

# Thriving in Academe

## REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education ([www.podnetwork.org](http://www.podnetwork.org)). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson ([drobert@fiu.edu](mailto:drobert@fiu.edu)) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery ([mflannery@nea.org](mailto:mflannery@nea.org)) at NEA.

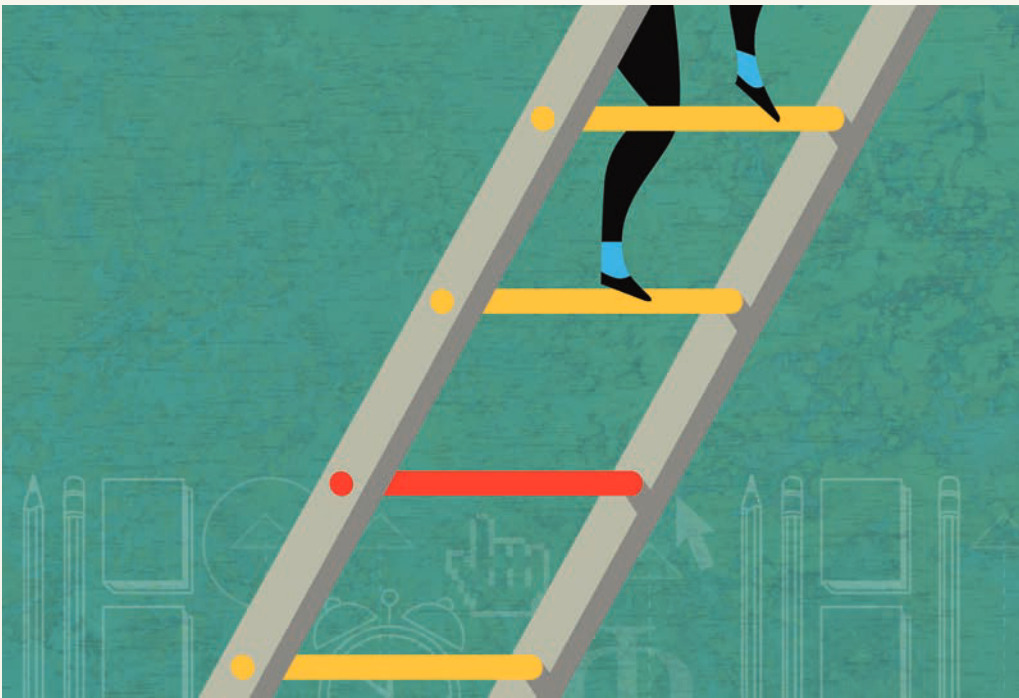
## ■ Empowering First-Year Students

You root for your first-year students to succeed in their entry to college and return the following year, but each year some don't make it through. You wonder why. Why is the first year such a vulnerable time for some students? How can you help?

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The transition to college is an exciting time, but it also can be a difficult time for many. With more free time between classes, students cite time management as a new challenge. Some find they can't keep up with the academic requirements, or don't have the background knowledge or vocabulary to do the reading and participate in discussions. Among national policy makers, only a narrow set of academic skills has been part of the discussion of college readiness. However, those who work with college students know that so-called "non-cognitive" skills and issues, such as family problems, finances, employment, mental health, and social issues, also burden new students. In addition, since college work requires both personal engagement in learning and effective study habits, a student's approach to academic work can fall short. Fortunately, there are proactive activities, including what George Kuh has called "high-impact educational practices," (Kuh, 2008, p. 9) that faculty and staff can use to support first-year students. For example, first-year students can find support in first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, and service learning.



## Meet Pamela W. Hollander



**Pamela W. Hollander** is an assistant professor at Worcester State University, where she teaches first-year and education students. She is the author of a book about college readiness, *Readiness Realities: Struggles and Successes during the Transition to College* (2017). Dr. Hollander has taught developmental reading and writing courses at public and private colleges over the past 20 years. She researches and writes about college-level literacy practices, including reading habits of college students in particular disciplines and interdisciplinary connections between college classes. She also has focused on the transition between high school and college and has taught college literacy for several high school-to-college bridge programs.

## Welcome to College: Prepare to Be Interrupted

Each new semester, professors and returning students migrate back to campus and meet a fresher and less informed group: first-year students. Of course these newcomers will have been socially and academically oriented before school starts, but what do they really need to know to succeed in the first year and beyond?

