

Academic Self-Sabotage

Understanding Motives and Behaviors of Underperforming Students

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The warning bell rang, signifying the impending start of 3rd period, and 25 rowdy juniors and seniors piled into my tiny third-floor classroom. One student's voice cut through the cacophony of students shuffling to their desks: "Why did you give me a D on SchoolLoop [the online gradebook]?" Jasmine demanded. Some students kept going about their business; others turned to look at her. "Hmmm," I answered, setting up the projector, "I think it might be because you didn't turn in that *Death of a Salesman* essay." She paused for a second, before announcing, "Well, if I fail as a student—you fail as a teacher."

The students who were looking at Jasmine turned their heads in anticipation of my reaction. I stood there, paralyzed, staring back at her and wondering if she was right. After all, Jasmine was a student who never missed a day of my class. Without fail, when the bell rang for 3rd period, she was there, engaged and ready to learn. And yet Jasmine's single line in my grade book was a disaster of zeros, half-credit scores, and incompletes. Her grade for the first semester was a D—passing but not University of California/California State University eligible.

Jasmine's performance concerned me greatly, and thus I sought advice from a veteran teacher. "If that girl were in my class every day," the teacher said curtly, "there is no way she would have a D." Jasmine's reproachful outburst, and my follow-up conversation with the veteran teacher, haunted me. After all, I was convinced that I was doing everything possible to ensure the success of my students—all my students. I sincerely believed in their potential; I worked tirelessly to create relevant, engaging curriculum; I stayed hours and hours after school offering extra tutoring and support; I reflected constantly on my practice. And yet, like Jasmine, too many of my students

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were not “successful” in the way I had hoped they would be in my class. The years I had spent philosophizing about “equity” now seemed useless; they did not tell me what to do when a student did not turn in an essay that the class had been working on for weeks.

It might have been easy to stop at the answer offered by colleagues in other disciplines: “The students just don’t care.” Yet this response seemed at odds with the expressed desire of most Franciscano High School students to do well in school. On the first day of class, the students shared their motivation for doing well in high school and going on to college. In response, I set high expectations for them, exemplified by rigorous lesson plans, nightly homework assignments, and ongoing project work. As the quarter progressed, however, a surprising and disturbing number of zeros began to fill my grade book. It became increasingly clear that some of the students were not turning in classwork I knew they had completed, while others were simply not completing their homework, and still others, like Jasmine, had completely missed important project deadlines. Although I made relentless attempts to intervene and support these students, their failure to complete or turn in assignments resulted in their earning Ds in my class.

The implications of these low grades were grave: a D does not count toward fulfilling admission requirements and therefore makes a student ineligible to apply to California public universities. This aside, I also was deeply concerned with my students’ learning—if Jasmine wasn’t submitting her essays, did that mean she did not know how to write them? Was she lacking in the composing skills that I had assumed she had? Or was there another reason behind her failure to produce them? Without the product, I was not able to fully evaluate her abilities, nor was I able to assess whether I was teaching writing effectively.

The concern I felt for my struggling students was intensified by the school’s commitment to serve *every* student, exemplified by the administration’s decision to implement an “antiracist” framework to its professional development and practices. In compliance with this framework, all teachers are required to disaggregate grades by race, charting the number of Ds and Fs given to Latino and African American students. We discuss our grades in both department-wide and one-on-one meetings. This disaggregating process, though painful and exasperating at times, forced me to look more closely at some of my struggling students. I began to ask myself more strategic, pointed questions: What assignments had my students missed, and which had they completed? How had I set up those assignments? What patterns could I see in their behavior? By conceptualizing these questions, I began to realize that I had the power to try and change these dynamics. I could conduct a directed inquiry with select students wherein I probed questions related to patterns of behavior and motivation.

Hence, I arrived at the following research question: Why do some students who clearly value academic success fail to complete or turn in important essays and homework assignments?

MY SCHOOL

Founded in 1890, Franciscano High School is an inner-city public high school located in Northern California. Like its surrounding neighborhood, Franciscano's student body is both racially and linguistically diverse. As indicated on the school's website, among the total 850 students 45% are Latino, 22% are Asian, 17% are African American, 8% are White, 4% Filipino, and 4% are students who identify as mixed race or "other." Roughly 14% are classified as having learning disabilities and have been assigned Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Nearly half (45%) fall under the category of "English language learners" (ELLs); many of these students have only recently immigrated to the United States from countries like Mexico, Honduras, China, the Philippines, Yemen, and Ethiopia. While the majority of ELLs are initially placed in English language development classes, there is a big push at Franciscano High to mainstream the students. As a result, many recent immigrants are enrolled in mainstreamed classes, creating a dynamic in which U.S.-born students work together with students who have been in the country for only a year or two. The school also has many cultural clubs for students to participate in and learn about each other's cultures; in this way we seek to build a diverse yet integrated community.

