

CeTEAL Community Podcast
Strategies for Promoting Student Learning
With your host, Jean Bennett and guest, Mary Fischer

00:03 Jean: You are listening to the CeTEAL Community Podcast. Today I have Mary Fischer she is
00:15 a learning specialist in the office of accessibility and disability services at
00:20 Coastal Carolina University. Welcome Mary! Mary: Thank you so much for having me well
00:25 Jean: Mary why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself.
00:27 Sure, um I'm a Southern California native. Um, new to Coastal Carolina, I've been here
00:32 about six months now and my background is in English and in higher education
00:36 administration. In terms of just students that I've worked with and universities
00:40 where I've been I got my degrees from the University of Southern California
00:44 which is where I started my career working with students with learning
00:46 disabilities. Jean: Oh the other... "laughter" Mary: the West Coast USC. I have to get used to that
now
00:52 that I'm in South Carolina. "Laughter" Jean: I don't think it's the one Mary: Exactly. And I've also
just
00:59 primarily worked with students who are traditionally underrepresented at the
01:02 college level so a lot of first-generation college students, women
01:06 and minority students in the STEM fields, and then students who are on academic
01:09 probation or working through a suspension recovery program. Jean: Glad that
01:13 you're here. Mary: Thank you very much. Jean: In our January/February news issue or the CeTEAL
01:18 news, um which is on our website by the way, you wrote an article titled
01:22 "Strategies for Promoting Student Learning". And I found this a fascinating
01:27 read and there's a lot of good information in here for faculty to
01:31 incorporate into their teaching. So I-I found it fascinating the first piece
01:36 when they talked uh about a survey or research that was done about a
01:40 discrepancy between students and professor expectations. Could you tell us
01:44 a little bit about that? Mary: Yes, I found that very interesting too because I feel as
01:49 though I see a lot of this in my day to day anecdotally and it was very neat to
01:53 actually see that come out in the research. The...let's see, UCLA higher
01:58 education Research Institute does a survey I believe it's every other year
02:03 but it may actually be as often as every year where they'll survey incoming
02:07 freshman students at a variety of institutions all over the country to
02:11 understand what their experience has been like in high
02:14 school from an academic perspective how much time they've really spent studying
02:18 how they've prepared what kind of grades they got and um how prepared they're
02:22 feeling going into college. And what they found is that the majority of students
02:27 did very well, they got at least B's, over 90% of them were at least hitting a
02:31 3.0 and in high school they were only studying an average of about five
02:35 hours a week to achieve those B's. Jean: Hmm Mary: So that surprised me "laughter" Jean: Yeah,
five hours a week, hmm Mary: Yes and most of them,
02:42 the majority of them actually felt that they were more prepared than their peers
02:46 going into the college situation, so that really gave me a great snapshot of the

