

On Course: A Comprehensive Program for Promoting Student Academic Success and Retention

By Skip Downing

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Dear Colleague,

For more than two decades, I have searched for effective strategies that will empower students to achieve greater success in college and in life. My quest had barely begun when it became clear that students aren't leaving higher education in droves because they don't know study skills or are unfamiliar with campus resources (though those skills and knowledge can certainly be a benefit).

Rather something much more foundational, more personal, is the cause of many students' struggle in higher education. The very best strategies I have discovered for helping students create success in college are gathered for educators in the On Course professional development workshops and for students in the *On Course* text.

After college and university educators attend an On Course professional development workshop, they often say, "I want to introduce my colleagues to some of these strategies...how should I do it?" Or they'll say, "I need to make a presentation at my college about my experiences here at the workshop...what should I include?" Or they'll say, "I think the *On Course* text is exactly what our students need...how can I convince decision-makers at my college who didn't attend the workshop?"

This DVD is an effort to provide brief but compelling answer all of these questions. Together with the handouts in this booklet, this DVD provides...

- An overview of the problems that keep today's capable students from being successful
- An explanation of how *On Course* differs from other student success approaches
- Data showing the positive impact of an *On Course* class on student success and retention
- Experiences of educators and students who are using the *On Course* text and strategies
- A description of the extensive support available to instructors of an *On Course* class.
- A sample On Course strategy (with full directions and handouts for facilitating)

Thanks for your efforts to empower your students to become active, responsible students. May these efforts enrich your life as much as it has mine!

Cheers,

Skip

Dr. Skip Downing

<http://www.OnCourseWorkshop.com>

CONTENTS OF THE DVD

Chapter 1: The On Course Story

College and University educators discuss their challenges of teaching today's students, and Skip Downing tells how these same professional challenges (along with some rough waters in his personal life) sent him on a quest to discover specific strategies for empowering students to achieve greater success in college...and beyond.

Handout A: National Retention Rates: Shows the crises of attrition in higher education where as many as one half of first-year students depart before their second year. As a consequence, many academically capable students abandon their dreams of a college degree, educators have fewer upper-level students to teach and counsel, and institutions lose much needed income.

Chapter 2: Rethinking Student Success Courses

Students and educators identify the obstacles that keep today's students from achieving their full potential in college, and Skip Downing explains why (re)empowering students to be active, responsible learners is a necessary foundation for improving student academic success and retention.

Handout B: The Pyramid of Academic Success: Shows how empowering students to be active responsible learners is the foundation for helping them learn essential study skills, utilize college resources, and maximize their academic success.

Handout C: Data from On Course Programs: Shows the dramatic increase in retention of students who participate in a class or program using the *On Course* text. Additional results, including data about improved academic success, are available at www.OnCourseWorkshop.com.

Chapter 3: The Choices of Successful Students

Students and educators discuss how the *On Course* text contributes to improved academic success, and Skip Downing explains all eight inner qualities that *On Course* helps students strengthen, empowering them to make wiser choices and therefore achieve greater success in college and in life.

Handout D: The Choices of Successful Students: Identifies eight pivotal choices of successful students in the realms of Personal Responsibility, Self-Motivation, Self-Management, Interdependence, Self-Awareness, Lifelong Learning, Emotional Intelligence and Self-Esteem. These are the "soft skills" that *On Course* helps students develop as a foundation for making wise choices in their academic, professional, and personal lives.

Chapter 4: On Course Learner-Centered Resources

Educators discuss how they use the extensive resources provided for the *On Course* text, and Skip Downing explains the benefits of educators using a learner-centered approach.

Handout E: On Course Resources: A catalog of the numerous *On Course* resources for educators. After more than four decades as an educator, Skip Downing, in partnership with Houghton Mifflin Publishers, has created an extensive set of resources that will help any educator empower students to achieve more of their potential in college and in life.

Chapter 5: Three Students' Stories

The *On Course* text contains 16 essays in which college and university students describe how they used *On Course* strategies to achieve success despite serious obstacles. These obstacles range from academic challenges such as comprehending difficult text books and adapting to challenging teaching styles to personal challenges of binge drinking and abusive relationships. In this section, three of these students tell their stories, exemplifying the complex lives and challenges faced by today's students.