When I was a college student, arriving on campus after a few sleep-deprived months

as a camp counselor, I slept through almost my entire orientation. But I did make it to a college simulation exercise, which made a deep impression on me. Today I incorporate some of its elements into my own workshop for incoming first-year students.

Back then, in a large gymnasium, about 100 incoming students held blank bingo-style cards. We were instructed to visit booths around the gym to sign up for pretend classes and clubs and to complete mock homework assignments, each time marking our bingo cards. But every time we made

any progress, we were interrupted by loud music and flying beach balls—at which point the booths would shut down temporarily. I’ve been teaching college students for 20 years, and I’ve seen nothing else that so effectively simulates the competing and conflicting demands faced by a first-year college student.

## TALES FROM REAL LIFE > EVERYDAY ACADEMIC ARTIFACTS

**B**ecause I studied the cultural dimensions of education, language, and literacy in graduate school, I approach my role in the classroom from a cultural lens. I see myself as an interpreter of college-level values for first-year college students.

In my college readiness workshops for high school students, I ask students what they can learn about the values of the professor from a sample American History syllabus. We take a good look at the book list, which includes a survey of history from colonial times to the Civil War, but also books on the Salem

witch trials, Native American relocation, and slavery. The list reveals the professor’s interest in the history of people who often are overlooked in textbooks. We also look at the space and attention the professor gives to describing the “class participation” part of the class. It is clear that participation is

very important to this professor.

I also ask students to compare three students’ daily planners, each organized in different ways, to see what students choose to prioritize. One is organized by class, but includes lists of social and work obligations; another lists social,

work and academic activities by day; while the third, also organized by day, includes homework only.

In sum, I see everyday academic artifacts as having deep cultural meaning, and believe students can benefit from spending quality time discussing them.

## Newfound Freedom/Time Management

When I ask my current first-year students to name the biggest difference between high school and college, they differ on whether they think the work is harder but agree that faced with more independence, time management is their biggest problem. With that in mind, I focus on time management in my pre-college workshops, but I think it's also a good topic for first-year seminars as well. First-year seminars certainly are high impact because of inquiry-based learning and critical thinking but also because they enable students to increase their "practical competencies" (Kuh, 2008, p. 9).

A useful tool to understanding students' choices around time is Steven Covey's four-quadrant 2x2 table, presented in his book, *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* (Covey, 1989). The four quadrants sort tasks by urgency and importance. In the first are things that are both important and urgent, like crises or "things that come up." The second includes the important but not urgent work that often gets you "ahead." Quadrant 3 has urgent concerns usually more important to someone else, while Quadrant 4 includes "escape" activities like video games or social media—not important, not urgent.

Quadrant 2 (important, not urgent) is where we are most productive and in control. Drafting a paper early, socializing sensibly to invest in relationships, and exercising to stay healthy all fit in this category.

Spending time in Quadrant 1 (important and urgent) is sometimes necessary. Consider the student who must rescue a roommate locked out of their room. But Quadrants 3 and 4 are time stealers and should be kept in control. One Quadrant 3 activity I agreed to, which I reluctantly admit here, was to babysit a first-year student's orphaned squirrel. (She soon realized she needed to return this squirrel to the wild and start concentrating on college.)

WHEN I ASK MY CURRENT FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS TO NAME THE **BIGGEST DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE**...THEY ALL AGREE THAT FACED WITH MORE INDEPENDENCE, TIME MANAGEMENT IS THEIR BIGGEST PROBLEM.

I found out about these quadrants after college, unfortunately, but since then I have used them to great effect. Summer is my Quadrant 2 (important and not urgent), when I plan and research and go to doctor appointments. Once students are familiar with the four quadrants, I challenge them to make decisions about activities to prioritize, what to say no to, and how to get ahead.

## Getting to Know a Professor and Their Hopes for Their Class

I have had students who don't seem to know their professors and what they value. This is why, in addition to time management, I have added an examination of "the syllabus" into my workshop for incoming students and also my regular first-year classes. I want students who are accustomed to gleaning information from Instagram to begin to look carefully at a long-form syllabus, and I want them to wring out what is important to this professor. What do you have to do to get an A or a B?