02:51 mindset of our incoming students and how they're feeling about those skills "laughter"
02:55 Jean: Yes which should be um very interesting for faculty to understand them Mary: Yes
"laughter" Jean: Because the other
03:00 side of it is that faculty feel... Mary: Well that the students should have the skills
03:06 that they need to be successful at the college level. So I think what I'm seeing
03:09 is a gap and expectations of um skill development
03:13 upon entering college and what is necessary to be successful at the
03:17 college level between what faculty feel might be those expectations and what
03:20 students expectations are. Jean: So there's a big discrepancy Mary: Yes, yes we see a
03:24 discrepancy. Jean: So you also address in this article something about students
03:29 entering college with incorrect assumptions about what it means to learn.
03:32 Can you expand on that a little bit? Mary: Absolutely. I think that what we're
03:37 seeing and what the research is showing is that students are equating studying
03:41 with memorization as opposed to with learning. And so learning is really in a
03:46 lot of a lot of times as being taken out of the equation completely and it's the
03:50 idea of doing that rote memorization and if I can do that it means I understand
03:55 the material and I'll be successful as opposed to really delving in deep
03:59 being a lot more active and storing that information correctly so that they can
04:02 retrieve it on an exam. Jean: But sometimes they just study to just take those tests
04:06 and then that information is gone. Mary: Absolutely, right. Jean: Where our goal is
04:11 for them is to retain it long term and actually apply it in other contexts.
04:15 Mary: Absolutely, especially in your major courses Jean: Yes. Mary: 'Cause hopefully those are
building on
04:18 one another, yup. Jean: Sort of start thinking like a chemist or thinking like a
04:23 writer; you know what is it we need to do to get them to that point?
04:26 Mary: Absolutely yeah so I think it gets really down to the purpose of college
04:30 courses and how they're preparing the student and ultimately what the goal is
04:34 for that student to be able to apply those skills and that information in
04:37 either a professional setting academic setting etc it's very much a building
04:41 block as opposed to just kind of a one-and-done okay I learned what I
04:44 needed to I'm time to move on to the next set of information. Jean: All right so one
04:48 of the other things you talk about in here is how can instructors help to
04:52 facilitate academic self-awareness and to encourage students to approach their
04:57 studies more deliberately and intentionally. And you gave some ideas to
05:01 consider, so if you could talk about these things and you know ways you see
05:05 that and I might ask you a couple other questions.
05:07 Mary: Absolutely. Um, so something that I'm seeing a lot of is students really lacking that
05:13 skill of being able to self monitor and self assess their learning, but that is
05:17 not automatically what students are doing as much as we would love for them
05:20 to do that but they're not always catching on and really able to assess am
05:26 I where I need to be with this information do I really understand these
05:30 concepts am I able to apply them. They're not necessarily asking those questions.
05:33 And so one of the things that I suggested was providing opportunities
05:38 very early on in the semester for low stakes assessment. Where it gives a

05:42 student an opportunity to pause and really think based on that grade based
05:47 on the feedback that they're provided am I where I need to be is my strategy
05:51 working or do I need to make some adjustments and most likely what
05:54 adjustments should I be making moving forward and if the assignment or you know assessment
however it looks as a test or some kind of written assignment,
06:01 if it's pretty low stakes it's not going to completely take the students grade
06:05 they're able to try some things out and make adjustments in time to really be
06:09 able to salvage that grade in the course. Jean: I really think that low stakes in the
06:13 beginning of any course you know will-be it online or a hybrid or face-to-face-is
06:18 a good thing to do with our students because give them that opportunity to
06:21 move that grade up in the beginning. Mary: Absolutely. Jean: And to also see your
06:25 expectations on a quiz, a test, an assignment-what is it you're looking for?
06:29 Because that again too is practice, students need practice Mary: Right Jean: and what it
06:35 is you want them to be able to do. So offering some type of
06:39 practice. And I know you're talking here about intentionally framing assignments.
06:43 Mary: Yes. Jean: So, you want to talk about that a little bit. Mary: Absolutely, and so with that it
isn't making any
06:47 change to the assignment at all. It's simply providing a frame for the student
06:51 to really understand what the purpose of the assignment is. If a student knows
06:55 where they're supposed to be going with this, what the objective is from the
06:58 professor's perspective they can then come up with an appropriate way for
07:02 meeting that expectation. And I find that that is incredibly helpful for a lot of
07:06 my students who have a learning disability or are on the autism spectrum.
07:10 Um, knowing clearly okay this is what the professor is hoping that I do they might
07:15 be able to come up with a really creative way of meeting that requirement
07:17 um, but knowing right off the bat they're not necessarily going to read through the
07:22 lines and see what that is. So a professor explaining this is why I'm
07:25 having you do this, this is what my learning outcomes are, whether it's
07:29 provided in the syllabus which is great but also maybe coming back to that in
07:33 the syllabus when we talked about this outcome this is how this assignment fits
07:36 into that and continuing to check in with students about that during the
07:39 semester I find to be very helpful. Jean: I can see that helpful even just from that
07:43 universal design standpoint Mary: Absolutely. Jean: We're reiterating what it is we said on that
07:48 that syllabus and now let's let's actually talk about it so I think it's a good
07:52 idea maybe just to even have conversations about an assignment when
07:55 you give an assignment. Mary: Right. Jean: One of the things we like to talk about too is a
07:59 muddiest point what does it student still are kind of confused about and I
08:03 think when you do this this will help clarify where their concerns are what so... Mary: Absolutely, I
feel like it's helpful from the instructors perspective to be able
08:11 to perhaps make an adjustment or revisit something but also it is helpful for the
08:15 student they probably haven't even thought about what a muddiest point is or
08:19 that that could even exist. And so getting them to reflect on that process
08:22 a little bit and go you know I actually I'm still not totally sure on this
08:25 provides another opportunity for them to then approach you and talk through that.

