



# Strategies for College Success

*Bruce Tuckman and Stephanie Drotos*

*Imagine that 5 weeks into the school term, you've just had your first midterm exam returned in your Intermediate Algebra class. You've received a D- and are very disappointed, since this exam had constituted 33 percent of your final grade. When reflecting on your performance, you come to realize that you've missed several class periods without a good reason and haven't been studying on a consistent basis. Which of the following would be the goal to set?*

- a. I'm still going to ace this class, even if it's the last thing I do.*
- b. I'll focus on my other classes, so that a failing grade in Algebra won't ruin my GPA.*
- c. I'm going to go to every class this week! Tuesday afternoon I'll go see my T.A. during her office hours to see what she suggests. I think I can still get a C, and maybe even a low B.*

For some students, deciding among these choices is easy. Other students, however, lack the study skills to make realistic and appropriate choices that will lead to academic success. Students may believe that they do not possess the intelligence to pursue a college education when the reality is that they just need to hone better study skills. More success during the school years leads to greater success in the workforce and an increase in productivity.

Dr. Bruce W. Tuckman came to the School of Educational Policy and Leadership at The Ohio State University in 1998 with a vision to help students become more successful in college. Tuckman's scholarly interest focuses on motivation: its manifestation as self-regulatory behavior and its absence seen in the form of procrastination, particularly as applied to the behavior of studying. Prior to his appointment at Ohio State, Tuckman conducted considerable research at Florida State University on helping college students improve their academic performance.

### Teaching Study Skills

The Younkin Student Success Center, which now houses Tuckman's office, was still in the planning stage when he arrived on campus, but it was evident that the space would be full of computers. Capitalizing on that space, he created a university course, Individual Learning and

Motivation: Strategies for Success in College (ED P&L 259), a five-credit course that counts toward graduation. This course, which is taught on campus and as an online distance-learning course, eventually developed into Tuckman's book, *Learning and Motivation: Your Guide to Success*<sup>2</sup>, published by Prentice Hall in 2002. Over 200 learning opportunities are presented through this book and online software that teaches students to assess their behavior and make progress in behavioral changes that can lead to higher academic achievement. The traditional classroom and live instructor are paired with the computer-based modules to create a more diverse learning atmosphere. More than 1,000 students annually who complete this course experience a 0.4-0.5 increase in grade point average compared to those who have not taken the course.

In 2003, Tuckman's vision grew beyond Ohio State as he wondered what the impact of the Learning and Motivation class would be for students in high schools and community colleges. He was awarded a \$340,203 FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education) grant to explore the potential of his methods. In order to receive a FIPSE grant, his project idea had to be accepted by FIPSE as a feasible, significant, and innovative idea that has the potential to develop into a national model. FIPSE grants are highly competitive, with ap-

proximately 80 grants awarded out of roughly 2,000 applications received yearly.

### Four Strategies for Achievement

The college course was modified slightly for the high school audience, but the main concepts remained similar. Four basic achievement strategies were taught in the course: how to take reasonable risks, how to take responsibility for actions, how to search the environment for information, and how to use feedback. A smaller increase in grade point average (0.2-0.25) was experienced by this group of high school students when compared with the college students, but Tuckman says that he wanted to take his evaluation to the next level by adding a qualitative analysis to the quantitative data he already had. He wondered what high school students think about the course and how effective it truly is.

The Ohio State University P-12 Project supported Tuckman's efforts to conduct the qualitative analysis and determine the project's effectiveness through \$20,000 in P-12 Scholar funding for the 2006-2007 academic year. Stephanie Drotos, a Ph.D. student in Cultural Foundations, Technology, and Policy, was hired to gather qualitative data. During the fall and winter quarters, Stephanie conducted 76 visits to high schools where the Learning and Motivation



course was being taught, writing case studies to demonstrate the impact of the course. Responses from the classes were presented to the teachers so they could gain a greater concept of the impact of the course they teach. The P-12 Scholar Grant was invaluable for building an ethnography to learn more about not just the students, but also how the course is implemented and the culture of the schools.