Over 60% of the student body is considered to be socioeconomically disadvantaged, and a large number of these young people have responsibilities that extend beyond their schoolwork: They hold jobs to help support their families, take care of younger siblings, and perform housework duties. While the school's official academic mission is to "prepare *all* students for college and careers with rigorous courses," the reality is that many students are not being prepared for life beyond high school. Despite recent gains in test scores and graduation rates, the school continues to be on the federal government's "persistently low achieving schools" list. Moreover, of all Franciscano High students who go on to attend 4-year universities, very few actually graduate within 6 years. In fact, only 10% of students test as "college ready" for the California State University system. Consequently, despite the school's best intentions, students are *not* being prepared to attend college.

Ironically, these grim statistics are at odds with the motivations of Franciscano High School's faculty, who are passionate, professional, and committed to social justice. Time and again, I witnessed teachers staying

late into the evening to tutor their students or helping them apply to universities and gain access to scholarships. The teachers are committed and infinitely patient and will stop at nothing to facilitate their students' academic achievement. Again, I was led to wonder if their passion and sincere caring might actually be working *against* us. For example, because most teachers accept late work, the students have come to understand that deadlines are very flexible. Within this context, teacher and student engage in an accountability tug-of-war. Thus, I couldn't help but wonder whether we've kept students from developing work habits they need for high school and beyond.

Currently, I teach 4 periods of English 11/12 (classes that combine both juniors and seniors), one period of English 9, and an Advisory class that meets 2 times a week (made up of some of my 11th-graders). For my research, I decided to focus on juniors in my 11th-/12th-grade classes, since they'd already spent several years in high school and are expected to have developed high school "work habits." Ultimately, I was interested in exploring why some of my juniors, even after 2 years of high school, continued to struggle with turning in assignments and essays in my class.

HOW I COLLECTED AND ANALYZED DATA

To address my questions within this context, I selected three focal students who had earned Ds in the first semester and collected a variety of data on them, including attendance records, grades, questionnaires, and one-on-one interviews. Unlike the students earning Fs, who were constantly truant, my students earning Ds were usually present but failed to turn in homework assignments or essays and projects. In addition to the behavioral criteria, I selected a group that ranged in race and gender. Although I do not claim that the experiences of three students can represent those of the entire student body, I did want to gain insight by selecting students who I felt represented something of the diversity of the school. Of the three juniors, two are female and one is male. One female student is Latina and the other mixed-race African American and Filipino; the male focal student is Latino. The female Latina student was born outside the United States, while the other two were born in this country.

To deconstruct exactly why I had given these students D grades, I accessed their Semester 1 grades using the online gradebook SchoolLoop. This program allowed me to see the students' overall grades, as well as a breakdown by category (Classwork, 35%; Formal Assessments, 25%; Informal Assessments, 25%; Homework, 15%). This subdivision was important because it allowed me to see in which areas students were strong and in which they struggled.

I conducted two initial surveys with my focal students to gain insight into their beliefs related to academic success and responsibilities to complete assignments. Then, I conducted one-on-one interviews that allowed me to probe student motivation more deeply. I requested that the students elaborate on why they did not do their homework by asking, “What do you do when you get home from school?” and “Do you have a place where you write down your homework?” When asking about specific assignments, I posed questions such as “Why did you not turn in the literary analysis essay? Did you start it? If you started it, why didn’t you complete it?” and “Do you feel you could write an essay at home by yourself? What happens when you get stuck?” In conducting the interviews, I used these questions as guides only. While I hoped to have all questions answered, I allowed the interviews to progress organically—using the student’s responses to tailor the order and wording of subsequent questions. This approach allowed for a more “conversational” style interview. All the interviews were recorded, and I also took handwritten notes while conducting them.

I organized my data by making a chart of the information I gathered and used it to look for patterns. In reviewing the data from both the pre-interview surveys and the interviews, I noticed that there were clear categories in the data that reflected “homework” and “essays,” on the one hand, and student “behavior” and “motivation,” on the other. As a result, I coded and organized the data within these four categories. Through this process of data analysis, I began to understand each focal student individually and holistically.