08:30 Jean: And I know when we talked a little earlier just a little bit about testing too
08:33 - one of the things they can do, and Jen actually runs a great session on
08:38 exam wrappers and you said you did attend that session Mary: I did, yeah. Jean: Uh, but I
08:42 think exam wrappers and we don't want to give away everything "laughter" on our podcast, uh
what did you find
08:46 interesting about that? Mary: Um well I attended that session
08:50 that is an area of research of mine I really am a big fan of exam wrappers. I
08:54 think that after attending that it started making me think about other ways
08:58 that I could incorporate reflection because in my current position I'm not
09:01 doing as much teaching in the traditional classroom setting I'm doing
09:05 a lot of one-on-one coaching. And so finding additional ways to incorporate
09:09 reflection into my everyday practice but also trying to provide reflective
09:13 moments for students so I actually have a lot of my students do writing
09:17 assignments for me reflecting on their goals and how things are going in their
09:20 classes in ways that aren't maybe looking always so traditional like a big
09:24 essay they need to write because they won't do that for me it's not graded but
09:28 just getting them thinking more about their strategies. So I have some core
09:31 strategy worksheets where I ask them to think about what would be their keys to
09:34 success in that class and we will revisit that over the course of the
09:38 semester. About mid semester we reflect on how things are going and what
09:41 adjustments they might want to make and at the end of the semester I feel it's
09:45 especially important for students who perhaps are not performing at the level
09:49 they want to or are experiencing some challenges with their learning taking a
09:53 minute to really reflect on areas where they have grown. Because even if grade
09:56 wise things aren't looking how they want them to I'm seeing a lot of growth in my
10:00 students and those academic skills and I think providing a pause for them to
10:04 actually reflect on that really helps for their esteem as well we're able to
10:08 continue to build on that success in subsequent semesters. Jean: I love reflection, I-
10:12 I just had a session not too long ago on teaching students to reflect. I think we
10:18 make the assumption that students know how to reflect and one of the things is
10:22 we have to teach them that. And in my session I have this great little meme
10:26 that comes up with a Tyrannosaurus Rex on it that says 'if thinking about
10:30 thinking is metacognition, then what is thinking about metacognition? "Laughter" And I just
10:36 thought I love that meme, I think it's just a great meme because it's a
10:40 dinosaur thinking about this. We really need to incorporate that into our
10:45 courses I think allowing or teaching students how to do reflection. And we can
10:49 do that in little pieces throughout the day. So do you have any recommendations
10:53 on things like that and maybe a classroom for faculty? Mary: Um, I think any
10:57 opportunity for students to reflect on their goals,
11:00 because I think that that really is that touchstone that you keep returning to as
11:03 a student, um and you feel especially that's helpful in major courses naturally that
11:08 should be a you know natural extension, but in general education courses as well
11:12 I find it's just as important thinking about what am i hoping to accomplish in
11:16 this class and continuing to touch base about that. So helping a student or