### *Impact on Academic Success*

Tuckman and Drotos say that the impact of the course has been substantial. Students report that the course has helped them to feel more confident in their academic work, assume greater responsibility for their achievement, and become

better at managing their lives and busy schedules. The class is designed to teach students how to overcome procrastination, how to take good notes during lectures and while reading, how to prepare for tests, how to be more responsible, and it leads them to increased confidence in their abilities. Computer-based learning modules that are part of the course lead students to

consider real-life situations, such as what to do when friends offer invitations to go out, but they know they have a lot of homework to do. Students learn to consider how the choices they make each day affect their academic success.

Drotos shared the following comments from high school students in the class:

Four basic achievement strategies were taught: how to take reasonable risks, how to take responsibility for actions, how to search for information, and how to use feedback.

Jovon Golden, from Linden-McKinley High School, doesn't have anyone in his immediate family who went to college. He'll be the first. He plans to get a degree in law. "I like to argue," he adds, smiling. "I want to better myself. I can't do what I want without going to college for 8 years. I'll need 4 years of regular and then 4 more of law school," he explains. He says the class is "better than others. It's a good way to prepare for college. It's prepared me. I know college will run at a quick pace, so it's good to be prepared." He tells me that in one year, he sees himself "in college, pulling out my hair."

Dominique Falls from Linden-McKinley is hoping to become an important boxer like his father. He plans to try out next year to box in the Olympics. This year, he was runner-up in the Golden Gloves. He told me that he thought it was very important that he get a college degree to have something to fall back on in case he ever gets hurt. He told me he'd recommend the Strategies class to other students, saying "it gives the tools for studying. I learned so many new tools. It also taught me how to think positive and to plan." He told me he wished he'd have known about "the different ways of studying" before he took his Social Studies Ohio Graduation Test. I haven't used the tools yet, but at least I've learned how to use them when I need them in the future."

Sherron Mayle, a junior at Centennial High School told me she liked the class better than others. "It helps people. I know it helped me to get a better understanding. It helps students to have a fuller picture of what college will be like. We hear what college is like from friends who have gone, but it's good to hear it twice. You're more likely to listen." The class gave advice on how to handle classwork. Her biggest worry about her future was that "maybe I might not be able to handle college. It might get too hard for me. I'm trying to prepare myself now so I won't have to drop classes."



Jasmine Johnson, a senior from Mifflin High School, has a 4.0 and said she'd recommend the class to others. "It's a very, very helpful class. There's a lot of work to it, but it's very helpful, teaching you the things you need to know to go to college. Like about procrastination and how to control it."

Linda Lianoudom, a senior from Marion-Franklin said she'd recommend the class to other students. "It builds up our study habits. I used to procrastinate all the time. Now I make up a study guide before a test. I use the questions from my notes, retype them, and find the answers." I asked her if she was happy with the class and she said, "It's a lot of work. You really have to think, but I think it's worth it."

Janae Hawkins, who is graduating near the top of her senior class at Linden-McKinley, has been offered a full-ride scholarship to two Ohio colleges. She told me that she thought that the class had taught her that "even though you don't like doing something, you've got to do it anyway. I'm sure in the future this will pay off."

### Making "Learning How to Learn" Part of the Curriculum

The current focus of Tuckman's course remains at Ohio State and in local public schools, but it has affected a broader audience. The Columbus City Schools have offered training in how to teach the course as part of their professional development day offerings. Tuckman has shared his work at an average of three national gatherings per year since 2003, including a recent presentation for the American Educational Research Association. The second edition of Tuckman's textbook, *Learning and Motivation Strategies: Your Guide to Success*, will be released this year.

Tuckman and Drotos both believe that "Strategies for School Success" provides students with much needed guidance in how to manage their lives so they can achieve their greatest academic potential and career potential. Tuckman reminds us that while learning how to learn is not included in school curricula like English and mathematics, "students need to learn how to learn before they can master any of those subjects. Students' hunger for learning, manifested through their academic talents and interests, can have a most significant impact not only on their success in high school and college, but also on the quality of work the students will do in their lifetime and on the way they will influence society." ■

<sup>1</sup>Bruce W. Tuckman, Dennis A. Abry, and Dennis R. Smith, *Learning and Motivation Strategies: Your Guide to Success* (Columbus, OH: Prentice Hall, 2002): 175.



Students need to learn how to learn before they can master other subjects.