WHAT I FOUND REGARDING THE FOCAL STUDENTS

After documenting the findings that resulted from my analysis of the focal students, I offer possible explanations for patterns of behavior and motivation regarding their academic performance.

Jasmine

Jasmine, who identifies as mixed-race African American and Filipino, epitomizes the brilliant-but-struggling student; she is perceptive, insightful, and quick thinking but does not turn in the assignments she needs to, to earn a high grade. Jasmine expressed a great desire to succeed academically, stating that her ultimate goal is to attend a California university as an engineering student. She explained, “Without an education you can’t really do anything. Most jobs won’t even hire you without a high school diploma.” Yet her stellar attendance record (she only missed one class in the first semester) and consistent in-class participation were not enough. Jasmine’s D (63.5%) for the semester broke down as follows:

Category	Weight	Score
Classwork (including participation)	35%	92%
Formal Assessments (essays, tests)	25%	27%
Homework	15%	42%
Informal Assessments (quizzes, projects)	25%	73%

As indicated by the chart, Jasmine's strongest areas of performance were "Classwork and Participation." Unsurprisingly, she also rated participation, classwork, and attendance as the most important categories of academic tasks. Although she is younger than many of the other students in my mixed 11th-/12th-grade class, Jasmine often offered her opinion confidently during class discussions. For example, in a recent classwide discussion of the "American Dream," Jasmine disagreed with many of her classmates that hard work guarantees success in the United States. She boldly stood her ground, critiquing Horatio Alger's argument by discussing the many inequalities that impede certain groups of people from achieving their goals. She voiced her opinion readily on provocative topics and avidly participated in debates and Socratic seminars. Jasmine also completed the majority of her classwork. These assignments are usually short and manageable; they include quick writes, text annotations, vocabulary sentences, and reading-response questions.

Jasmine's performance in school was at odds with her lack of completion of out-of-class tasks—indeed, with her perception of the latter. In her questionnaire, Jasmine reported that she "often" does homework, but, as evidenced by her homework performance (42%), she rarely completes homework assignments, and when she does, she turned them in late for partial credit. When asked to clarify the obstacles impeding her from completing her homework, Jasmine reported, "I get lazy and I sometimes forget." In an effort to understand *why* Jasmine "forgets," I asked her a series of more specific questions about her life after school. "I don't write down my homework anywhere," she revealed. "I don't even think of it when I get home."

Jasmine recounted that when she gets home, she either watches TV or chats on the computer. She continued, "If I don't do it at school, it won't get done." Jasmine's explanation revealed that she does not "forget" to do homework; rather, she does not even think about it outside of school. Homework is not a part of her routine.

It is important to note that Jasmine *did* make an effort to complete some homework during the *school day*, specifically during class. This effort signified that she indeed cared about her education, as discussed earlier. However, she reported that on the occasions she did do English homework, she usually "will start but not finish it." She explained, "Most likely I'll get stuck and not know an answer." As a result of "getting stuck," Jasmine often stopped working on the assignment entirely.

The problem of “getting stuck” was exacerbated when Jasmine attempted longer written assignments, usually essays. As evidenced by her grades, she did not turn in the major writing assignments of the semester and, as a result, earned a 27% in the Formal Assessment category. While we worked on these major essays in class through both writing workshops and computer lab time, I required all students to finish their work outside of class. Hence, although Jasmine began and worked on these large assignments in class, she did not finish and submit her work. When probed, Jasmine reported that when working on an essay, she will usually “finish it but not turn it in.”

My assumptions around Jasmine’s early failure to turn in work were that she was either defiant or lazy. I knew, from the examples of in-class writing I had received from her, that she was an eloquent writer. In addition, her paragraphs were well organized and she was facile with syntax, using a variety of complex sentences. And yet when I devoted an entire class period to outlining an essay, she would write only a few lines. Every time I asked her if she needed any help she shook her head no. It always seemed to me that she just needed *time*, but even when 50 minutes were allocated she would produce less than a paragraph of writing. I admit that I grew frustrated, and thus I would spend the period helping my other 24 students. I would thus send Jasmine home to finish her essay, but it would never come back.

