UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
SWANSON school of engineering
freshman engineering

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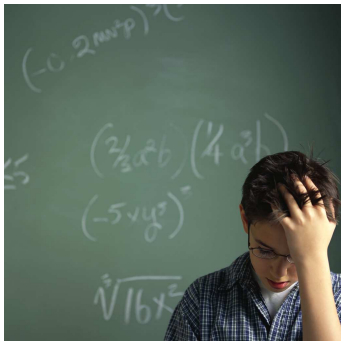
Help for Struggling Students



The start of the Spring semester always brings with it a group of students who have found themselves on academic probation due to poor grades in the Fall term. The Freshman Engineering Program advising team takes a very hands-on approach with these students by offering up biweekly one-on-one advising meetings to students on academic probation and by offering a series of Academic Recovery Workshops. Both the one-on-one advising meetings and the workshop series are aimed at helping probation students assess what went wrong in the first term and at helping them improve their study habits, time management skills, and test preparation.

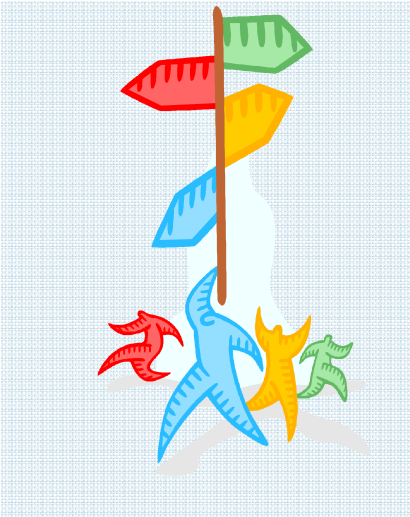
The Academic Recovery Workshops began during the last week in January and will end during the third week in February. This is a three-part workshop series focusing first on defining last semester's mistakes and setting priorities for the new term. The second workshop focused on learning styles and in-class strategies for success. The final workshop keys in on outside-the-classroom success strategies such as more effective reading techniques and utilizing help resources.

Students are considered to be on academic probation if they have a cumulative GPA below 2.0 after the first term. Students in this position must achieve a 2.0 by the end of the second term in order to come off academic probation. Students who fall below a 1.75 cumulative GPA after the spring term will be dismissed from the university. (Normally, two consecutive terms below 2.0 make a student subject to dismissal, but freshmen must achieve a 1.75 cumulative GPA.)

If your student falls into the probation group this semester, ask them if they have been attending the Academic Recovery Workshops and if they have responded to their advisor's invitation to meet biweekly. We are persistent in our effort to meet with all of our probation students regularly, but unfortunately, not every student is as proactive as they should be in the second term. The good news is that most students DO take their probation status very seriously, meet with us regularly, and attend at least one of the workshops. Ask your probation student how those meetings are going and what he/she is doing differently this term to make sure that good academic standing is in his/her future!

Important points on Probation:

- A student with a cumulative GPA below 2.0 is considered to be on academic probation.
- Probation students should be meeting biweekly with their advisor.
- Academic Recovery workshops started in January and end the third week in February.



Department Selection Time is Approaching

This term in Freshman Engineering Seminar, the course material is focused almost solely on program selection. During the first week of the term, freshman engineers indicated their top choices of engineering majors and were then given the opportunity in subsequent weeks to visit their two favorite departments. Before students attended the departmental Open Houses in the beginning of February, they heard presentations from Career Development and Cooperative Education; these resources should assist undecided students in selecting a program and also could help arm decided students with questions to ask during the Open House programs.

After hearing the departmental presentations in Freshman Seminar in the fall term and then attending the Open House programs in the spring, most students are able to select a program confidently at the end of February. These selections are unofficial and help us direct students to the appropriate department for fall selection of classes and registration in mid-March. The selections become official and students' files are sent to the appropriate departments once spring grades are in and eligibility to declare a major is confirmed. Students are eligible to declare their major at the end of the freshman year as long as they have at least a 2.0 cumulative GPA and are missing no more than one class from the Freshman Engineering Program.

Students who are still undecided after the Open Houses should take the following steps to clarify their interests and strengths:

- Attend the third optional Open House with the departments in contention. This third optional Open House is actually Q&A with the department Undergraduate Coordinators in their offices.
- Meet with an academic advisor
- Meet with the engineering career consultant in the Office of Career Development to discuss the selection process
- Attend an upcoming program for undecided students (more info available with your student's advisor)

Save the Date!

The Freshmen Engineering Conference will be held on Saturday April 4, 2009!

