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Readings on
**SUCCESSING
IN COLLEGE**

collected by

Dr. Jesse M. Heines
Associate Professor

UMass Lowell
Department of
Computer Science

Olsen 223
ext. 3634

heines@cs.uml.edu

EDITORIAL – GUEST OPINION

reprinted from The Connector, October 25, 1993

Last week I took one of those lovely exams called mid-terms and when the test was over, I knew I had bombed it. I had spent weeks attempting to grasp abstract concepts and philosophies but when it can time to put my knowledge to the test, I had somehow failed. How many times has this happened to you? This makes me wonder exactly what it is I'm supposed to be learning.

This isn't the first time I've been aggravated with my education. Though I've tried to remain optimistic about it, I've noticed that lately I've begun to cop a 'tude. This only complicates matters. I'm not blaming UMass Lowell for this situation either because I've experienced it at other colleges as well. I know that this education frustration isn't some manifestation of my twisted mind...others have expressed it as well...and not just students.

Over the three years that I've been here, I've had discussions with several of the faculty who have expressed increased frustration with each class that progresses through these hallowed halls. One professor told me that he had just about given up trying to stimulate his students. Why? Because half of the students don't show up to class and the half that do show up want to be spoon-fed the information rather than exert any energy in actively learning it.

Another professor asked me one day, "What's wrong with the students today?" Then he explained to me how he had told forty freshmen exactly how to write a paper, taking them through each step to avoid confusion. When the professor received the papers, only two people had done it correctly. He then asked me, "Is it me? Have I done something wrong? I don't know anymore, maybe I should stop teaching and retire." I reassured him that problem wasn't his fault.

Now I know that you've all experienced professors you've been less than thrilled with. I know you've probably had some professor or course that you thought just sucked. I know that you've also been in classes where people don't interact and just sit there leaving either the professor droning on in monologue or else having a small discussion with the same two or three people class after class. I also know you complain about having to take required courses. How do I know? We've all gone through it and we'd be lying if we said we haven't.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not blaming anyone in particular. We're all to blame, myself included. I've experienced the same frustrations as you have and I've blamed also. It's easy to blame, but it's also destructive and we've got to stop doing it. It's one of the factors that has creating the downward spiral of apathy which is spreading from student to faculty to student, etc...about as fast as the AIDS epidemic. So what can we do about it? We can change it. We can dump our 'tudes and become responsible.

After a brief hiatus in the military and the working world, I returned to college for several reasons. I had learned that it was a necessary evil to acquire a degree in order to better my chances to succeed, but more importantly to better myself, further my knowledge and broaden my horizons. I never expected anything to be given to me here. I knew that I'd have to work for it. I knew that all my professors weren't going to be polished talk show hosts, nor did I expect them to be. I knew that I'd have to extract knowledge out of some of them provided they had it. I also knew that I wasn't going to enjoy all of my courses, especially some of the required ones. If the kind of

schooling you want provides all the answers and no work, go to the Sally Struther's Correspondence Course School for the Incredibly Lame. Lets face it, life just isn't that simple.

So, what I propose is this. If you've got a problem learning or you're not satisfied with your classes, do something about it!! Talk to your professor and explain your frustration. When you're drowning you don't just go down complaining, do you? No! You yell for "HELP!" I've talked to several professors in the past and they've always been attentive and helpful. That's what they're paid to do, and even though this might sound crazy, that's what they want to do! Can you imagine that? They appreciate your input and actually want to help you! But they can't help if you leave 'em in the dark.

Become involved in your classes. Participate. The only silly question is the one that was never asked. If you're finding something is not interesting, make it interesting. Make it challenging. Don't take anything for granted. Whatever you do, don't just sit there bored because you'll probably spend the rest of life like that. Make your education work for you, don't just cruise through it and then wonder what was it was all about four years later. Which reminds me, I've got a professor to go to and yell for some "HELP!"