I remembered Jasmine’s struggle with academic writing during a timed in-class essay-writing assignment. Following our dynamic class discussion of the “American Dream,” during which Jasmine was a key speaker, I asked students to write an argumentative essay in which they sided with either Horatio Alger or Harlan L. Dalton. Jasmine began writing immediately and after several minutes paused and called me over. “When was the 14th Amendment ratified?” she asked. “Don’t worry about that,” I said. “Just leave a blank and you can come back to it and fill it in.” A few minutes later I circled back to her and noticed she hadn’t written anything new. “I’ll look it up,” I told her. As soon I shared the information with her, she filled it in and continued writing furiously for the rest of the class period, but ran out of time before getting to the conclusion. It was shocking to me that this small piece of information had impeded her from moving on with her writing. This made me think back to a literary analysis piece we had written a few months earlier: Had a similar roadblock prevented her from getting past the introduction of her essay?

Rather than grading the “American Dream” essay as incomplete, I decided to give Jasmine a chance to complete it for a better grade. Like the other essays, this one went home and disappeared. Yet surprisingly, several weeks later, the essay reappeared along with a conclusion. I asked Jasmine what had motivated her to finish the essay. “I was at home flipping through papers,” she said, “and I seen my grade had gone from an A to an F. So I found the paper and finished it.” Intrigued, I asked her why she hadn’t finished it earlier. “I forgot or got lazy,” she replied. “What do you mean you

‘got lazy?’” I probed. “I like it to sound good,” she explained, just as in her questionnaire; “I need to find the right words so it takes me a long time.” Again the same issue caused Jasmine’s struggle: She could not express herself in a way that seemed adequate. Yet this time, she persevered. She explained that the grade motivated her and that the topic was easier than others because she knew a lot about it.

Rather than forgetfulness or laziness, it seemed that a peculiar *perfectionism* might be behind Jasmine’s struggle with writing. Jasmine admitted to me, “I feel like I *could* write an essay by myself, but I just *choose* not to . . . because I can’t concentrate. I get stuck because I don’t know what to write.” Her struggle therefore seemed to be mostly with concentration, figuring out what she wants to write, and finding ways to express herself that she considers appropriate: “I think of a sentence before I write it, but I don’t know what to say. I get stuck. I like to sound educated so I get stuck.” As elucidated, Jasmine was troubled by a desire to get the words just right, or sound “educated.” Given Jasmine’s high level of oral expression and critical thinking, it must be frustrating for her to not be able to express herself on paper with the same ease.

Hence, Jasmine’s propensity to “get stuck” when completing assignments indicated a perceived perfectionism around academic writing. When she “got stuck,” Jasmine stopped and waited to “get back to it, at school.” The reality was that if the assignment was required to be typed, as most of my longer assigned essays are, Jasmine did *not* get back to writing. As a result, she did not complete the assignments and did not receive credit.

Mateo

Mateo, a sixteen-year old Latino male born and raised right near the high school, contributed great energy to my 4th-period English 11/12 class. Much like Jasmine, he was insightful, confident, and engaged and offered a strong voice in our class. Although he faced significant adversity every day, including personal family problems and health issues, he consistently came to class with a positive attitude and desire to learn. Mateo did not think about life beyond high school, and he had no idea what he might want to pursue as a career. Still, he understood the importance of academic success. Echoing Jasmine, he explained, “Getting good grades and passing school is important to me because a high school diploma means nothing in this world.” Over several months Mateo came to my classroom at lunch every day to make up the homework that he did not do at home. He was determined to pass, but given that he didn’t do schoolwork outside of class, achieving this goal was proving to be difficult. Like Jasmine, Mateo earned a D (67.45%) in his first semester of English 11:

Category	Weight	Score
Classwork (including participation)	35%	82%
Formal Assessments (essays, tests)	25%	68%
Homework	15%	20%
Informal Assessments (quizzes, projects)	25%	75%

Similar to Jasmine, Mateo almost always completed his in-class work. He was also an avid participator—often volunteering to read aloud and voluntarily answering questions when called on. In my informal observations of Mateo, I noticed that although he was quick to respond, he worked slowly, especially when the task involved writing. Further still, his written responses were usually brief and lacking in depth. I found myself having to push him to explain his argument or develop a complex analysis.

In the many months that Mateo was my student, he never turned in a piece of work that was to be completed outside of class. Cognizant of and truthful about his own performance, Mateo noted that he never did his homework. This is in part explained by Mateo’s perception of the weight of homework on his overall performance. While he said that homework was “important” for his academic success, he stated that it was less important than attendance, participation, classwork, and essays: “Small homework assignments are not so important, so I don’t really pay attention. I just don’t do it.”