Since the beginning of your student's academic career in the Swanson School of Engineering, he/she has been writing a progressive series of papers in his/her ENGR 0011 and 0012 classes aimed at helping identify an area of interest in engineering, select a major, and learn how to write and present a professional conference paper.

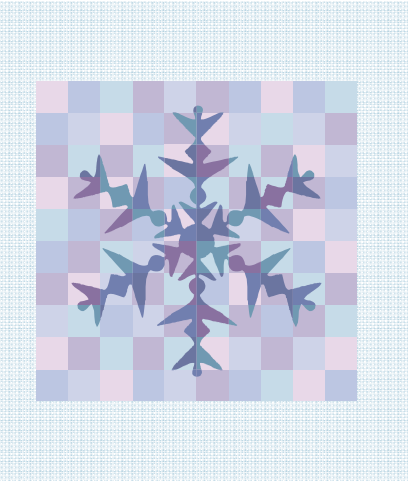
At the end of the freshman year, students are required to present these papers at a mock professional conference. They are required to dress professionally, use presentation software, and present a coherent, well-researched paper. They have been working with an upperclassman and a professional engineer from industry in writing the paper and most students are working in teams of two. Attendance at the conference is mandatory for students and parents are invited to attend. It is truly impressive to see just how much our students have learned and grown by the end of the first year at Pitt.

More information with specifics will follow. But if you're interested in attending, save the date: Saturday, April 4, 2009!

Freshman Engineering Program Addition

The Freshman Engineering Program is pleased to welcome Christopher Kirchhof to the advising team! At the start of the term, Chris joined the Freshman Engineering Program in the position of Academic Advisor. Chris comes to us from the public school system, where he taught in Connecticut, Michigan, and most recently in Pennsylvania. In addition to an eagerness to work with students on the college level and assist them in their first year in engineering, Chris brings a unique perspective to our team with his direct experience at the high school level. We are excited to have Chris join us in the Swanson School of Engineering and welcome him to the Freshman Engineering Program Office!

Seasonal Student Issues



There's a seasonal ebb and flow when it comes to student issues. Here are a few things your student may be experiencing this month:

√ Difficulty getting into study mode

√ Things become routine…school finally becomes home

√ Missing family and friends at home, and friends who did not return to school

√ Cliques become stronger within residence hall communities, student organizations and in classes

√ Cabin fever and burnout

√ Pressures to figure out living plans for next year as the room assignment process draws near

√ Valentine's Day depression if not dating

√ Vocational choice/internship search causes anxiety

√ Spring break planning underway

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Plant the Seeds of Greatness

Parents like to think their sons and daughters can do anything. And they can! But, this doesn't just happen. They need encouragement and support—and helpful hints about the practical ways to get where they're hoping to go.

February is "Plant the Seeds of Greatness" month. This awareness month is designed to give people permission to take time to sit back and evaluate how their life is going. Are there changes your student would like to make? If so, you can help him improve his situation.

For instance, do you know what goals your student is working towards, both personally and professionally? What he wants to achieve in his life? This is important. You may have known that at age 7 he wanted to be a rodeo cowboy. Or that she wanted to be the first female president of the United States. Although your student may still be harboring these goals, it's quite likely that she has some other short-term and long-term goals in the mix too.

So, how can you help plant the seeds of greatness? Doses of reality interspersed with permission to dream work really well. And a little bit of encouragement goes a long way.

This month, consider:

- Asking your student what his current short-term and long-term goals are.
- Discussing the practical strategies he is taking to accomplish these goals.
- Asking if there are ways you can help him to achieve his goals.
- Talking about both his good and bad habits and how they are contributing to or hindering his ability to achieve his goals.
- Offering suggestions and alternative ways of thinking about things.
- Sharing some of your own short-term and long-term goals.
- Reminding your student to have dreams…they are important.

And remember, there's nothing wrong with thinking big! Who knows what great accomplishments are yet to come.

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"So, how can you help plant the seeds of greatness? Doses of reality interspersed with permission to dream work really well."

Recognizing Eating Disorders

National Eating Disorders Awareness Week is Feb. 22-28, 2009

As college students contend with new anxieties, emotions and stressors, they may turn to eating disorders as a way of regaining control. Knowing the signs and symptoms of the most common eating disorders and how to talk about body image issues can help you proactively address any potential concerns you may notice. Additional help is available both on and off campus, too.

Anorexia Nervosa Signs & Symptoms

- Resistance to maintaining a body weight that is at or above normal for age and height
- Intense fear of gaining weight and anxiety over being "fat," even if underweight
- Disturbance in how weight or body shape is experienced, overemphasis on weight or shape on self-evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of low body weight
- Amenorrhea (loss of menstrual period)

Warning signs include: comments about being fat in spite of weight loss; refusal to eat certain foods or categories of food combined with food-related rituals; denial of hunger and excuse-making around situations involving food; and excessive and rigid exercise routines.