Handout F: Three Students' Stories: Provides the text of the three students' stories about how they used *On Course* strategies to overcome obstacles to their success in college. These essays were all winners in the On Course Student Essay Contest. Any present or former student of an *On Course* class is invited to submit an essay to this on-going contest. All entrants will receive a Houghton Mifflin student planner, and winners will receive a \$100 prize and publication in the next edition of *On Course*. Contest information can be found at <http://OnCourseWorkshop.com/Contest.htm>

Chapter 6: Sample *On Course* Learner-Centered Activity--Language of Responsibility

On Course uses a variety of learner-centered approaches for empowering students to achieve their greatest potential—academically, personally, and professionally. The *On Course* text provides students with short readings about success strategies and follow-up journal entries in which students apply what they have learned to their own lives. The *On Course Facilitators Guide* and the author's *On Course Web Site* provide hundreds of learner-centered activities for instructors to use during class time; these activities provide reinforcement and deepening of the success strategies that students read and write about as home assignments. Below are the directions and handouts for one of these learner-centered activities: "The Language of Responsibility." This Chapter of the DVD shows a group of educators discussing their experience of using this activity with their students.

Handout G: Facilitator's Notes for "The Language of Responsibility": Here are step-by-step directions for facilitating a sample learner-centered activity from *On Course*. This is an ideal activity to give participants an experience of what *On Course* provides to students.

Handout H: Inner Voices: A set up for activity.

Handout I: The Language of Responsibility: A work sheet for the activity.

National Retention Rates

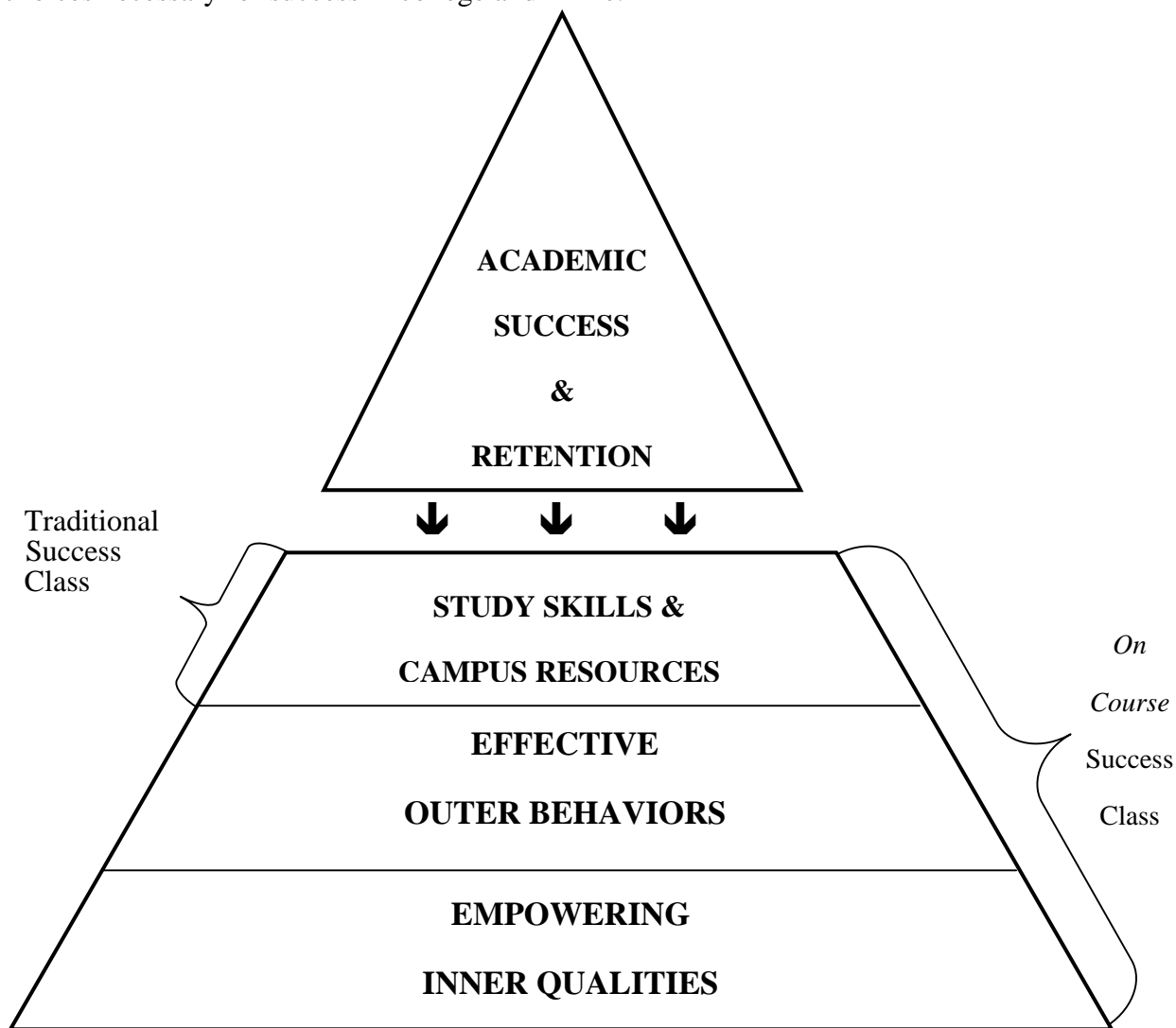
Degree Level	N	SD*	Mean Retention %	Mean Attrition %
2-Year Public	447	16.4	51.6	48.4
2-Year Private	52	29.3	61.7	38.3
BA/BS Public	66	16.2	66.4	33.6
BA/BS Private	296	16.5	70.9	29.1

