Do You Truly Grasp Why That Student Keeps Missing Class?

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Jim Lang

Professor at Assumption College

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She sat in the front row of my classroom, quiet but engaged. She didn't raise her hand, but when I invited her into the conversation or asked students to speak to one another, she showed she had done the reading and had thought about it. I learned from an informal writing exercise that she was a first-generation college student, paving the way to higher education for her family.

By week two of the semester, she was missing classes. Then she failed to turn in a major essay assignment. I emailed her and heard nothing. Soon afterward, I encountered her in a stairwell of a classroom building, and I could see her fight an impulse to hide.

But in that confined space, she had nowhere to go. I put on my most empathetic face and voice and asked: "How are things going? Are you having a problem I can help with? Are you going to stay in my course?"

Her response was sad and resigned. She commuted to the campus from home, and problems there were interfering with her ability to attend class and complete her work. One of those problems: She had to drive a younger sibling back and forth to school every day and assume other aspects of the child's care. She was struggling to stay on top of all of her responsibilities, but she was trying.

We agreed on a tentative new date for her to turn in her essay. The date came and went — but no paper materialized.

In the meantime, the smart and caring people on our campus who help students at risk had been reaching out to her. But none of the solutions they had to offer could change the home dynamic that was making college so difficult for her.

Although I believe that a college education has enormous power to change the lives of students like this one, I started to wonder whether all of us swarming her with efforts to keep her on the campus was really the right thing to do. Given everything she was facing, maybe she needed a semester or a year off to seek solutions at home before she tried to add the challenge of succeeding at college.

I was conflicted about that thought, and still am. What is our obligation to a student like her? Should we do everything in our power to persuade her to stay, provide her resources, convince her that she has to make sacrifices at home in order to succeed in college? Or should we encourage her to consider the possibility that stepping away might be the right choice in this situation? And how much of our effort in either direction is driven by (or perhaps compromised by) the fact that tuition dollars are involved?

A month into the semester, she dropped out. I still think about her, wondering whether she will ever return. But my views on her situation have been illuminated by a new book — *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* — that should be required reading for everyone who works with students who face hard choices between their family lives and academic demands.

Its author is Jennifer M. Morton, a philosopher who emigrated from Peru to the United States for her university education. After spending a decade of her career at the City College of the City University of New York, she will start a new position in January as an associate professor of philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The hopeful nature of the book's main title belies, to some extent, the sobering analysis within. Morton explores the ethical dilemmas that arise particularly for low-income, nonwhite, first-generation college students as they struggle to balance home-life pressures

with higher education.

Morton uses the word "ethical" in a specific way. We all make ethical choices, she argues, in balancing family, community, career, and education. Each of those things is a "good" that we opt to maximize or minimize. But they often conflict. Choosing what's best for our careers might involve sacrificing time with family, and vice versa. Every major choice we make to maximize a good might detract from the quality or quantity of other potential goods in our lives.

Moving Up Without Losing Your Way offers many stories of "strivers" — students from backgrounds that require them to sacrifice ties to their families and communities in order to pursue a college education. First-generation and low-income students are the clearest examples of strivers. Morton counts herself among them and describes her own experience of leaving home, family, and community to travel to another continent for her university education.

Two striking arguments jumped out at me from her analysis of the ethical choices faced by strivers:

The damage to a student's identity. Those of us trying to help strivers do not reckon fully enough with the painful sacrifices they make in leaving behind their homes to study on our campus.

We tell students that education will be their ticket to a better life, that they have to put their education over their lives outside of college, that it will all be worth it in the end. And that may well be true in terms of their future income and career pathway. But as we urge them to prioritize education, we can easily lose sight of the fact that they may well be doing permanent damage to relationships that have shaped their entire lives until their arrival on our doorstep.

"If she is to succeed in college," Morton writes of a typical striver, "she will have to learn to say no to those for whom she cares." The act of saying no to family and friends carries deep consequences not only for a student's relationships but also for her own identity. After all, we are formed in our communities, large and small. "A loss or weakening of those relationships," Morton writes, "is not only a loss of something that matters to me but a threat to my sense of identity."

No longer firmly grounded in this family, this community, this place, now they are people who have left those connections behind to pursue something else. When they return, they cannot fold easily back into their old selves. Their education is still in a nascent stage, but the damage to their relationships is in full form.

The loss to their families and communities. This one presents an even more complex challenge. We invite strivers to our campuses and promise to send them off to new lives,

better careers, and exciting places around the world, but the very act of striving does collateral damage to the communities they leave behind.

The students with the talent, intellect, and ambition to improve their lot through a college education are likely to be the ones who help their families and communities to thrive. When they are pulled from their homes and neighborhoods, they leave behind gaping holes.

Those holes will be especially damaging to families and communities that already bear the weight of institutional and structural racism, that have been devastated by addiction and poverty, that have been left behind by a rising economy. "Consequently," Morton writes, "the ethical costs of a striver's departure fall on communities that are already bearing many other difficult costs."

This puts strivers in the agonizing position of choosing their education over their roles as siblings, neighbors, and helpers in families and neighborhoods that truly need them. "Focusing on their education means that they have to abdicate some of the support roles that they play at home," Morton writes. "And because of the lack of an adequate social safety net, their families are often in dire need of that support and may be unable to replace it."

This second conclusion struck me with special force in light of my experience with my student. If she had chosen to come to class and get her work done, who would have driven her younger sibling to school every day? Who would have stepped in to fill the other gaps that committing to my course would have created in her family life?

When students don't get their work done on time, when they miss assignments, and when they decide to sacrifice college for family or community obligations, we might shake our heads at their choices. But Morton's book provides an important reminder that they might still be choosing something good: "They are not simply choosing to forsake opportunities for educational and financial advancement; some are choosing to stay engaged with genuinely valuable goods," such as family and community relationships.

The ethical choices faced by strivers are complex enough that we cannot come to their aid with easy answers. We have been debating ethics for thousands of years precisely because ethics involves choosing among goods, and no guidebook exists to tell us which good deserves absolutely priority over all of the others. Every choice has its costs, and human lives are built from the goods we choose and the goods we sacrifice, thinking and feeling and evolving along the way.

For those of us who work with strivers — and such students are coming to our campuses in increasingly large numbers — *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way* provides an empathetic and clear-eyed analysis of the difficult choices they must make, and the costs of those choices to both themselves and their communities.

I have much thinking to do about Morton's analysis and what it means for my own students. But her book's capacity to inspire continued reflection is perhaps the best commendation I can make for this excellent read.

Jim Lang is a professor of English at Assumption College in Worcester, Mass., and director of its Center for Teaching Excellence.

His latest book, Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons From the Science of Learning, was published in the spring of 2016. Follow him on Twitter at @LangOnCourse.

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