Bulimia Nervosa Signs & Symptoms

- Frequent intake of abnormally large quantities of food, coupled with a sense of loss of control over eating
- "Purging" behaviors after binges, such as self-induced vomiting, laxative or diuretic abuse, fasting and/or compulsive exercise
- Extreme concern with body weight and shape

Warning signs include: swelling of the cheeks or jaw, stained teeth, and calluses on hands or knuckles from vomiting; evidence of binges such as the rapid disappearance of large amounts of food or many empty food packages; evidence of purging such as trips to the bathroom after meals, signs and/or smells of vomiting, empty laxative or diuretics packages; a rigid exercise routine even if sick or injured; complex schedules or rituals to make time for binge-and-purge sessions; and withdrawing from friends and activities.

Binge Eating Disorder (or Compulsive Overeating)

- Recurrent binge eating similar to bulimia without the compensatory measures to rid oneself of the food
- Extreme discomfort from consuming large quantities of food
- Avoidance of social activities that draw attention to one's body or involve food, or eating only small amounts around others
- History of cyclical dieting, depression and weight gain

How to Help

Many individuals go through periods of disordered eating in response to transition or stress; this doesn't necessarily indicate that an eating disorder exists. When eating or restricting patterns become a compulsive urge and interfere with health, social interactions and academic progress, it's likely an eating disorder has developed. At the heart of any eating disorder is a lack of emotional coping skills for dealing with stress, anxiety or trauma. The persons' relationship with food becomes their mechanism for coping and a way to manage or alter mood states.

If you suspect that your student has an eating disorder:

- Learn as much as you can about eating disorders.
- Develop a support network in which you can talk openly about your feelings and frustrations—and where you can develop a plan of action to help your student.
- Directly express concern; tell your student that you care and offer to help. Share details about behaviors you have noticed that concern you the most.
- Try to be objective and calm in discussing the behaviors that concern you. Avoid offering simple solutions – if it were that easy, there would not be a problem.
- Suggest that you and your student seek professional help from a physician and/or therapist.
- Avoid making comments about his or her appearance. Concern about weight loss may be interpreted as a compliment; comments about weight gain may be felt as criticism.
- Don't become involved in a power struggle. You can't force the person to eat. Offer continued support and refrain from judgment.
- Try to maintain as normal and healthy a lifestyle as possible.
- Do not blame yourself.

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Exploring Healthy Relationships with Your Student

February is Relationship Wellness Month. Talk with your student this month about what a healthy relationship looks like. It doesn't really matter if you're talking about the love of your student's life or a good friend. The basic tenets of healthy relationships are the same, regardless! Consider using this acronym to get the conversation started:

Signs that a Relationship is Healthy…

Vitality! In a healthy relationship, both individuals have the opportunity to grow, explore areas of interest to them and live life to the fullest.

Acceptance. It's nearly impossible to change another person. In a healthy relationship, both partners accept the good, the bad (and the sometimes ugly) parts of one another.

Love. This goes without saying! But, it's important to note that love is intimacy, friendship and respect— not possessiveness, obsession and manipulation.

Emotion. Relationships are emotional roller coasters, there's no doubt about it. If you didn't truly care about the person, the relationship wouldn't be hard work. Sometimes you'll face uphill battles and sometimes you'll feel like you're coasting downhill. This is all-important in building a strong, solid relationship.

Natural. In a healthy relationship, partners aren't pressured to do things they don't want to do. If something doesn't feel right, it's quite likely that it isn't. You should never feel intimidated or put down by the person who loves you.

Trust. It's much easier to be vulnerable when you trust someone wholeheartedly. And this vulnerability is so important in achieving an authentic relationship built on honesty and openness.

Interdependence. In a healthy relationship, partners live and work together. Neither is dependent or independent from the other and both have their own positive identity.

Nourishing. A relationship should make deposits in your emotional bank account, not withdrawals. Healthy relationships are those that make you feel good about yourself.

Effervescence. If you're not feeling excited about your relationship, something is wrong. Although relationships are hard work and take a great deal of compromise, if you've tried this and you're still not feeling excited, it might be time to evaluate why you're feeling the way you are. This is okay! Sometimes you just need to take stock to realize all that you have. But sometimes, it may be time to part ways. If this is the case, stay true to yourself and be as honest as you can.

Now's the time to get the conversation started. Show your student that you care about his emotional well being by encouraging him to take a close look at the relationships he has to determine how healthy they are.

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February is Library Lovers Month!