While Mateo reported that he “forgets” about his homework, his later comments also indicated a lack of overlap between his school and home life. He explained, “My activities after school consist of me doing my workout at the gym or going out late with friends. Doing these activities caused me to forget about my homework.” Clearly, the activities that Mateo enjoyed did not *cause* him to “forget” about his homework; rather, homework was simply not part of his after-school routine—neither his family nor his friends encouraged him to bring academics into the home sphere. “Some days homework crosses my mind, some days it doesn’t,” Mateo explained, adding with a smile, “I’m distracted by other activities.” He spoke about homework with a lightness that suggested a casual approach to academics; he cared about his education, he wanted to succeed, and yet he didn’t understand the importance of continuing to practice reading and writing outside of the classroom. Even though I explained that class time is *not enough*, Mateo did not change his habits. His reality once he stepped out of Franciscano High School was disconnected from school, and my nagging voice was drowned out by other priorities and other realities.

One of Mateo’s great strengths was his ability to recognize when he needed help and to request it. As such, Mateo managed to complete several major writing assignments last semester. While I was helping him with

these essays, I came to understand that he lacked confidence in his own writing abilities. He explained, “When I start an essay I have help from my teacher. The reason I don’t finish the essay is because without help I get lost and I just give up.” Unlike Jasmine, Mateo did *not* feel that he could write an essay on his own. “I don’t trust my own writing,” he explained, “I don’t think it’s up to the standards so I don’t even do it.” Indeed, in the beginning of the year, Mateo was behind his peers in terms of writing ability; he did not know how to construct a topic sentence or critically analyze a quotation. Yet he answered brilliantly when I asked him to justify his rationale orally, and he flourished when I helped guide his writing assignments. Once these scaffolds weren’t present, though, I struggled to convince Mateo to trust in his own writing abilities. He still preferred to have “teachers sit down with us and work on the essay with us.” Thus, because he couldn’t “ask for help” when writing at home, Mateo did not even start.

Esperanza

Esperanza was a soft-spoken, sixteen-year-old Latina in my 2nd-period English 11/12 class. Given that she was very quiet and nondisruptive in class, it was easy to imagine that some teachers failed to notice her. When I talked to her individually, though, she was quite gregarious, eager to share her perspective. “I know I need to do well in school and go to college to be successful,” she began. “One of my dreams is to become a teacher. That’s what my parents want for me too.” Yet this drive to succeed in school was highly inconsistent with her academic behaviors. Most of the time she completed all her classwork but failed to transport it from her binder to the turn-in tray, while for other work, she shrugged and mumbled that she didn’t do it. Given her highly inconsistent performance throughout the semester, Esperanza earned a D (68%), with a breakdown as follows:

Category:	Weight:	Score:
Classwork	35%	83%
Formal Assessments	25%	62%
Homework	15%	48%
Informal Assessments	25%	65%

One of Esperanza’s greatest strengths was her ability to offer deep text analysis. Although she was one of the quietest students in the class, when I called on Esperanza to share, she offered interesting inferences and analyses of both fictional and expository texts. She also worked well in groups, but if paired with friends, she would go off task. Or she would begin listening to someone else’s conversation when she was supposed to be working.

Esperanza explained, “I get distracted easily. With anything in front of me I could get distracted.” On other occasions she just would not finish classwork that she didn’t like (usually writing). As with the other focal students, Esperanza’s perception of the importance of certain academic tasks mirrored her own strengths. While she labeled homework and participation as “not important,” she rated attendance, classwork, and essays as “fairly important.” As with the others, Esperanza’s failure to work at home hurt her grade in the class.

In the first semester of school, Esperanza completed less than half her homework. Many of these assignments were turned in late for partial credit, meaning she completed them late in class. Esperanza recognized this and stated that she only “sometimes” does her work. She explained, “I have some teachers that leave me a lot of homework and it is really hard so I forget on doing it sometimes.” As with the other students, her initial response was that she “forgets.” Given her brief comment about the workload, though, it seemed that there is something behind her reported forgetfulness.

Unlike my other focal students, Esperanza stated that when she comes home from school, she does her chemistry homework. She continued, “I do chemistry because that class is the hardest and that teacher gives the most homework.” She then did homework for her other classes if she “remembered” to. Esperanza did not write down her homework in a planner or on a piece of paper; rather, she flipped through her binder to see if there were any assignments she needed to do for the following day. She explained that “it’s hard—I forget what we learned when I get home.” Esperanza did not seem to feel the urgency or importance of doing homework, nor was she used to completing all of it every night. As a result, she completed her homework on some days and not others. When I gave her an opportunity to complete homework in class, she almost always took advantage of the time and turned the assignment in for partial credit.

