

Four Rules for Academic Success

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From SAAS Watch

Three years ago I wrote in this column about a recipe for academic success. Several parents suggested recently that I do so again. Here are the four rules, which if followed, consistently produce success.

One, **Don't Let Things Slide.** No one enjoys, and few people handle well, digging out from under huge piles of work (However, a good plan for responding to such a situation will be described later.). The much better tactic is to avoid finding oneself underneath huge piles. Academically, the tortoise, who consistently covers smaller chunks of ground, invariably does better than the hare, who does fine one week and then wakes up two weeks later behind in every single subject.

Two, **Be Organized.** Anyone can juggle one ball. Juggling five or six is another problem. Our students do a lot, both in the classroom and out (Proof: most graduates return and say that the freshman year at college is less hectic than life at SAAS.). Good organizational habits are essential to managing the flood of requirements and responsibilities that begins with freshman year and ends at graduation. To paraphrase Mike Haykin, our learning specialist, if you got good habits, use them. If you don't (and I didn't as a high school student), find someone who does (like Mike) and steal some. Then pretend you invented them.

Three, **Be Engaged.** Get involved in school life outside of the classroom. Empirical reality: those who do get involved—on a team, in an activity, on a trip, in a production, etc.—do better in class and feel better about themselves. Empirical reality number two: the common theme of those who

are consistently in my office because of academic or behavioral problems is an unwillingness to do anything outside of class (often including homework).

Four, **If You Get Into Trouble, Ask For Help.** In my experience, no rule is as frequently ignored as this one, and ignoring it almost always causes serious problems that can frustrate students, parents, faculty, and administration.

When people need help and don't ask for it, the consequences are almost always indirect and often not related to the real problem. For example, Jon's problem with math becomes a problem with Sam the math teacher which in turn becomes a problem with school and How Can They Expect Me To Learn When All the Teachers Are Boring And There's Nothing To Do Here and Doesn't Everything Just Suck?

This pattern of avoiding the necessity to confront the real issue(s) and instead Blaming the Rest of the Universe is not restricted to students. When coaching football at Charles Wright, I would often subject Burbank, my kitty, to a torrent of verbal abuse when I arrived home late Friday night after a difficult game (read: one wherein I had made dumb mistakes.) and he would greet me with the feline version of "So, how was your day?"

Whenever a student comes to me to complain about a problem with a given teacher or with a given course, I ask, "Have you sat down, one on one, with Sam the math teacher and discussed this problem with him?" If the answer is no (and it is about 95% of the time), I suggest the obvious, which usually works. If it doesn't, then the next



logical step is to get the advisor involved.

Let me conclude with a diagnostic rule and a plan. I invented the rule, inherent in what I've already said, several days after I stole it from Three-fingered Izzy Cohen (who didn't have three fingers and who wasn't Jewish, but that's another story.): Every problem is the result of a failure to confront a previous problem. If your son or daughter has a problem in school, discuss the situation and try to trace the chain back to the previous problem that was not confronted. (A hypothetical example: I don't tell my history teacher that I can't follow his lessons unless he uses a written outline on the board. Then I fail two consecutive exams.)

The plan: If your student gets way behind in a course or every course, have her sit with the relevant teachers and have the teachers prioritize the work for the student, so she knows what is the most important thing to be done, the next most important, and so on. If something has to be left undone (and because of time pressure, this is usually the case), then the undone stuff is, by agreement of both student and teacher, the least important. Also, speaking with the teacher lets the teacher know that there is a plan in place and the student is following it. This awareness often mellows the teacher's attitude toward the student and her work.