*Standard Deviation

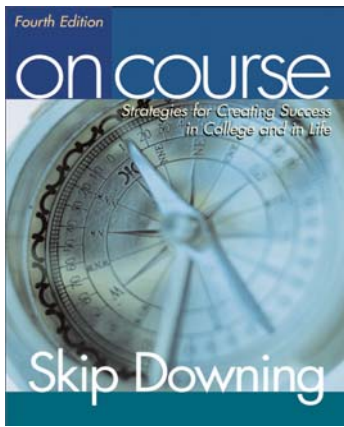
Adapted from ACT Institutional Data File, 2005

ON COURSE: A Comprehensive Foundation for Academic Success and Retention

With attrition at high levels, many colleges and universities turn to student success classes for a solution. In choosing the content of a student success class, the key question is “What causes our students to struggle?” The traditional answer has been that students lack effective study skills and don’t make thorough use of campus resources. While students certainly benefit from exposure to study skills and campus resources, *On Course* suggests that a more foundational deficit exists for many students, even those who are academically capable. They have not yet developed the inner qualities and outer behaviors that will empower them to make the wise choices necessary for success in college and in life.

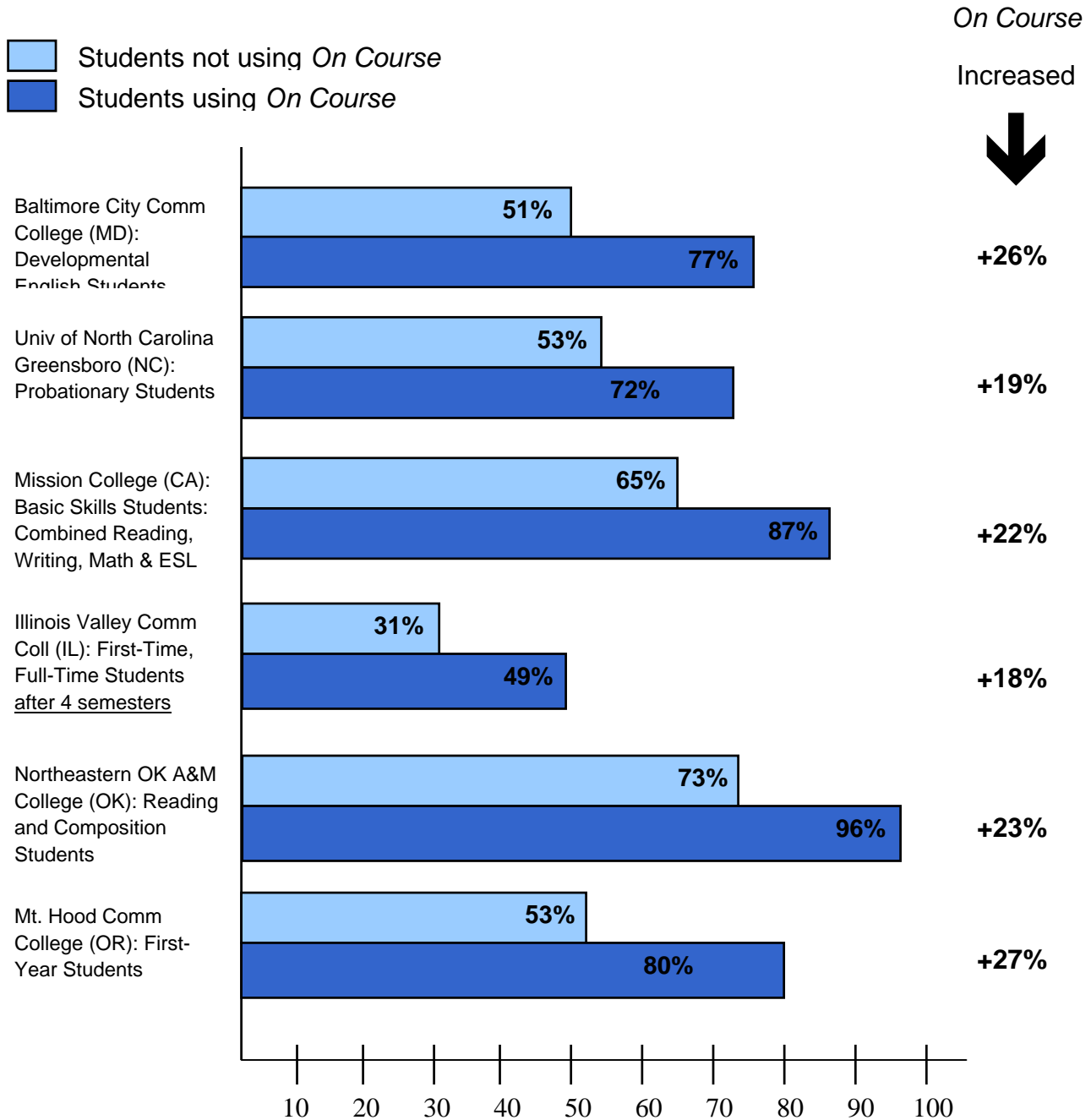


In addition to study skills, *On Course* helps students develop eight empowering inner qualities: personal responsibility, self-motivation, self-management, interdependence, self-awareness, lifelong learning, emotional intelligence, and high self-esteem. This solid foundation supports them to make wise choices in both their personal and academic lives. Studies at numerous colleges and universities document compelling evidence that *On Course* significantly increases student academic success and retention! This evidence is posted at www.OnCourseWorkshop.com/Data.htm.



Increased Retention with *On Course*

Colleges and universities using the *On Course* text are significantly improving retention of their first-year students. Here's data from *On Course* programs at colleges and universities around the country.*



* Studies conducted by individual institutions. To read their complete reports, see www.OnCourseWorkshop.com/Data.htm

CHOICES OF SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS

SUCCESSFUL STUDENTS...	STRUGGLING STUDENTS...