Unlike with daily homework assignments, Esperanza *did* keep essays in her mind beyond the school day. Her reasoning was that “an essay is harder so I focus on it in my mind.” Similarly, she indicated on a class survey that essays were more important than homework to her academic success. After much pestering on my part, Esperanza did turn in the three major essays from the first semester. However, all these essays were submitted late, and in one case *so late* that I did not even have time to factor it into her final grade.

Esperanza offered several explanations for her behavior toward writing essays. She acknowledged that when she was assigned an essay, she would usually “start but not finish it,” or complete it after the deadline. Like Jasmine, Esperanza did believe that she could go home and write an essay. Indeed, Esperanza was a fairly high-skilled writer and could produce a well-written essay. Rather, then, her struggle seems to relate to her difficulty with completing a longer written piece. When asked directly,

she wrote, “Sometimes I don’t have any more ideas. Other times I forget to finish it or I just don’t want to keep doing it.” When I probed her to reveal what happens after she “runs out of ideas” (usually after the third paragraph), she stated, “I first ask my brother for help. Then I think even harder. Finally, 10 minutes later, I just give up. I decide just to not do the essay.” Despite this candid explanation, Esperanza *did* eventually turn in her essays, and the last was submitted on time. I therefore asked her about this last piece. She stated, “I wasn’t going to do the essay, but then I remembered I needed to get my grades up. So I found some information, I got notes, and I finished it.” In the end, the value she placed on academic success motivated her to finish the essay: she was able to connect her future goal of becoming a teacher with her current reality of being a high school student. Although she still “got stuck,” in the end she pushed herself through the process of completing these essays.

FURTHER EXPLANATION OF MY FINDINGS

Getting Stuck

As the preceding case studies revealed, all three focal students reported that they started their essays for English class but often gave up before they finished them. The difficulties the students faced with writing were unique to each of them: Jasmine struggled to find the “right words” to use, Esperanza “ran out of ideas,” and Mateo reported having trouble with everything from organization to analyzing quotations. Their shared struggle, however, was “getting stuck” while writing.

In my experience, it’s natural for students to hit roadblocks during the writing process—especially for a substantial essay of five or more paragraphs. These difficulties are not uncommon, even for more experienced writers. However, unlike these writers, my focal students lacked strategies to help them overcome these roadblocks, or resilience that would enable them eventually to persevere. As Mateo asserted, “The reason I don’t finish the essay is because without help I get lost and I just give up.” Esperanza hit her wall while trying to write the topic sentence of the third body paragraph of a literary analysis essay, while Jasmine became blocked when she didn’t “know what to say” or how to find the words to “sound educated.” When these students hit a wall, they gave up.

With every essay completed, the writing process became a little easier, and students’ endurance strengthened. For example, while Mateo admitted that he did not “trust” his own writing, he recognized that after completing a thematic analysis essay he had more confidence. He did not believe he could complete an essay on his own, but he felt as though he was getting

closer to that goal. This evidence suggests that as students practice formal essay writing, they are likely to gain confidence and develop resilience strategies. The implication is that teachers, then, must provide numerous and varied opportunities for students to write essays and be confident that students can work on their own before asking them to. We can also explicitly teach strategies for overcoming writing roadblocks to help students gain the ability and confidence to write independently. Teachers can also emphasize the importance of revision with the hope that students will not feel their first drafts need to be “perfect.” Students will benefit from understanding that writing is a process and a struggle that can be approached in multiple ways—but as with all struggles, students need support.

A Home–School Connection

As I walked around collecting homework from students, it was not uncommon or surprising to hear students mumble that they forgot to do their homework. However, I *was* surprised when all my case study students confirmed this in their written surveys. A closer look at their questionnaire responses elucidated the motives behind their “forgetting” behavior: Jasmine wrote, “I get lazy and I sometimes forget,” while Mateo shared, “My activities after school consist of me doing my workout at the gym or going out late with friends. Doing these activities causes me to forget about my homework.” Esperanza offered a third reason: “I have some teachers that leave me a lot of homework and it is really hard so I forget on doing it sometimes.” Hence, behind “forgetfulness,” the students suggest more probable reasons for not doing homework. Going to the gym does not *cause* one to forget about homework assignments, nor does the rigor of the expected work. Rather, for myriad reasons, these students have not formed a consistent habit of doing or thinking of schoolwork outside of school.