## Learning How to Make Sense of Professors' Writing Assignment Guidelines

When I assigned a book review essay that asked students to tell whether they would recommend the book to a friend, I got a lot of plot summaries instead. I hadn't made it clear that I wanted them to create an argument, to marshal details in service of a larger point. As Donald Bartholomae said, I want my students to "join the conversation" (Bartholomae, 1986) of academia by adding their own modest contribution, consistent with their status as newcomers, to conversations about a particular topic. They have

## ■ BEST PRACTICES > TEACHING ESSAY AS ARGUMENT

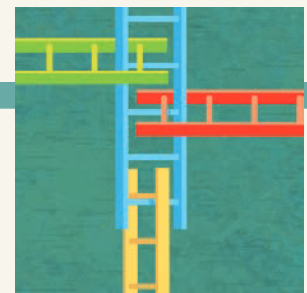
For detailed information about how to teach students the ins and outs of essay as argument, I recommend Gerald Graff, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russel Durst's *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (2006). This book takes as its premise that students are being asked to write in the ways that academics write, adding

their contributions to knowledge in a field. The book explains how arguments and contributions are constructed with examples, and gives students instructions on how they can do the same thing. For example, I often use an article by Charles Mudede, "Hip-hop Rupture" (2015), in my first-year courses that uses a borrowed concept to build an argument. Mudede

borrowed jazz theorist Ted Gioia's idea of jazz being an imperfect art and he applies that term to hip hop music, maintaining that hip hop is a true imperfect art.

What sets the book *They Say, I Say* apart from others is how it deconstructs these arguments for students so that they can see how they are put together. The book includes many examples of

academic readings that demonstrate academic arguments. I think students are served well by getting this kind of direct information about what is expected of them and how they can meet those expectations.



to figure out, like a person entering a cocktail party, the appropriate way to act. This is no easy task, and as Bartholomae says, new college students need to “approximate” what this looks like in subjects that they may not know much about.

As the academic year goes by, like many others who teach first-year students, I will have tried in my first-year seminar to help new students get oriented to their environments, to more productively manage the slippery thing known as time, and I hope to also have a better grasp of what professors expect from them.

## I HAVE BEEN AMAZED AT HOW INVOLVEMENT WITH CERTAIN CLUBS, EVENTS AND COMMUNITY-SERVICE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES HAVE TURNED AROUND SOME BLEAK LOOKING CASES OF FIRST-YEAR MALAISE.

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### ISSUES TO CONSIDER

#### FIRST-YEAR FIXES

##### Why do so many first-year students struggle?

First-year students surely struggle with academics, but their academic problems are broad and include their relationship to their own learning, prior learning habits, background knowledge, and motivation. Also, I have found that when my first-year students drop out during or after their first year, the causes are multiple—including any of the following: academic issues, health issues, finances, English fluency, learning disabilities, and social or family issues. For more, see Readiness Realities: Struggles and Successes during the Transition to College. Also, see George Kuh’s article, “The Other Curriculum: Out-of-class Experiences Associated with Student Learning and Personal Development” (1995).

##### What can help students overcome these issues?

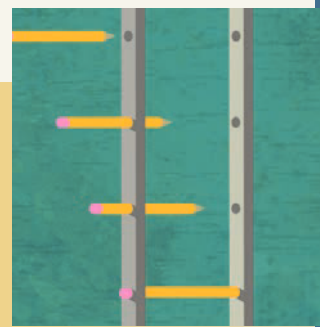
I have been amazed at how involvement with certain clubs, events and service learning has turned around some bleak cases of first-year malaise. For example, a community service club at

our university called CLEWS (Community Leadership and Engagement at Worcester State) has made a huge difference. This club acts as both a club and a learning community, where students study big ideas together and even live in the same dorm.

Another winning strategy is for students to attend performances and have what Kuh calls “common intellectual experiences” (Kuh, 2008, p. 9) with peers and professors that either reflect their own experience or introduce them to other experiences.

##### Why Do Some Activities Work to Turn Around Students’ Experiences?

In the CLEWS program, newer students are invited in by students who act as mentors. I think it is the student-to-student interaction that works so well. Also, because CLEWS is about service students feel good about their work. Terenzini et al. (1994) write about how students need to feel “validation” from extracurricular activities. Kuh attributes the success of high-impact educational practices to the “deepening in investment” that results from these activities, and



from the opportunity to “interact with faculty and peers over extended periods of time” (2008, p. 24).

##### What Can Professors Do To Help?

We as professors have a unique opportunity: we interact with students in small groups in settings that stress authentic inquiry. We also have a chance to engage students in practical concerns like time management and analyzing a syllabus.

We should encourage students to connect with clubs and activities. It’s easier when students have an existing interest or skill they can follow in college—for example, a student danced in high school and joins the college dancing club. But many could connect with a general club that focuses on less specific skills. Finding out how student organizations accomplish their outreach may give you ideas about helping first-year students in your classes.

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