1. ...accept PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY , seeing themselves as the primary cause of their outcomes and experiences.	1. ... see themselves as Victims, believing that what happens to them is determined primarily by external forces such as fate, luck, and powerful others.
2. ...discover SELF-MOTIVATION , finding purpose in their lives by discovering personally meaningful goals and dreams.	2.have difficulty sustaining motivation, often feeling depressed, frustrated, and/or resentful about a lack of direction in their lives.
3. ...master SELF-MANAGEMENT , consistently planning and taking purposeful actions in pursuit of their goals and dreams.	3. ...seldom identify specific actions needed to accomplish a desired outcome. And when they do, they tend to procrastinate.
4. ...employ INTERDEPENDENCE , building mutually supportive relationships that help them achieve their goals and dreams (while helping others do the same).	4. ...are solitary, seldom requesting, even rejecting, offers of assistance from those who could help.
5. ...gain SELF-AWARENESS , consciously employing behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes that keep them on course.	5. ...make important choices unconsciously, being directed by self-sabotaging habits and outdated life scripts.
6. ...adopt LIFELONG LEARNING , finding valuable lessons and wisdom in nearly every experience they have.	6.resist learning new ideas and skills, viewing learning as fearful or boring rather than as mental play.
7. ...develop EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE , effectively managing their emotions in support of their goals and dreams.	7. ...live at the mercy of strong emotions such as anger, depression, anxiety, or a need for instant gratification.
8. ... BELIEVE IN THEMSELVES , seeing themselves capable, lovable, and unconditionally worthy as human beings.	8. ...doubt their competence and personal value, feeling inadequate to create their desired outcomes and experiences.