– Chris Borden

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF COLLEGE

Reprinted from *The Connector*, November 8, 1993

I am writing to express my very strong support for the ideas expressed by Chris Borden in the October 25 edition of the *Connector*. I would like to amplify—from one professor’s point of view—Borden’s call for students to “dump our ‘tudes and become responsible.”

On September 14, 1993, the Computer Science Department sponsored a dinner to welcome freshmen to our department. Representatives of several University offices addressed the freshmen, outlined their charters, and encouraged freshmen to use their services. I then gave a talk on factors that get in the way of success in college and ways to overcome them. The main points of my talk were exactly the same as those in Borden’s editorial:

- (1) students must *take* education from the University, not wait for it to be handed to them,
- (2) students must *ask* for help, not wait for a prof or TA to ask them if they need it, and
- (3) students must recognize that *they*—not their profs—are responsible for their education.

The Need To Attend Class

Being responsible has many meanings. First and foremost, it means coming to class, coming to class on time, and participating in class discussions. How can you expect a prof to care about your learning when you don’t care enough to show up for class? What would an employer think if you repeatedly came to work late? And how much interest would you have in pursuing a relationship where you asked your date a question about something you’ve been talking about for two weeks and she or he just looked down at the floor and didn’t say anything?

It always amazes me when students apologize to me for not coming to class. Who’s loss is it, anyway? Mine? I don’t think so. I lecture pretty much the same to 15 or to 50. If you miss my class you only short-change yourself. A typical course contains less than 40 total lecture hours, less than the number of hours most students work in one week over the summer. If you miss even one class, you’ve missed a statistically significant amount of material. Miss four, and you’ve wasted 10% of your tuition money.

I really don’t know what’s in students’ minds when they cut class and then send me e-mail asking if I made any assignments or asking me to summarize the highlights of my lecture. I’d be embarrassed to ask such questions. Those students I direct to see other students for their class notes. The killers, though, are those students who send me e-mail asking—and this really happens—if I “covered anything important.” That’s an insult to my teaching. Those messages I don’t even bother to answer.

If I was enrolled in a class that sucked so badly I couldn’t stand to go, I’d either drop it or go see the prof or department chair. How can you allow yourself to be cheated out of your tuition money? It is true that not all profs are dynamic lecturers. Indeed, some of us are really quite poor classroom teachers. However, in our system nothing’s going to be done about how profs manage their own classes unless students take the responsibility to go see that prof and discuss what can

be done. Talk to profs, talk to other students, write letters to the *Connector*! Your greatest enemy is not the professor, it's your own apathy.

The Need To Do Assignments

I laughed out loud when I read Borden's account of the prof who told 40 freshmen how to write a paper and only two did it correctly. Hell, I teach 75 freshmen, and I'm lucky if I can get two to write their names and section numbers at the top right-hand corner of the first page!

The bigger problem, of course, is just getting students to do their assignments at all. Anyone who has taken Teaching 101 will tell you that—long term—people retain only about 20% of the factual information they read, and only about 10% of that they hear. That ain't much. In fact, one might say that very little learning occurs during lectures, especially pure lectures in which students are passive listeners. Real learning occurs while one actively works through solving homework problems or expressing ideas in a paper. One can't possibly hope to retain knowledge presented in class without working with that knowledge outside of class.

Being responsible also means doing your assignments on time. Sales people will tell you that when you are invited to present your product, you can beat 50% of the competition simply by showing up. You can beat the other 50% simply by being prepared for your audience. How can you expect to be interested in a class if you haven't prepared yourself to hear the prof's lecture or haven't reinforced his or her lecture through conscientious work on the assignments?

All knowledge is hierarchical. That is, concepts build on one another, and it's awfully tough to understand B if you don't have a firm grasp of A. If a prof is ready to teach B, but has to slow down to reteach A because students haven't done the assignment that reinforces A, that prof will make little or no progress through the subject matter. The repetitive material will be boring to many students and the overall amount of material covered in the course will fall. When the level of one course falls, the levels of all courses that require it as a prerequisite fall. The total amount you learn falls. And the value of your degree falls. Remember: it's YOUR degree, not mine. I already have mine hanging on the wall.