11:20 providing an opportunity for them to at least create one goal for the course and
11:24 really challenging them to think about okay great what is your action plan for
11:28 getting there? Um, I think is a really useful tool very basic that can be a five
11:33 minute written reflection or perhaps something that the student submits to you
11:36 over email, doesn't need to be anything very extensive. But sometimes the student
11:41 hasn't considered maybe what their goal is for that class and we see that with a
11:45 lot of our students really focusing on maybe external factors for why that
11:48 they're here I think that that's a very useful exercise to get a student
11:52 thinking about that. Jean: In your article you talked about using your syllabus to
11:56 communicate your expectations and one of the things you pointed out is giving
12:00 guide lights to students for how much time they should be spending each week
12:03 in the course. I know for me teaching an online course I tell my students a
12:07 minimum six hours when in reality they should probably be spending maybe eight
12:12 to ten hours. Mary: Right. Jean: And then I get the surveys back at the end of the year that
12:16 says how long did they actually spend which was four hours, usually pretty
12:20 honest about that, but I think that's a good point and-and you know here what
12:26 are you-what's your thinking behind that? Mary: Yeah my thinking behind that is I think
12:30 helping to close that-that expectation gap. When we talked about students maybe
12:35 only spending a total of five hours per week studying at the high school level
12:39 for all of their courses total um and still receiving those B's you know rightfully
12:44 so they're thinking well this has worked for me before it's probably gonna work
12:48 for me now and being able to provide clear cut expectations of just to be
12:52 prepared this is what really my expectations are of you about how long
12:57 this should take. I think at the beginning of the semester is helpful. I
13:00 find it also especially important to revisit that conversation after that
13:04 first assessment because now a student may be more willing to listen after
13:09 they've maybe not preformed at the level that they wanted to and I
13:12 think there maybe primed for actually reflecting on that process then and
13:15 saying let's be honest about this you know how long did you prepare for
13:19 this test and what specifically did you do to prepare, because we see a lot of
13:23 students um focusing not only on doing a little too-too less "laughter" too little work for it but
13:30 also how they're preparing or is maybe not a very productive strategy for
13:34 actually learning the material so that's a great use of potential using an exam
13:39 wrapper there to kind of get them thinking a little bit about what really
13:42 should I change cuz ultimately those adjustments a lot of it's gonna be the
13:45 amount of time they're spending and then what they're spending that time doing. It
13:49 may not be obvious to them until they've actually received that perhaps negative
13:52 score back or some feedback from the instructor oh I might need to change my
13:56 approach. Jean: Now I like that piece for them to be able to reflect because then they
14:00 can see well maybe they're not spending their time on the right things too. Mary: Right,
14:04 exactly, exactly. And I've noticed when a student comes in after under-performing a
14:10 lot of times I'll ask them you know what questions did you get incorrect, why do
14:14 you think you've got those incorrect, is there a pattern and they you know I
14:17 talked about this in the article they stare at me blankly like I have you know

14:20 three heads, what are you talking about "laughter" you know the test is over and I would
14:23 have focused on this it's time to move on. And well I do appreciate the ability
14:26 to compartmentalize and not be you know feeling so downtrodden about it I feel
14:30 that it's important for us to really think about well what happened and why
14:34 did it happen, what was surprising about this? Because even though the material
14:38 might be different on that next round really you know the approach needs to be
14:43 adjusted and so having to um facilitate those conversations at a very
14:47 compassionate way can sometimes be hard but I feel like it's important to really
14:50 challenge the student to think about how would they you know what their approach
14:53 was. A lot of them when I ask how they'll study they can't really answer that
14:58 perhaps they reread notes is usually what I hear the majority and that's as
15:03 we know not a very active approach to really learning material and much less
15:07 storing it to be able to retrieve it on the test when you need it so it's not
15:10 going to be second the long-term memory by any stretch just by continuing to
15:13 revisit it and not really thinking critically on it. Jean: So I think that's a
15:17 good point for all faculty to-to kind of take that into practice them with that
15:21 first big assessment and the students that don't do well you know
15:25 just reviewing that with them using exam wrappers or using some type of
15:29 reflective piece so I thank you for um putting that in there. Mary: Oh yes oh and
15:33 something I just wanted to add to that to is I feel like those conversations
15:36 and reflections are so helpful for me to better understand from the students
15:41 perspective what does it mean for them to study? What does that entail? And when
15:45 a student says I studied a lot what that actually means I find that a lot of
15:49 times even my expectations or maybe although I do this a lot, um I'm sometimes
15:53 surprised by what those answers are so taking the time to gather that
15:57 information from the student I think helps them think about it but also helps
16:00 me think about how I might want to tailor my message slightly differently
16:03 if it does feel like it's falling on deaf ears how I would approach that... Jean: Oh wow Mary: ...and
you
16:07 know and reframe. Jean: So is there anything you care to share with us "laughter" for some of the
ways or things that kind of shock
16:13 you? Mary: Goodness, well I think um I think what is usually the most shocking is-is
16:20 what it-well it's not shocking anymore cuz I feel like I hear it most of the
16:23 time-but it is the I studied for so long and I find out when I probe a little bit
16:28 more there's a couple hours before or they didn't really study or you know
16:33 whatever um so I think that sometimes a big roadblock is breaking down those
16:38 defenses a little bit and being able to have an honest conversation about it
16:42 um because I think my students will sometimes expect that I will, I don't
16:46 know, be disappointed in them if they come in and haven't performed well or
16:49 didn't follow up with what they said that they would do. So that's always
16:52 interesting I-I find even for students who it doesn't really seem like they care
16:56 about it they're kind of coming in with a little bit of an attitude a lot of
17:00 them really I feel like what surprised me is that sometimes it's coming from a
17:03 place of hurt or a place of pride and trying to you know be compassionate and