On Course Resources

1. **On Course Facilitator's Manual**, now offered online, offers hundreds of suggestions and innovative strategies for providing a learner-centered classroom experience that will empower students to become active, responsible and successful learners.*
2. **Eduspace Course Cartridge**, created by the author, provides flexible, efficient and creative ways to present On Course classes that are fully or partially online.*
3. **Online Assessment Tools** allow students to do a free self-assessment of how they score on the eight On Course Choices of Successful Students, as well as a separate self-assessment of their preferred ways of learning. Additional resources at the Houghton Mifflin site include a learning styles self-assessment and downloadable self-management tools: calendar, next-actions list, tracking form, and 32-day commitment.*
4. **On Course I Workshops** provide a four-day immersion in learner-centered strategies that are will change the outcomes and experiences of educators across the curriculum. Unlike presentations that talk about educational theories, On Course workshops provide participants with the experience of specific strategies they can use immediately to help their students achieve greater success. Participants will leave with dozens of new strategies for their educational toolbox.**
5. **On Course II Workshops** offer an advanced professional development event for educators who want to add to their educational toolbox of learner-centered strategies from the On Course I Workshop and also learn how to design and facilitate engaging learning-centered experiences that fully engage students in the process of discovery.**
6. **On Campus Professional Development Workshops** are offered in lengths of one to three days, and they provide your educators with innovative strategies that can be employed by instructors across the curriculum as well as by student services personnel in their daily interaction with students.**
7. **On Course Ambassadors** is a group of educators who have completed at least the On Course I Workshop and whose common mission is to improve student academic success and retention on their campuses. OCAmbassadors use a private listserv to share experiences, resources, and lessons that will contribute to this goal.**
8. **On Course National Conference** is a festival for learner-centered educators. At this big conference with a little conference atmosphere, you'll have a challenge deciding which of the many engaging sessions you'll want to attend.**
9. **On Course Newsletter** is a bi-weekly e-zine that is received by thousands of educators worldwide. Each issue provides one or more "best practices" from innovative learner-centered educators. Subscribe to this free resource at <http://www.OnCourseWorkshop.com>.**
10. **Skip Downing's On Course Web Site** contains an archive of strategies originally published in the *On Course Newsletter*. Along with the Facilitator's Manual, this treasure trove of activities will provide you with all the learner-centered strategies you would ever want. A Google search engine allows you to find just what you want.*

*For more information, see the Houghton Mifflin On Course web site at [Insert URL] or email [insert email address].

**For more information, see author Skip Downing's On Course web site at <http://www.OnCourseWorkshop.com> or email Info@OnCourseWorkshop.com.

Three Students Stories

Lindsey Beck, Three Rivers Community College, CT

When I started college, I had been in an abusive relationship for almost three years. I was terrified to leave this man (I'll call him Henry) because we have a child together and he had convinced me that I had no worth as a human being without him. At 6'4", Henry is a foot taller and weighs twice as much as I do. He would punch or kick me until I was in so much pain I couldn't go to my classes. When I did go, I'd often leave early because he became convinced I was cheating on him and I didn't want to give him another reason to beat me. I have a fair amount of academic ability and I did well in high school, but I started allowing my emotions to overrun my intelligence. It was like I had a bunch of emotions in a bowl and I'd just pull one out at random when something happened. One day when my mother expressed concern about my bruises, I got furious at her, but instead of getting angry at Henry for beating me, I'd feel afraid, confused and depressed. Rather than stepping back and thinking logically about what was going on, I allowed my emotions to control me.

Studying became my escape. In my freshman year experience course, I loved expressing myself in my journals. In Chapter 8, I started writing about my emotions, and for the first time in years, I wasn't ashamed of my feelings. I decided to be totally honest, and I wrote down exactly what was going on and how I *really* felt about it (not what Henry told me I felt about it). Writing the journals really made me look at myself and ask, *What am I doing in this relationship?* When I read about all of the positive ways I could manage my emotions, I started looking at things as though I wasn't going to take it any more. I got stronger every day, and then one day I made the decision to leave Henry.

I've always done well at writing papers, studying and taking tests, but I've never really taken responsibility for my emotions before. I learned that I need to get my emotional life under control if I want the rest of my life to work. I now realize that how I feel at one moment isn't necessarily how I'll feel 10 minutes later. Emotions change. Why let something control you that is so temporary? By growing emotionally, I'm able to control my emotions instead of letting them control me. I am finally starting to picture a positive life for myself without Henry, and I am growing more confident everyday. My dream is to earn a degree in microbiology and make a difference by working for the World Health Organization. Enrolling in this course is the best life decision I will probably ever make. If I hadn't, ten years from now, I may not have wanted to change my life. However, I have been able to do that, and now I have my whole life ahead of me.