The Student/Professor Team

I sent a copy of Borden's editorial to all of the profs in my department, and one responded, "Right on, Jesse. This is the problem. Under the present conditions, however, I have not the foggiest idea of what to do about it." Is there really nothing we can do? Borden makes several suggestions, chiding students to "make your education work for you." The only problem is that he doesn't quite say how to do that, and I'd like to offer one idea: make yourself part of your prof's team. Let me explain.

It sounds trite, but students and professors really are two sides of the same coin. Believe it or not, profs are learning all the time, too. One of the true joys of being a prof, especially in a field like Computer Science, is that the knowledge explosion makes everything I know obsolete every five to seven years. Everything! If I don't learn, I rot. Hell, PCs weren't even invented when I got my doctorate in '79, much less Windows, C++, relational databases, graphical user

interfaces, multimedia systems, object-oriented programming, real-time data compression, and on and on and on. How do I keep up with it all? I don't. I can only keep up with part of the explosion.

Over the years, a small number of students have come to me and asked what they can do to further their own learning beyond what I teach in class. Some students ask for projects that will enhance their skills and make it easier to get an interesting—and well-paying—job. Others ask just so they can work with the state-of-the-art hardware and software in our lab. All of these wonderful students have joined my team, helped me keep up, and thus made me a better teacher.

One student even came to me and asked if he could help with my grading, realizing that by looking at other students' work he could learn from seeing other approaches to solving the homework problems and thus expand his own horizons. He did this for a semester—unpaid—and then I won a corporate grant under which I was able to hire him on a project. This student now works for the company that gave us that grant and has fulfilled his dream to own a vintage Corvette.

I typically try to get students seeking enhanced learning experiences either to develop interactive teaching and/or demonstration programs to help students who need remediation, or to explore things I know nothing about so that they teach me! Right now I have two students writing lecture notes and assignments for a course in C++ Programming for Windows I intend to offer in the Fall 1994 semester. Personally, I've never done any Windows programming at the basic C++ language level, so I'm doing their assignments! As they learn, I learn, and I believe that future UMass Lowell students will benefit greatly from this team effort.

These are examples of students who really make their education work for them by getting the most out of the physical resources—and *professors*—available at our University. What does it take to go up to your profs and tell them that *you* can help *them*? Self-esteem: the simple recognition of your own worth. You have been admitted to the University of Massachusetts. You're no dummy. You can make a contribution as a member of your prof's team. That contribution will benefit your fellow students, your University, and, most of all, yourself. The effort you make now as part of the team will get you the experience, the knowledge, and the crucial corporate contacts that will get you the job you desire, leading to the life you dream of. The effort is yours, but the guidance is ours. And for both of us, the time is now. No one "makes it" on his or her own. Team up with your professors to make UMass Lowell your stepping stone to success.

– Prof. Jesse M. Heines
Dept. of Computer Science

MORE ON GETTING THE MOST OUT OF COLLEGE

*Reprinted from **The Connector**, November 29, 1993*

In keeping with the recent theme of “Getting the most out of College,” as begun with no less than Chris Borden and Prof. Jesse M. Heines, I feel it necessary to add in my own thoughts.

We all would like to see the University offer better quality services and education. I’m sure we have all had our own problems with classes, time management, or with particular professors. However, per usual, apathy is up, as well as bitching and complaining. While I’ll admit that I have done my share of empty bitching and complaining, I feel I have learned to get some things done to improve my quality of life in this university.

First of all, let me expound on a point that Prof. Heines brought up. A number of professors here are indeed poor classroom teachers. This may or may not be their own fault. With my own participation in a “student uprising” against one of the aforementioned teachers, I learned a little more about the process.

