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The Benefits of Taking Academic Risks: Creating the Life You Want to Lead

By Pamela L. Bacon, Assistant Professor of Psychology

Welcome class of 2011.

Eleanor Roosevelt said, “The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experiences.”

College offers students many intellectual opportunities to “taste experience to the utmost”. Unfortunately, many students are afraid to do that. Rather than seeking out challenges, they stick with what is safe, letting outside forces determine their future.

Imagine two identical first year students with the same major. Both take the first course in the major, and both fail the first exam. One of them thinks, “I guess I wasn’t meant to major in this. I clearly am no good at it. I guess I’ll have to switch my career goals now.” Rather than risk trying harder and possibly failing again, she decides to pick a new, easier goal.

The other student thinks, “Wow! I guess I had better learn how to study for these tests. I thought I knew the material, but I must need to try some other ways to study. Maybe I should meet with the professor and see if she has any suggestions. I really want to learn about this topic.” This student increases her effort in the course and works to develop different strategies to prepare for the exams. She ends the semester mastering the material and is prepared for the next class in the sequence for the major.

Which kind of student are you going to be?

Are you going to be the kind of student who gives up when you receive negative feedback, or are you going to be the kind of student who listens to the feedback and tries harder and discovers new strategies?

Psychologist Carol Dweck has spent her lifetime studying students’ reactions to failure and found that people either have a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. Students with a fixed mindset believe that intelligence is fixed; you can’t do anything to change your intelligence. They believe that if they get a high test grade, it is evidence that they are smart.

Unfortunately, this also means that if they get a low test grade, it is evidence that they are not smart. Thus, every test becomes incredibly important—it doesn’t matter how many times they succeed; one failure is a sign that they are not good. In fact, students with the fixed mindset tend to believe that if they have to work at something, they must not be good at it. Students with this fixed mindset become very concerned with protecting their

egos. Trying difficult or risky things means that they might fail and show the world they're not smart. It's safer to stick with easy things where success is guaranteed.

Students with a growth mindset believe that intelligence can be changed or can grow over time. They believe that effort activates and uses intelligence. They believe that if they don't do well at something, they need to increase their effort or try a new strategy. When students with the growth mindset fail, they try even harder. They are intrigued by the challenge and delight in having the opportunity to learn something new.

One of Dweck's studies followed a group of first year pre-med students taking a difficult chemistry class that was required to stay in the pre-med major. Dweck and her colleagues found that students who had a fixed mindset—who thought their poor exam grade meant a lack of ability in chemistry gave up on their dream of being a doctor—after ONE exam! Students with the growth mindset—who thought that they could change their ability in chemistry through effort and new strategies, stayed engaged in the class, improved on later exams, and continued in the major.

Mary Pickford, an Oscar-award winning actress, stated, "If you have made mistakes, even serious ones, there is always another chance for you. What we call failure is not the falling down but the staying down."

Receiving a disappointing grade is common in college—especially the first semester! As Pickford states, it's not the act of receiving a poor grade, but the lack of effort to remedy the situation that defines failure. Students with the fixed mindset start to avoid academic risks because they believe that once you fall, you can't get up.

Do you recognize yourself in the fixed mindset group? Do not fear—

Those of us with the growth mindset know that you can work to change your mindset, something that Dweck's research supports. I know from personal experience. Tests in college felt like tests of my intelligence. It didn't matter how many times I succeeded—if I failed one test, it would mean I was a failure. Fortunately, I did well and went on to graduate school. There was a moment in graduate school, however, when I had to decide if the fixed mindset would control my life, or if I would take control.

In college, I took a course with an amazing professor who inspired me to become a psychology professor as well; I had found my vocation. In graduate school, I had the opportunity to teach one 50 minute class period in an undergraduate psychology class. I was really excited and nervous about my first real teaching opportunity. I spent hours practicing my lecture and had the timing down to the second.

The day of the presentation came and I was ready! Unfortunately, I didn't take into account how quickly I would talk when I was really nervous. What took 50 minutes alone in front of a mirror took 20 minutes in front of 30 dazed students who looked like a tornado had just ripped through the room. This was a moment when I had two options. I could assume that I wasn't meant to be a teacher or I could try to learn from this

experience and improve my skills. Rather than dwelling on my bruised ego, I could focus on strategies to do a better job lecturing, such as slowing down (and having lots of backup material just in case!). Rather than let one bad experience determine my future, I decided to create my future by redoubling my efforts.

Determine your goals and then work to make them happen. Don't limit yourself to goals you know for certain you can achieve. It is often the more challenging goals that are ultimately the most rewarding.

As you begin the risky undertaking of starting a new life in college, please think about the growth mindset and how it can help you make your time at the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University the most beneficial to you:

Take chances in the courses you select. Don't stick to things you know you can do from past experience. Challenge yourself to try something that may require more work, but will lead to intellectual reward. Go beyond what is safe and take advantage of the amazing variety of classes offered at St. Ben's and St. John's.

With changes in our common curriculum, you can now get by with ONE natural science class. Don't settle for that. Take more than the minimum requirement, regardless of your future plans. We need citizens who have an understanding of science.

Take chances in the major you select. Don't limit yourself too quickly—how can you possibly know what you want to major in before you've even taken a single college class? Explore numerous possibilities and take advantage of these liberal arts colleges. Don't pick a major because it will lead to a safe, clearly defined career path. College is one of the only times when you can pursue a field of study because you find it *fascinating*. Do not let this chance go by; few people have the opportunity (or financial resources) to go to college a second time!

Sometimes people may question your choice to put passion above practicality. My sister was a French major in college and constantly heard "You're majoring in French? What are you going to do with THAT??" Her response was, "I've already done what I planned to do--I was able to study a subject I enjoy in depth, in a way I may never get to study again in my life." The beauty of a liberal arts education is that regardless of your major, you will leave with core skills that will prepare you for a variety of careers.

Class of 2011, you have the power to create your future. You need to think about what you want out of life without worrying about potential setbacks. Do not make choices based on what is safest and will result in the highest GPA. Do not let one low grade determine your future. You have enormous potential AND enormous resources at your disposal. When you struggle in a class, DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. Do not be passive—do not let “destiny” determine your future.

As your college career unfolds, I hope that you will take advantage of the wonderful opportunity you have at College of St. Benedict and St. John's University to “taste

experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experiences.” By taking the chance, you will create a life that will be meaningful and one that will help you become the person you want to be.