



Mindset Matters: Giving Your Students an Edge for Success

What is all the fuss about mindset, grit, resilience, and other noncognitive skills in higher education? Some of the hype comes from a never-ending need to give students an edge for success. It is no secret that educators are under increasing pressure to retain and graduate students. We have redesigned courses and degree programs, removed institutional barriers that have stymied student progress, and added high-impact practices, such as service-learning and common-book experiences, all in the hopes that students will be more engaged and, thus, more likely to graduate. For faculty and staff, noncognitive skills such as growth mindset and grit provide a new frontier for student success.

Growth mindset, according to Dweck (2007), is the belief that abilities can be developed through dedication and effort and are not at a fixed level that never changes. We can observe growth mindset in students when they invest extra time and effort to master difficult content or challenging skills. Moreover, faculty who put in extra time and effort educating students who do not immediately understand or master a concept or skill also demonstrate growth mindset as they affirm their students' abilities to be successful. One way to help students strengthen growth mindset is to explain how the brain works when it learns. Another option is emphasizing the importance of effort and improvement over performance. This does not mean students and educators should focus on effort alone as an indication of mastery; instead, we need to acknowledge the role that effort plays in the learning process.

Duckworth defines grit as "... the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward very long-term goals" (Duckworth, 2016). Students who persevere in an activity even when distractions, setbacks, or obstacles arise show grit. Helping students strengthen grit should involve them developing a plan of action to overcome obstacles in pursuit of their academic, personal, and career goals. Resilience, then, is the ability to rebound following a setback. To be sure, demonstrating growth mindset and grit affect a student's ability to bounce back from challenges, which is resilience. To help students use grit and resilience in the classroom, faculty can work with them to develop new learning strategies for when students come up short or fail to master a concept. They can also teach students to monitor themselves as they learn (McGuire, 2015).

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“When we tackle obstacles, we find hidden reserves of courage and resilience we did not know we had. And it is only when we are faced with failure do we realize that these resources were always there within us. We only need to find them and move on with our lives.”

— **A. P. J. Abdul Kalam,**
President of India
(2002-2007)

Developing Growth Mindset, Grit, and Resilience

It should be acknowledged that some researchers have questioned the findings of Duckworth and others on the implications of grit and its development, especially for low-income students (Denby, 2016). However, other researchers, such as Dweck, contend that growth mindset and resilience can be developed over time. In most cases, activities that allow for that development can be easily incorporated into a course with minimal disruption to content. Here are several options, which can be used individually or as a complete set of activities in any course or just about any interaction between staff and students:

- **Introduce the information.** Put simply, students are best served when they understand what mindset and resilience are and how to develop them. Never assume students have an intuitive sense of the content, even though it may seem like common sense. One way to frontload this process is to provide a short reading or informative video on mindset or grit early in the term. The material can be brief and to the point, but it is especially effective if it comes from the mouths of researchers or from other students who have overcome challenges and setbacks in striving for success. This will ground discussions about the science of the noncognitive traits.
- **Assess students' grit and mindset.** Carol Dweck offers a mindset assessment: <http://www.mindsetonline.com/testyourmindset/step1.php>, and Angela Duckworth provides a 10-question grit scale: <http://angeladuckworth.com/grit-scale/>. These quick online surveys let students evaluate themselves regarding mindset and resilience. The results of these instruments can give you and your students an opportunity to discuss how to move toward greater grit or develop a growth mindset.
- **Coach students to reframe their self-talk.** Even when students know better, they do not always do better. Sometimes, increased self-awareness is not enough to change students' ingrained views of challenges and learning alone. To help students practice growth mindset and resiliency strategies, assign them an activity that lists a dozen fixed-mindset statements (e.g., "I am not good at math"). Then, ask students to choose a few that resonate with them (or ones they have said to themselves or others) and rewrite them so they align with what they have learned about growth mindset. For example, "I am not good at math" could be rewritten as "With more effort through solving homework problems, I can get better at math." While students do not have to truly believe these restatements at first, they can be encouraged to repeat them when they are feeling frustrated or ready to give up.
- **Teach students to develop "rerouting skills."** As we know and often observe, college students are not immune to challenges, setbacks, and even failures. Students who see these as opportunities to change their strategies or strengthen their resolve to meet goals have the mindset and grit needed to succeed. One way to help students develop these rerouting skills is to ask them to list some typical academic obstacles they have faced while pursuing a degree, then work with them to create concrete plans for surmounting those obstacles using college resources. For example, a student who fails a test may need to visit a tutoring center or talk with their professor about better study strategies.
- **Make a plan for an A.** A first-week course assignment from Nilson (2013) lets students demonstrate their understanding of growth mindset and grit. Nilson's original assignment asks students to describe what they will do to earn an A in a course. This could be adapted by directing students to tell how they used



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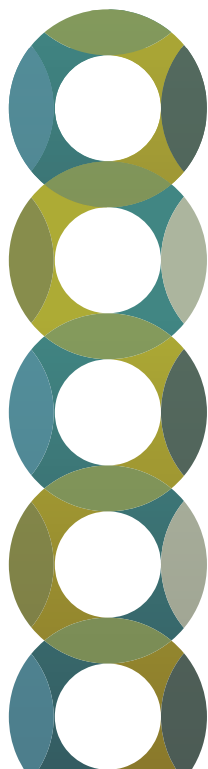
growth mindset and resilience strategies to overcome potential setbacks in the course. A professor might ask them to describe (a) how they will set the stage for learning the material and (b) what steps they will take if they fall short of earning an A on assignments. To support development of growth mindset and grit, students can be directed to discuss strategies within this assignment that center on focused effort, deliberate practice, and a sense of purpose, all of which Duckworth (2016) argues help develop grit.

Future Implications for Mindset and Resilience

Teaching students about growth mindset and resiliency is more like silver buckshot than a silver bullet (Yeager & Walton, 2011). However, we know that students who are exposed to this information and given opportunities to assimilate the ideas into their own views of learning and goal setting demonstrate significant benefits, such as higher retention rates and GPA. Students also credit these newly developed skills for an improved attitude toward difficult classes and for success in subjects that may have once challenged them.

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ALIGNING INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR STUDENT SUCCESS: CASE STUDIES OF SOPHOMORE-YEAR INITIATIVES

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About The Toolbox

The Toolbox is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative, learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

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