“Teaching Unprepared Students: Success & Retention Strategies”
Selected highlights from the Magna Online Seminar presented by Dr. Kathleen Gabriel
2010 Magna Publications

Who are we talking about?

The at-risk student addressed by these strategies is the one who has low reading or writing skills, has trouble taking notes, does not know how to study or organize – the academically unprepared student.

Ideas to get ahead of at-risk behavior at the beginning of the course:

Get a Writing and Reading Sample
On the first or second day, assign a writing sample. Ask the students a question such as “What do you hope to learn in this class?” Also, have students read a passage during the first class and give an open-book/open-note reading comprehension quiz. Review the writing sample and comprehension quiz to see the level of preparedness of your students. Suggest tutoring to those who need it.

It’s Not Too Late
Convey to students that it is “never too late, that even if you have been unsuccessful in the past, that doesn’t mean you need to keep going that way, that it’s not too late to learn, it’s not too late to learn how to learn, and to grow and improve” (Transcript p.7).

Whose Responsibility Is It?
Make it clear to students that they are responsible for their own learning. As a teacher, you’re willing to help, but students must put in the time it takes to read the textbook, attend class, take notes, study and complete assignments.

Provide a Rationale
Let students know what the class will do for them—how it will help in future courses and in the real world.

What Does It Take?
Have students respond to a list of true/false items regarding behaviors that will lead to success in your course. Items might include statements/questions like “I always read the lecture material before I get to class,” or “I try the example problems before doing the homework.” Have students total their number of true responses and predict the grade they’ll earn in your course based on their responses. Communicate to students that “you can change your prediction of you’ll do in this class, by changing the number of these things that you’re willing to do” (Transcript p.14).

Use Students’ Names
Studies show that calling students by name makes them feel less anonymous and more obligated to come to class because they feel that you will notice that they are gone. Find ways to remember your students’ names early on, and greet them as they come into class or when you see them on campus or in town. (Transcript p. 14-15)
Boost Attendance
Make participation a grade in order to boost attendance. Create assignments that can only be done in class and that count for a small portion of the course grade. Tell students, “These assignments cannot be made up” and stick to that. Consider having students write a “minute paper” or using other Classroom Assessment Techniques. Consider having students work in small groups and have each group submit one sheet of paper with all group members’ names listed at the top. Consider grading the participation assignment as all-or-nothing so that showing up, paying attention and completing the activity is what’s emphasized.

Explain why students should want to come to class: “I tell my students that I use class activity points because I value their time, and I value their presence…they need to be present to have the academic discourse that will take place in the class that will enrich their learning experience.” (Transcript p. 17)

Ideas to use throughout the course:

Have Students Make Connections
Prior knowledge is very important in learning new concepts. Tapping into students’ prior knowledge is especially important in teaching at-risk students new concepts. (p. 26-27)

Consider using the index card technique to have students connect new vocabulary to personal experience and prior knowledge. Students write a term on the front of an index card. On the back of the card, students write the definition and draw a picture, related to their own life experiences, illustrating the word and its definition. This way, students connect what they already know to learn a new term. (Transcript p. 21-22)

If you have trouble getting your students to do the assigned reading and accompanied questions, try telling them to create index cards for the words in bold print in the chapter, without using the glossary. Students will have to read the paragraph that contains the bolded term in order to come up with the definition. This should give them the exposure to the material that they need before you lecture on the material. (Transcript p. 23)

Focus on the Student Perspective
Rather than asking, “What will I do?” “What will I lecture on?” “What will I present?” ask “What are my students doing?” “What are they thinking?” “How might they applying the material?”

Provide Students with Partial Notes Before You Lecture
Prior to your lecture, give students a lecture outline. As you lecture, ask students to put the information into their own words and add their own comments to the class notes. Research shows this is the best way to get students to process information while you present it to them. (Transcript p. 30)

Consider trying one new idea each semester and see how well it fits into your course and how well at-risk students benefit from it. Add one new technique each time you teach the course until you have found your perfect balance. (p. 31)