The excuse of “forgetting” is so common perhaps because it enables students to relieve themselves of responsibility. If students develop a habit of saying “I forgot,” they do not have to think more seriously or deeply about their patterns of behavior or motivations behind their behavior. Indeed, we all tend to “forget” when faced with a task we don’t feel comfortable with or find overwhelming. All my focal students became uncomfortable when I asked them to elaborate on their reported forgetfulness. Jasmine, for example, looked away from me or down at her paper, her voice quieting. Her body language suggested an internal struggle, which signified that I had forced her to recognize her explicit academic self-sabotage. Yet I feel bad because I played a role in what became self-sabotage by not offering sufficient support.

All three students reported that homework was “important” to academic success. They also all rated homework to be less important than

attendance and in-class work. While it is possible that they did not realize the importance of these tasks, it is also not uncommon to justify to oneself a choice to avoid difficult tasks by downplaying their importance. Mateo offered some insight in his interview, explaining, "Small homework assignments are not so important to me, so I don't really pay attention. I just don't do it." Mateo decided these short assignments did not matter, and thus he put them out of his mind. Esperanza also shared that while she did not think much about homework, "essays are harder" so she "focuses on them in [her] mind." It therefore followed that students were not completing homework possibly because they found it insignificant, or they believed (or hoped) they could do well in the class without doing it, or because they felt unable to complete the task without support and so gave up.

Concurrently, I was shocked to discover that none of my focal students wrote down reminders of their homework assignments. In the first week of school the students are all given planners for keeping track of their homework assignments. The interviews revealed that none of my focal students used these planners (several months into the school year, they did not even know where their planners were). While this was initially surprising, it became clear that all the focal students decided, consciously or subconsciously, that they wouldn't do schoolwork beyond the school day. The problems with doing homework seemed to have a history for these students.

Indeed, students' failure to write reminders about homework signified that these students had over time come to see "school" and "home" as *two different worlds*. Jasmine divulged that her after-school routine involved watching TV and chatting on the computer, and did not think of homework when she got home. "If I don't do it at school," she said, "it won't get done." Mateo shared a similar pattern of behavior: after school he went out with friends or went to the gym. He often came to class with stories of being out until four in the morning with friends and sleeping in his car. "Homework doesn't cross my mind," he said, "I'm distracted by other activities."

These students are not to blame for their separation of their "school" and "home" lives. There are countless reasons to explain why, from 1st grade through 11th, they did not develop the habit or skill of working at home. We mustn't turn to "blame," but instead look to ways that we can support their success. When my students enter college, they will be expected to read and write independently for sustained periods of time; these skills must be taught so that students like these three can gradually learn to assume responsibility for working outside of class, both in the present and to prepare them to achieve their dreams of higher education in their future. The discussion then turns to *how* to help students learn to work independently.

IMPLICATIONS FROM WHAT I LEARNED

When I began this project I admit that I felt a certain amount of frustration toward my focal students. While I recognized their many strengths and appreciated them greatly as people, I was aggravated by their failure to turn in homework assignments and essays. I sincerely felt that I was doing all I could for them, and yet they were not succeeding. The chasm between their dreams of success and the obstinate Ds they were earning seemed to be a black hole, inexplicable and destructive. After doing this research, I developed a radically different perspective on this phenomenon of what appears to be student academic self-sabotage, and have renewed my empathy for struggling students.

First, I have reopened my eyes to the reality that for many of my students, “school” and “home” (or whatever exists after school) are two separate worlds that seldom meet. I knew this was true for many socioeconomically disadvantaged students, but somehow, in the flurry of first-year teaching, I had failed to think about my students as people with lives outside of school. Perhaps because there are other, more pressing priorities, there is no one at home forcing them to complete their homework. And then for any number of other reasons, just because something was assigned, they did not necessarily complete it, regardless of its importance to their school success.

These findings hold several important implications for my practice and for other high school teachers, especially those teaching in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods. We simply cannot take for granted that if a student is motivated to succeed, she or he will automatically do schoolwork outside of school.