Jessie Maggard, Urbana University

The first friends I made in college were my teammates on the soccer team. After practice we started riding around, shopping, and going to parties. We almost never talked about school or personal problems. To them, play time was more important. I wasn't getting much sleep and I was exhausted all the time. I didn't feel like studying and when I went to class, I wasn't learning much. Then a couple of things happened that shook me up. First, my English teacher handed back a paper and told me it wasn't very good. I thought all day about what she said and it really bothered me. I'm the first person in my family to go to college, and I started worrying about whether I was going to make it. If I was doing poorly in a class that I thought was easy, what would happen in more difficult classes? Second, I learned that my parents were getting divorced. I tried talking about my feelings with some of my teammates, but they just listened and didn't say anything. I might as well have been talking to a wall, and I realized they weren't really interested in my problems.

The *On Course* book talks about how easy it is to get off course even when you want to be successful. That is so true. By the time soccer season ended, I was *way* off course and I knew I had to make some serious changes. At first I spent more time by myself. I wrote out a schedule and started to get more organized. Then I slowly began spending more time with people in my dorm, and over time I developed friendships with six amazing people who have really touched me. Doing well in school is important to them, too. We started studying together, and my grades began to improve. I even got comments from my teachers about how I had changed. Still, I felt weighed down by my parents' divorce and it was a huge distraction from my school work. One of my new friends had gone through her parents' divorce, and she gave me tips on how she had gotten through it. She encouraged me to sit down with my parents and talk about my feelings. I did, and it helped so much to talk with them and understand why they had fallen out of love with each other.

Through all of this, I've learned that when you get off course, you have to do something different. My soccer friends had different goals. I'm not trying to put them down. Their goals weren't bad, they just weren't my goals. My goal is to get my degree and teach kindergarten, and when I was hanging out with my soccer friends, I was headed in the wrong direction. I totally changed my peer group, and now I am back on course. I know I'm the only person who can change my life. I just need the courage to stand up for myself. At the time, changing seemed so difficult, but now in the big picture, it seems so easy.

Dominic Grasseth, Lane Community College

Enrolling in college at the age of 28 was very intimidating to me. Having dropped out of high school at 15, I had a real problem with confidence. Even though I had a GED and was earning a decent living as a car salesman, I still doubted that I was smart enough to be successful in college. I finally took the leap and enrolled because I want a career where I don't have to work 12 hours a day, six days a week and never see my family. However, by the second week of the semester, I found myself falling back into old habits. I was sitting in the back of the classroom, asking what homework was due, and talking through most of the class. Negative thoughts constantly ran through my mind: *The teachers won't like me. I can't compete with the 18-year-olds right out of high school. I don't even remember what a "verb" is. I can't do this.*

Then in my College Success class, we read chapter two of *On Course* about becoming a Creator and disputing "stinking thinking." I realized I had taken on the role of the Victim almost my whole life, and I was continuing to do it now. One day I was on my porch when I caught myself thinking my usual negative thoughts. It occurred to me that I was the only one holding me back, not the teachers, not the other students, not math, not English. If I wanted to be successful in college, I had to quit being scared. I had to change my thinking. So I made a deal with myself that any time I caught myself thinking negatively, I would rephrase the statement in a way that was more positive. I started to truly pay attention to the thoughts in my head and question the negative things I was telling myself. After that I began sitting up front in my classes and participating more. I've always been kind of scattered, so I started using a calendar and a dry erase board to keep track of what I had to do.

What amazes me is that I didn't really make that big a change, yet I finished the semester with a 4.0 average! All I did was realize that what I was saying to myself was my underlying problem. I am responsible for my thoughts, and the choice about whether or not to succeed is mine. These days when I have a ridiculous thought going through my mind and I change it, I smile. It's very empowering.

Directions for Facilitating “The Language of Responsibility”

Purpose: To have students...

- Practice language that supports their making responsible choices, and
- Meet and interact with a classmate, thus contributing to the creation of a community of learners.

Supplies:

- “Inner Voices” Handout
- “The Language of Responsibility” Handout

Directions: [This activity will take 35-60 minutes, depending on the time you devote to discussion. You can shorten the activity by skipping some steps.]