A small group of us went to the dean of the college in which the said class was offered, and practiced what most of us do on a daily basis: empty bitching and complaining. We felt that the teacher did not give us adequate instruction in the subject, and should give us more insight as to what we should be studying. We were given good advice from this dean, who suggested that we approach the professor. Now admittedly, we did not get very far with this professor, as he may have been a bit taken aback by five angry students marching into his office, and this professor responded in kind, sending us out a bit more frustrated than when we walked in. So, back to the dean we went, as advised, and explained our position and what we had tried to do about it. In doing this, we had informed the professor of our unhappiness with his system, and why we felt it was wrong. Although he took it rather angrily, as anyone might, had they been told that they were not doing their job correctly, he did apparently listen to what we had to say, and did consider it. By the time the dean spoke to this professor, the problem had been alleviated. Not solved, but it was a step in the right direction.

The point is this: You pay your professors to teach their courses. If they get no feedback, they cannot update their teaching methods. You can complain in the all you want. You can complain to your dorm friends all you want. You can even write and complain to the *Connector* all you want, but it will all be to no avail. Seize the opportunity to do it right. Talk to the teacher, and in groups, if necessary. After this first step, go higher if you must. If that does not work, then go higher still. But, if you try to start at the top, you’ll only be told to begin again. Don’t waste all your time and energy not getting things done.

Prof. Heines was absolutely correct. Although I have never met the man, I share many of the same ideas with him. If you cut classes because the class sucks, then you only have yourself to blame for not at least trying to change it. Get involved! There are many services to help us get through the red tape in this university, but most of us don’t even realize they are there. See a peer advisor, or a tutor, or speak to your professors if you’re having problems. Don’t settle for mediocre education, but don’t wait for quality education to be handed to you on a plate, either.

– Mike Crutcher and K. Mercurio

REQUIRED READING

*Reprinted from **The Connector**, November 29, 1993*

The OPINION Column by Professor Heines on students' participation in their own education, in the Nov. 8th issue of the *Connector*, should be required reading for all Freshman and transfer students at the University. TAs and new faculty would also benefit from reading it.

As a teacher at the University, I really want students to learn! I concur with Professor Heines' opinions. It is so disappointing when students either choose to ignore, or life circumstances interfere with, optimal learning at the University.

I, too, have heard the question "Will this be on the test?" or "I couldn't get to the library to do the assignment because I was working," or, "There was too much to study so..."

Teaching rewards for faculty at UMass Lowell mostly come from having students achieve! True, self esteem of faculty is influenced in part by this. We want students to do well! The emphasis should be on getting "the most out of college."

- Dr. Patricia A. Tyra
Department of Nursing
College of Health Prof.

E-MAILS FROM FORMER STUDENTS

From: pinkos@butyng.bu.edu (Jay Pinkos)
Subject: Your editorial in the Connector
To: heines@cs.uml.edu
Date: Sat, 11 Dec 1993 17:02:11

Dear Dr. Heines,

I am not sure if your remember, but I had you as an instructor back when I attended the University. I recently saw your editorial in the Conector the other day. Now I didn't have a chance to read the editorial to which you were responding, but I think I have a vague idea what the student had to say.

But what I wanted to say was that you are completely correct. I unfortunately was one of the types of students that you described in your write-up. And I learned my lessons the hard way. But I believe I have learned them. I only wish that I knew then what I knew now about how to not get through school, but how to get stuff out of school.

A student tries to get out of school (i.e. to graduate), a good student tries to get something out of school (i.e. actually learn something). It was kind of odd that I happened to read your article while waiting outside of the Dean of Instruction's office hoping to find out what I need to do in order to return school. And I laughed to myself thinking "Oh, man, is Jesse right!"

I have learned in the real world what I should have learned at school. Not stuff out of the text, but rather one needs to work hard and push at what they want to be happy when they look back. In school, I always tried to find the easy way out and only cheated myself in the end.

Recently, I have started working with Novell and have had to find myself trying to earn my C.N.E., Certified Netware Engineer. This has taken a lot of work. I just wish I had put the same effort forth in school when I was there. No one in the "real" world is going to tell you don't worry what we did on tuesday won't be on the test. Every day is a test and if you can't cut the mustard you're done. You can't oversleep or party all night anymore.