Use this month-long theme as an excuse to gobble up some good reads for pleasure. That's right. Put aside those work-related publications and encourage your student to set aside her textbooks (just a little) too. Here are several bestsellers that you can pick from to read together – and discuss – this month:

The Twilight Saga by Stephanie Meyer

This series received considerable attention in late 2008 when the first book became a major motion picture, but it was around long before then! Deeply romantic and extraordinarily suspenseful, Twilight, New Moon, Eclipse and Breaking Down are powerful reads for people of all ages. Check out what all the buzz is about!

Three Cups of Tea by Greg Mortenson

This is the story of a real-life Indiana Jones and his humanitarian campaign to bring education and justice to the Taliban's backyard. It's the tale of Greg Mortenson, a homeless mountaineer who was inspired to build a group of impoverished mountain villagers a school. He didn't stop there! He has since built 55 schools, especially for girls, in one of the most isolated and dangerous regions on earth.

Dreams from My Father by Barack Obama

Published years before he became the 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama shared this memoir, which became a bestseller when it was reissued in 2004. The book tells the story of Obama's struggle to understand the forces that shaped him as an individual and his father's legacy. The book has been described as a "searching meditation on the meaning of identity in America."

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Making Time

Helping Students Take a Look at Their Time Management Approach

Time marches on – sometimes much too quickly. College students understand this as well as anybody. Unfortunately, what they don't always understand quite so well is how to manage the hours in their day. Thankfully, this month is Time Management Month, a great time for your student to look at bad habits and to figure how he can be much smarter about maximizing his time.

You can help by asking a few questions…

How much time do you spend sorting through "stuff"?

There's a saying: "Stuff steals time." Your student may find this to be true every time she's shifting through the pile atop her desk or searching for something in her overloaded backpack. Encourage her to spend 20 minutes each week filing papers away and sorting through stuff so she knows where everything is. Getting in this practice can help stop the stuff shuffle for good!

How much time do you spend online?

Ah, yes, it's so easy to do. Ask your student if he's every popped online to look up one thing, only to bounce to another and another… until he's spent an hour online in what started as a "five minute check." To save time, encourage your student to get in the groove of only checking his email or Facebook page a few times each day, instead of responding to every ding. Suggest that he turn off the sound on his computer if that'll help. And encourage him to play "beat the clock" when he gets online to do research—only giving himself 30 minutes to get in and get out. That kind of incentive can make him much more aware of how quickly the clock is ticking.

How much time does other technology gobble up?

Ask your student how much texting and chatting on the phone she is doing. Is the TV on for several hours a day? Does she find that video games suck her in? These techy pursuits are fine, in moderation. Just encourage your student to be smart about how she consumes them. Maybe she doesn't need to call her best friend from home every single day. Maybe she can watch some TV shows online for free, thus cutting back on time wasted by commercials. There are options!

Time is our most precious resource. As your student thinks about what he wants this term to be all about, it's important for him to look at how he's spending his time. Sometimes old habits need to be bumped to make room for new experiences.

Advantages of Time Management

√ you gain time
√ you get more sleep
√ you feel more motivated
√ you don't get lost in "stuff"
√ you reduce avoidance
√ you don't cram as much
√ you feel less anxious
√ you are more productive

Resource: www.dartmouth. edu/~acskills/success/time.html

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Having Fun with the Academy Awards!

The Oscars will be awarded live this February 22 on ABC-TV. A variety of high-quality movies have been nominated, providing yet another topic of conversation to share with your student.

Tune into the Academy Awards website at www.oscar.com for more information. Plus, check out the movie descriptions, actor/actress bios and previews available through the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com). You'll have all sorts of information at your fingertips to "talk movies" with your student.

Plus, just for fun, have family and friends guess who the winners will be in some of the major categories. Have a cheesy prize or crown that can be passed on to the winner once the show airs on February 22. You may just have an annual tradition on your hands!

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Real -World Preparation

The Freshman Engineering Program strives to develop, maintain, and promote a supportive environment conducive to the recruitment, academic advising, personal development, and retention of undergraduate engineering students.

This mission can be achieved by:

- Encouraging successful personal and academic growth by providing programs and support/guidance specific to the first-year engineering experience
- Providing a medium for selected undergraduate students to enhance professional skills such a team-building, communication and organization while contributing to the engineering community.

Visit us on the web:
http://www.engr.pitt.edu/freshman

Additional Information

Important Dates:

2/16/09: *First Day of Summer Registration*
3/6/09: *Monitored Withdraw Deadline*
3/8-3/15/09: *Spring Break*
3/23/09: *Fall Registration Begins*
4/17/09: *Last Day of Classes*
4/20-4/25/09: *Finals Week*

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