1. “How many of you are aware that you have voices chatting in your head most of the time? Well, so do our students. And the inner voices they listen to determine the choices they make, wise or foolish. One way to help students be more successful is to help them listen to inner voices that keep them on course in college and in life.”
2. “I’m going to ask volunteers to read aloud the five paragraphs on the **Inner Voices** Handout. Someone please read the first paragraph; then someone read the next; and continue reading down to the cartoon.”
3. “Now, let’s take a look at the cartoon. The character is a student responding in three different ways to the same event: receiving a failing grade on a test.” [Read the various balloons in the cartoon and ask participants to identify which inner voice is represented by each response. Answer: The balloon on the left is the Inner Critic; the balloon on the right is the Inner Defender; and the balloon in the middle is the Inner Guide.]
4. “Whichever voice our students listen to will determine what they do next. What’s the student’s likely next choice if she listens to each of these voices?” [Identify negative choices for Inner Critic & Inner Defender.]
5. “Now we’re going to watch a DVD in which Skip Downing, author of *On Course*, introduces an activity that we’re going to do. You’ll want to refer to your **Language of Responsibility** handout as he talks.” [On the DVD, show the first part of Chapter 6. When the screen goes dark, pause the DVD and continue giving Direction #6 below.]
6. “Working alone, translate as many of the statements as you can. In a few minutes, you’ll have a chance to compare your translations with others.” [5 minutes.]
7. “Now compare your translations one other person. Look for great translations. Or look for statements that were challenging to translate.” [If there is an extra person, create a trio.] [5-10 minutes]
8. “Let’s come back together and see what you’ve found. Who’s got a translation you’d like to read to the whole group? Who’s got a challenging one and would like to hear how others translated it?” [5-10 minutes]
9. “What are some of the main differences between how Victims and Creators think about the same outer event?” [Victims use their energy to blame, complain, and make excuses. Creators accept ownership—accountability—for their outcomes and experiences...and they create a plan to improve the situation. In other words, Creator use their energy to improve their outcomes and experiences.] “What would it be like to teach students who thought and talked like Creators?” [5-10 minutes]
10. “In this activity, you started working alone to translate the Victim statements. Then you discussed your translations with others in a small group. And finally, we discussed the translations as a large group. How

might you use or adapt this basic learner-centered structure [solo/pair/share] to help students engage actively with information or a skill you want them to learn?" [This step can be skipped if time is short.] [5-10 minutes]

11. "The activity that we just did used Victim statements that were made by educators. The *On Course* text has a similar activity for students to translate Victim statements that students make. Now we're going to watch a discussion among a group of college and university educator who have used this activity with their students." [Show Chapter 6 of the DVD, in which educators discuss their experience of doing this activity with their students. If time allows, invite comments.] [5-10 minutes]

FACILITATORS NOTE: Occasionally someone will make the point (perhaps vigorously) that **sometimes people really are victims**. There are, they point out, health problems, racism, weather disasters, social problems and many other difficulties that victimize innocent people. Here's what it says in the *On Course* text (page 25, 5th ed.):

This claim, of course, is true. At times we *are* all affected by forces beyond our control. If a hurricane destroys my house, I am a victim (with a small "v"). But if I allow that event to ruin my life, I am a Victim (with a capital "V").

The essential issue is this: Would it improve your life to act *as if* you create all of the joys and sorrows in your life? Answer "YES!" and see that belief improve you life. After all, if you believe that someone or something out there causes all of your problems, then it's up to "them" to change. What a wait that can be! ...

If, however, you accept responsibility for creating your own results, what happens then? You will look for ways to create your desired outcomes and experiences despite obstacles. And if you look, you've just increased you chance of success immeasurably!

INNER VOICES

The world of self-criticism on the one side and judgment toward others on the other side is a major part of the dance of life.

—Hal Stone & Sidra Stone

There is a voice within each of us, the Inner Critic, that sometimes sounds like Charlton Heston in the Ten Commandments or the wicked witch in the Wizard of Oz or sometimes like a seemingly concerned God-like parental voice that proclaims judgments on our actions, thoughts, feelings and our bodies.