Well, I have applied for readmission to UML and can only hope for the best. I made my bed during my tenure at school and will have to live with it. I can only hope that I can get a second chance to try to right some of the wrongs I did to myself. Because I only did cheat myself.

Well, I just thought I'd throw my two cents in and let you know that I think you are right in what you said. Hope to see you on campus.

- Jay Pinkos, Supposed to be Class of 92

From: heines@cs.uml.edu (Jesse M. Heines)
Subject: Re: Your editorial in the Connector
To: pinkos@butyng.bu.edu (Jay Pinkos)
Date: Thu, 16 Dec 1993 10:18:37

Hi, Jay.

I certainly do remember you! And I can't tell you how much I appreciate your taking the time to express your feelings about my editorial. I am putting together a packet of student responses to the editorial for next year's freshman class. May I please include yours? It would be a great addition.

I hope you are successful in your effort to return to University of Massachusetts Lowell. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help you. I would be more than happy to talk to the admissions people for you if you like.

- Jesse

From: pinkos@butyng.bu.edu (Jay Pinkos)
Subject: Re: Your editorial in the Connector
To: heines@cs.uml.edu (Jesse M. Heines)
Date: Fri, 17 Dec 1993 07:20:27

Dear Dr. Heines,

It is nice to hear that you remember me. You may go ahead and use anything that I wrote to you. I look forward with both excitement and trepidation as I return to school. Any assistance that you can give would be greatly appreciated. I am unaware of statistically how many students are in the same boat that I am, but perhaps this is something that the Department might be interested in fostering...returning students.

Well, must get back to work. My 3Com communication server died 4 months after we closed our service account and now my Annex III won't boot over a WAN link. Oh, well, another day another less than a dollar.

- Jay Pinkos
pinkos@butyng.bu.edu

From: Jonathan Hartford <jhartfor>
Subject: Light dawns on marble head.
To: heines (Jesse M. Heines)
Date: Mon, 13 Dec 1993 21:50:11 -0500 (EST)

I recalculated my grade, based on the figures that I got from you to-day, and I get a final average, minus the final exam, of course, of 68 point something. Way off what I thought it would be, but that was the point that you kept trying to get across to me, isn't it? Too bad I figured it out at this late date.

I am not asking you for a chance to hand in homework that I did not do, or asking you for a better grade, or anything like that, I understand the time for that is past. But I did think that you should know, that you did the right thing, I screwed up.

To make a long story short, I want to thank you in retrospect, for the good teaching, a class that you tried to make interesting, and pointing out the failures in my education that I somehow couldn't comprehend. See you at the final.

- Jonathan Hartford

Date: Thu, 1 Sep 1994 12:38:45 -0400
From: David Sowsy <dsowsy>
To: heines
Subject: Thoughts for Incoming Freshman

I was mathematically unprepared for CS at UML. In order to succeed here, a strong mathematical background is crucial. The Math and Physics expected and required of incoming freshman is overwhelming. Time management is crucial when Physics keeps you busy with assignments and 4 hour lab reports.

Many students just aren't prepared for the college environment. Knowing the material in your courses just isn't enough. The professors really want you to work your tail off. It's not the job of the student to question 'Why?' but to just do the work and figure out the meaning later.

In high school, they really emphasized the importance of the SAT for the prospective college student, without teaching much of what is really needed in the college environment. They did not teach me how to apply the math being taught, and thus it was cast aside and forgotten. They don't teach 'Logical thinking' and 'Problem solving' in High School. Through trial and error (read: failures) I have learned how to do well in the college setting.

The keys to success here are:

1) Self-motivation

You have to do the work because you want to 'Make the grade'. You should not be out to please anyone with your grades. They will mean nothing unless you feel you have earned them)

2) Dealing with courses properly

a) Keep absences to a minimum.

b) Ask questions in class when you don't understand something.

c) Enjoy and learn to take pride in your work. (Your grades will be better and you will feel accomplishment for a job well done.)

d) Give the professor exactly what they want from you for work, or do your best to what they want trying.

e) Understand what you are learning.