17:09 those conversations and recognizing that this does not feel good to have this
17:12 conversation... Jean: Sure Mary: ...um that even if the student is acting as though this isn't
17:16 impacting them sometimes it really is and so working with them on creating a
17:21 safe space where we can really delve into it is good. But at this point
17:24 honestly um I've worked with students with every GPA imaginable, there really isn't
17:28 anything I haven't seen. So I remember my first time seeing a 0.0
17:32 GPA was very shocking at this point "laughter" that I didn't think that was possible
17:37 initially when I first got into probation work I thought oh my goodness
17:41 I didn't even know this was possible and the truth is is that a lot of students
17:45 are coming in under- you know underprepared and maybe don't have the
17:48 support that they need, I think it's easy to make assumptions about a student not
17:53 putting in the time. I think maybe that's the most surprising thing for me is that
17:57 there's usually a little more to the story and I have found students who have
18:00 I found out later been single parents been working three jobs trying to you
18:04 know manage things and so sometimes it ends up being a little bit more of a
18:08 personal conversation about managing priorities and how to be successful in
18:12 all aspects of their life. I feel like those that personal really impacts the
18:16 academic. So I would say not so much in this job lately but my first time
18:20 kind of really working with students who were definitely low socioeconomic
18:23 status, first-generation that was definitely a very surprising um moment when
18:28 I started seeing what does that look like in terms of GPA after that first or
18:33 second semester. Jean: Well I'm glad you were there to help them and I'm glad you're
18:36 here at Coastal now to help us. Mary: I'm very happy to be here "laughter". Jean: Any final words
you
18:42 want to leave us with? Mary: Oh goodness I'm always terrible at ending "laughter". Um, you know
I guess
18:49 let's see... Jean: Well how can faculty reach out to you? Mary: Right. Jean: Is that...are you
available to talk to faculty? Mary: Oh, always,
18:56 absolutely um and that's been a really fun part of my job over the last couple
19:00 of months as I've gotten more comfortable in my role and what that's
19:03 entailed I feel that I've been able to do more faculty outreach and um meeting
19:08 with more professors about interesting classroom situations and thinking about
19:11 how can we make things more accessible. I know that you've been um speaking with
19:15 another faculty member who works with the role-playing games I'm actually
19:18 meeting with another professor who does the role-playing and talking about ways
19:21 to make that accessible for students with a learning disability, because that can
19:25 sometimes present some interesting challenges. So yes, I am always open to
19:29 talking with faculty about ways um to accommodate students or if you just have
19:33 questions um about maybe how to handle any student situations that tends to be my
19:38 area of expertise so please come in and talk with me about that we're always
19:40 open to do that. Jean: Well Mary I thank you for spending time with me today and
19:45 welcome to Coastal! Mary: Thank you so much! Jean: You have been listening
19:49 to the CeTEAL community podcast. Tune in again next time. We look forward to having you
19:55 hear us. The views expressed on this podcast do not represent the views or

20:00 opinions of CeTEAL or Coastal Carolina University.