With regard to writing, I think that I need to provide students with frequent opportunities to write a variety of academic essays and I need to give them more help throughout the process. At home, assignments will have to be something they can accomplish without the support of the classroom. Given my students’ struggles with writing essays of five paragraphs or more, I will consider starting the year by assigning several shorter essays—about one page in length—to be completed during class. These one-page essays will require students to follow the structure of a formal academic essay and will ask of them the same critical thinking and analysis they use in any essay. Given the short length requirement, I hope the essays will be less intimidating than traditional essays. Once they master writing these, I will try to move them toward writing longer essays, also at first in class. This will give all students, regardless of their skill level or experience with independent writing, time to practice their writing skills, ways to get help throughout the process, and ways to demonstrate to the teacher their strengths and weaknesses. With this method, as students gradually gain both skills and confidence, the

teacher can then assign some independent writing to be completed outside of class, carefully monitoring what students can and can't do without support.

In addition to offering ample and frequent opportunities for students to write and ample and frequent support for writing, teachers could think about how to help students develop strategies for overcoming roadblocks in their writing. Specifically, teachers might guide students to understand themselves as writers by asking them to reflect on instances when they "get stuck." Teachers could remind the students that *all* writers, regardless of skill level, run into roadblocks when writing, but that they use strategies to keep going. Together, then, the class could brainstorm the various strategies they use to persevere in writing. These strategies could include asking a friend, sibling, or parent for help; checking notes from class; asking the teacher for help (in class or through email); or perhaps even taking a risk and writing something they are not fully confident in. After each essay, students could write a reflection in which they think back on their writing process, identifying both the roadblocks they encountered and the strategies they employed to overcome the problems and finish the essay.

Beginning in the first weeks of school, teachers need to identify those students who do not complete homework assignments or miss deadlines, and intervene as soon as possible. Once students are fully supported academically, teachers may still need to monitor the pull of the daily movement from home to school. If students are still having difficulty, teachers might try contacting parents or caregivers of these students to inform them of homework assignments and to explain explicitly *why* it is important to work outside of class.

If the "forgetting" problem persists, teachers might try using cell phones and computers to help students track their homework and grades. Teachers at Franciscano High School have long been employing planners and graphic organizers for homework tracking to no avail. However, students are incredibly adept at using cell phones. Teachers could instruct students to record their homework in their cell phones and to set up reminder alarms. The alarm could serve as a temporary interruption of the "home" realm, carrying with it reminders of the "school" realm. Although many teachers may feel nervous about permitting cell phone use in class, we could set a designated period of time to set up these alarms and teachers could walk around the room to monitor the process. Students could even act as "experts," instructing the teacher and other classmates how to set up reminders and alarms. The task could therefore be empowering for students and encourage them to take ownership of their academic achievement.

In addition to facilitating the setup of homework reminders, teachers could try giving students who are still struggling weekly progress notices in which they track their grades and get feedback from teachers about their strengths, weakness, and missing assignments. These progress notices could

provide students with constant feedback that may help them see a more direct, instantaneous connection between their assignments and their grade in the class, and they could give teachers additional information about where students continue to get stuck.

In the end, teachers will only learn about their students by *listening* to them and hearing about their strengths and struggles, about their perceptions of the work they are expected to do. Too often we wonder about what is going on with our students, why they are acting a certain way or *not* doing something we want them to do. Rather than speculate, we can get the answer directly from the source. We can ask students what they need and want from us as teachers. When I asked this of my focal students, Jasmine offered, “Constantly remind me. Explain and show me what I need to do or how to do something.” Mateo echoed, “I personally don’t like it when a teacher gives you a hard time about your work but it has helped me do my work.” Esperanza concluded, “I don’t know. Maybe every week give me a report of what I’m missing and make me stay on lunch or school to do it.” In essence, the students intimated that they *wanted* to be pestered, reminded, and harassed to turn in work. Their suggestions remind us that we must not give up on these struggling students. Rather, we must recognize what they *are* doing and pushing them to do what they are not.

Finally, we must keep in mind the goal of helping all students achieve academic independence. While I believe I can help by reminding and pestering my students, I want my students to appropriate the work habits and strategies and learning they need to work on their own. If I can achieve this, perhaps Mateo will have the confidence and skill to produce an essay without my help, and Esperanza will have the resilience and ability to return to a difficult part of her essay and finish it before the deadline. And maybe Jasmine will no longer explain her grade—whether a D or an A—by what I, her teacher, did or did not do. Instead, she will be empowered with the confidence and skills to complete her work on her own and earn the grade she aspires to receive.