3) Balancing the social scene with the academic

Students must be able to balance their social time with their academic time. Most students who cannot balance their lives with relaxing and dealing with people will burn out before their second year. On the flipside, too much partying can also be a downfall. (Example: Student ends up too hung over to go to class and ends up having a lesser quality education.)

There's a lot of fun to be had in the first year of college, but it can take a real shock before you get into your coursework. You have to adapt to a new environment and deal with a *LOT* of freedom. The sooner you put your efforts into your work, the better. Its a very confusing time and a lot of people don't know what direction they are going in, but the persistent will be able to make it.

4) Plan out how to deal with your work and manage your time.

Aside from giving 200% of your effort to your coursework, it helps a great deal if you can systematically break down your assignments and pace yourself. Saves a lot of grief in the long run.

5) Keeping a good attitude.

We learn from both our successes and our failures. The grades we get are only a measurement of our work and our progress in a field of

study. If we don't get it right the first time, we have to try again and again until we make it. We have to be stubborn about wanting to learn, and showing what we have learned. The grades become more and more irrelevant if you can actually prove that you know the material. If you can show you know the material by work and homework assignments, you will do well.

I hope this has been helpful.

Sincerely,

David Sowsy

Name: Thuy Le
Subject: Compare and Contrast

Prof.: Robert Griffin
Date: November 4, 1993

HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE, WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES?

Note from Prof. Heines: Thuy Le is a graduate of Chelmsford High School and a member of the UMass Lowell Class of 1997. She wrote this paper when she was a freshman. I saw it, discussed it with her, and asked her permission to distribute it in this package, which she gratefully gave.

It is November now, the month when most high school seniors are worrying about colleges or universities which they would like to be attend next year. To prepare for next year, students should have some general ideas about colleges and universities. The education systems between high school and college are slightly different depending at how you look at them. Some students have had very hard times with new issues at colleges such as scheduling, teachers, or school activities.

In high school, you do not have too much difficulty selecting your courses. Counselors will always be there to give you advises when you need them. Most of the courses are required; therefore, the student does not have many choices. This saves her or him a large amount of time. It is nice that in high school the teachers take care for you like your second parents. The teachers look after you when you are inside or even outside of school. Every day, they check your work, ask about your homework, or remind you about the test that you will have on the next day. They know whether or not you understand the problems, and they properly go over them before you ask your questions. Sometimes, you may feel a bit angry at your own teachers because they pay too much attention to you, but you are lucky to have those teachers.

Most have such memories of high schools as these, but college applications are coming up. You are now right at an opening door, but you do not know what will happen behind that mysterious door.

To have a good start in college, the student should have a neat schedule which fits his or her major, level of understanding, and time; otherwise, things will be all mixed up. There will be several places where students can go and look for advisors – the Freshmen Center, for example. The difficult thing is that there are so many courses the student can choose from, especially when he/she is a liberal arts major. It confuses almost students as they are making their decisions. Even when the student get all the courses that he/she wants, it is not over yet, those courses have to be put together without overlapping.

About the professors, most students will feel so alone when they are in college because there is no one to look after them, no one to take care them as their high school teachers did. They are now out on their own. Each day, the professors come to the class, teach students the material that they think students need, and that is it. They walk out of the class. If students cannot understand something, they are responsible for solving their problems. You have to reach the professors

and try to solve your problems. Up until now, maybe, you will think that the professors are very rude. Get that thought out of your mind because that is not true. They are very nice. If you come to their office and knock on their door, they will be there to help you at anytime (if they are available). They look so hard and strict outside, but they are so easy and soft inside. So, don't hesitate to ask for help when you need it. Don't be shy; it will make things worse.

There are many different points between high school and college, so you have to experiment by yourself. Most students feel very difficulties to be custom with the new life in college like scheduling or professors; your should be aware at those.