unfortunately, it appears that these messages negatively impact our incoming students, especially those who are first-generation college students who may not have good role models and already feel somewhat inadequate. Nonetheless, there’s pressure from their families that failing a class or switching majors makes them “less than.”

Imagine you are in a student’s shoes facing a difficulty, and not just of an academic nature. Perhaps you feel isolated or overwhelmed. Perhaps your time-management skills are not up to par, and you’re not sure how to approach a professor in a class in which you are not doing well. You have been told to figure it out on your own, and seeking help means you have a deficit and are a failure because you can’t figure it out by yourself.

Research and practice have shown that first-year college students have a variety of academic and social support needs, particularly students of first-generation or minority status. To address this problem, universities offer many services but students hesitate to use these.

Here is the problem: An individualist culture and society neither encourages help-seeking reliance on others nor admits that you need help. In reality, this is not how people advance in life. All of us are dependent on others—we are social creatures who depend on being nurtured, supported, and coached. We understand that being dependent has a negative connotation in its own right, that's why we need to look at a different concept: Interdependence.

Positive interdependence has predominantly been explored in collaborative practice (Frey, Fischer & Everlove, 2009), but it is gaining increasing importance in other areas, particularly when it comes to community building. Essentially, a campus is a community where students live, learn, and connect. A student's sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012) is extremely important for incoming college students to feel confident and trust that faculty and university personnel have their back.

Researchers have suggested that attitudes about academic help-seeking may be contingent on secure attachment to parents and role models. Holt (2014) suggests that students securely attached to their parents may not hesitate to seek help, but those who are insecurely attached, may believe they need to handle their academic challenges and stresses alone. If students who lack role models are dealing with difficulties as challenges to overcome, this may interfere with their adjustment and academic learning.

Based on this framework, college personnel are encouraged to initiate positive interdependence through outreach and strategies that encourage help-seeking. **B**

Build Trust

1. Try to get to know your students: Make name tents the first day of class and use the back of the sheet to have students provide information about themselves, their expectations for the class, their intended major, and anything that may impact their success, along with their hobbies to add a personal touch.
2. Use check-in questions such as asking about their current stress level and if they may be overwhelmed. Ask them what they need in order to be successful at the very moment. Online tools and apps can be useful for this.

Encourage Help-Seeking

3. Having students turn in an assignment early at a professor's office may take away the fear of utilizing office hours later in the semester.

4. Invite individuals from your academic support center, such as academic success coaches, tutors for your specific course, or Supplemental Instruction (SI) leaders, to make personal connections with your students.

Foster Interdependence

5. Tell your own story by showing your web of connections that sustains and supports you, and provide students with the opportunity to create their own web of connections that is crucial to thriving in college. Show your students "famous failures," and educate them on how others succeeded with the help of their support network, mindset, and persistence.

6. Connect Four: create a buddy system. Have students write down the names and numbers of four students in their class. If one of the four buddies doesn't show up for class, the others will reach out to make sure they are okay, ask if they need anything, provide missed class material, and make sure they are up to speed.

Create Awareness of Thoughts and Challenges

7. You are not your thoughts! Utilize a reflective exercise: Remember a day when you failed in an academic subject or with personal goals, what were your thoughts? How can you turn crushing thoughts into challenges to overcome and develop a strategic plan for success?

8. Have students write letters to one another and address them with, "Dear classmate." In the letter have them name a problem/challenge they are facing. Then, close with, "What advice do you have for me?" Students can then exchange letters and address their classmate's problem/challenge in writing.

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