—Ruth Berlin & Abby Rosen

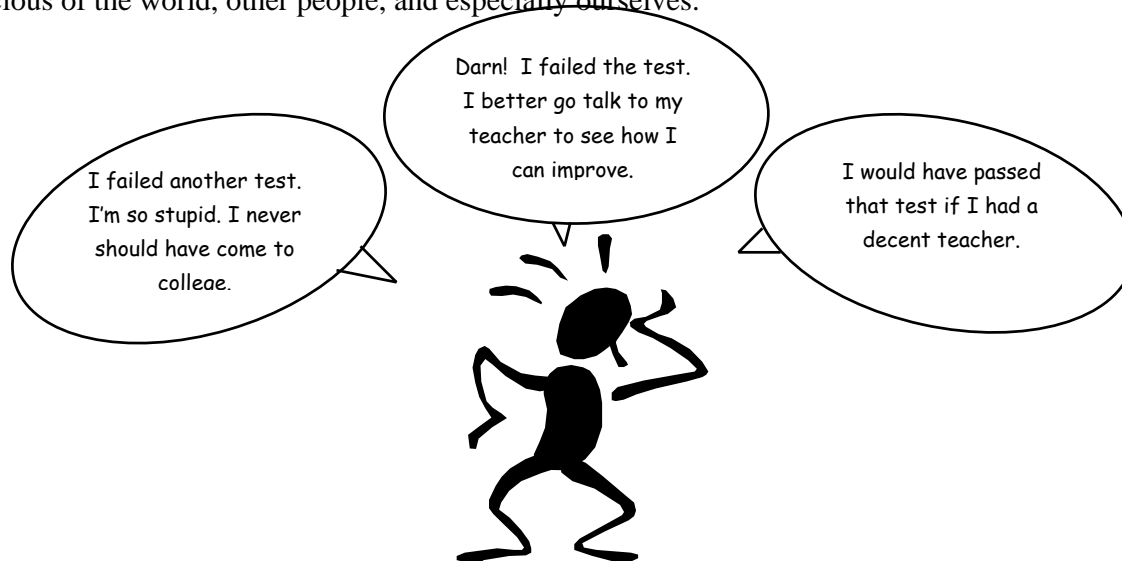
VICTIM VOICES

INNER CRITIC: The Inner Critic judges us. It blames us, complains about us, demeans us. This voice often sounds like a recording of critical parents and other judgmental adults we have known. Its positive intention seems to be protecting us from attack from the outside; through constant self-criticism, the Inner Critic hopes to perfect our actions, thoughts, and feelings to meet the approval of others and thus avoid their displeasure and possible punishment.

INNER DEFENDER: The Inner Defender judges others. It blames others, complains about them, demeans them. This voice often sounds much like a scared, confused little child backed into a dangerous corner. Its positive intention seems to be fending off criticism and punishment from powerful others. As such, the Inner Defender becomes a master of the preemptive strike.

CREATOR VOICE

INNER GUIDE: The Inner Guide offers an objective and wise perspective about ourselves and others. It neither demeans nor attacks. Instead, The Inner Guide observes the events in a Creator's life, asking simply: *Am I on course or off course? If I'm off course, how can I best get back on course?* Our Inner Guides tell us the absolute truth (as best we can know it at that moment), allowing us to be more fully conscious of the world, other people, and especially ourselves.



WHEN LIFE COMES CALLING, WITH WHICH INNER VOICE WILL I RESPOND?

IT'S MY CHOICE.

THE LANGUAGE OF RESPONSIBILITY

VICTIM LANGUAGE

VICTIMS BELIEVE THAT THEIR OUTCOMES AND EXPERIENCES ARE DETERMINED BY FORCES BEYOND THEIR CONTROL, SUCH AS POWERFUL OTHERS AND LUCK. THEY BELIEVE THEY ARE MERELY PAWNS IN THE CHESS GAME OF LIFE. THEIR LANGUAGE IS CHARACTERIZED BY BLAMING, COMPLAINING, AND EXCUSING.

CREATOR LANGUAGE

CREATORS BELIEVE THAT THEIR OUTCOMES AND EXPERIENCES ARE THE NATURAL CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR CHOICES. THEY BELIEVE THEY ARE CHESSMASTERS WHO **CREATE, PROMOTE, OR ALLOW** ALL THAT HAPPENS IN THEIR LIVES. THEIR LANGUAGE IS CHARACTERIZED BY OWNERSHIP AND ACTION PLANS.

1. Today's students are totally unmotivated. I've tried everything and, believe me, nothing works.

I haven't figured out what motivates my students. I'm going to ask my colleagues what they do.

2. I've been too upset by something that happened at my college to get anything out of this workshop.

I've allowed my upset to distract me. Tomorrow I'll focus on being present and learning something new.

3. I get no recognition for all I do at my college.

4. My students never do their assignments.

5. I can't learn anything in this workshop because the room is so cold.

6. My advisees insist that I fill out their schedules for them. They never do a thing to help themselves.

7. I saw people breaking the commitments we agreed on. A good facilitator would confront them.

8. I'm always getting stuck on another college committee, and I'm running myself ragged.

9. I'm quiet because I'm a new instructor and I really don't have anything to contribute.

10. I don't get paid what I'm worth.

11. I'm a real grouch in the morning until I've had my coffee.

12. Students drive me crazy because they never turn in their financial aid applications on time.

13. I'm tired of the same people talking all of the time. I'd like to hear what other people have to say.