Preventing Students from Falling Behind Through Proactive Teacher Communication

Struggling students benefit greatly when the teacher provides a clear explanation of course requirements, and offers regularly updated information about upcoming assignments, missing work, and students’ current standing in the course. When the teacher makes a proactive effort to keep students fully and continually informed about course expectations and their own performance, the instructor substantially reduces the likelihood that students will fall behind in their work and be at risk for underperformance or failure in the course. Here are some recommendations for teachers in communicating about course requirements:

1. *Prepare a Course Syllabus.* At the start of the semester, the teacher hands out a syllabus listing all major course assignments, their descriptions, and due dates, as well as dates of quizzes and tests. This syllabus provides the student with a comprehensive map of all of the work to be done in the course for the semester. It also gives a clear explanation of the grading system, including the relative weight toward the final grade of tests, quizzes, homework, classwork, and student participation. Additionally, the syllabus spells out any penalties for submission of late work.

2. *Hand Out Weekly Work Agenda.* On Mondays, the teacher gives students a work agenda for the week. The agenda lists any in-class and homework assignments for that week, their descriptions (if necessary), and due dates. [Optional but recommended] The agenda may also include milestone tasks from larger, multi-week projects (e.g., reminding students in a November agenda that they should have their 6 required source documents for a term paper selected by Friday of the current week).

3. *Schedule Weekly Student Conferences.* The teacher holds brief meetings with individual students. In those mini-conferences, the teacher reviews with students their performance in the course to date, notes any missing work and gets the student to commit to a plan to submit that work, and checks in with the student about upcoming assignments, quizzes, and tests to ensure that the student continues to stay on top of course requirements. NOTE: If time constraints prevent the teacher from being able to conference with the entire class each week, the instructor may instead meet with at-risk students weekly and meet less frequently (e.g., every other week or monthly) with the remainder of the class.