TEACHING UNPREPARED STUDENTS
Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education

KATHLEEN F. GABRIEL

with a foreword by Sandra M. Flake
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Foreword by Sandra M. Flake
To my husband, Michael, and my children, Stephanie, Isaac, and Lucas. Without their constant support, encouragement, understanding, and love, this book would not have been possible.
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Kathleen F. Gabriel
Chico, California
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Kathleen Gabriel’s *Teaching Unprepared Students: Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education* is an invaluable tool for college and university faculty whether or not they teach unprepared students. The philosophy underlying the approaches and the strategies Gabriel uses to help students understand how to learn in a college environment are useful for working with all students, including those who are adequately or well prepared to take on college. But, of course, these approaches are best suited and will significantly help students who are challenged by college-level material and who need to develop the skills to succeed in an academic environment.

Earlier in my career I spent several years as a faculty member working with unprepared college students, first in an equal opportunity program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and then as director of a reading and writing center and retention programs for students of color and immigrant students at the University of Minnesota’s General College. Gabriel’s book and her examples immediately brought to mind the impact that teaching students who needed additional preparation for college had on me. I had not realized, until my experience at UW-Milwaukee, that fairly large gaps in skills could be overcome and that students unprepared for college could make large gains if they were challenged and supported in their learning.

The strategies Gabriel outlines work effectively with students who need to develop their skills—particularly once they realize the importance of those skills and how much they will need them. I still remember Vince, who showed no concern about his low grades on two writing assignments but who came into my office greatly concerned when the grade on his third paper indicated only marginal improvement. As he put it, “I knew the first two papers were bad—I rushed them and didn’t try. But I knew I could get...”
an A or a B if I tried, and on this one, I tried!” That third paper was the catalyst for Vince; learning how to improve his writing suddenly became important. Vince never became a great writer, but in that semester he took the first major steps to becoming a competent writer. He also learned that to write well, trying was the first step, not the last.

Gabriel recognizes too that students with good abilities may still be unprepared for learning at the college level. Gaps in skills are the result of not learning how to study, how to read college-level materials, how to manage time, how to read a syllabus, how to communicate in writing, and so on. Further, students who are ill prepared for higher education often value the credential without valuing the learning that goes along with it.

I highly recommend *Teaching Unprepared Students: Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education* to faculty members who are dedicated to improving student learning. This book promotes improved learning in a context of high expectations. It is a primer for all of us who believe in the value of a rigorous education that fosters development of knowledge and skills for a lifetime. It recognizes that students learn better in an environment where they understand the expectations, where they learn through application and practice, and where multiple pathways to knowledge and skills result in lifelong learning and education. This book also provides useful ideas for those of us engaged in working with a full spectrum of students, from the unprepared and often unengaged to the well-prepared and dedicated learners. Gabriel recognizes there are multiple paths to successful learning, and faculty members can guide students to finding the pathways that help them to be successful.

Let me close with a final recollection. Robin was a factory worker who decided to get an education to improve his standard of living. He came into my office one day near the end of his first semester in college and proudly handed me a book—the first he had ever read without it being required of him. He had come to the university to improve his standard of living and would do so, but he had also improved his understanding of what it meant to be educated. He would now read books on his own, for both learning and enjoyment. Kathleen Gabriel understands that successful students develop the ability to learn enough to get that credential—the degree—and
to learn enough to value education beyond the credential. She teaches all of us ways to make that happen.

Sandra M. Flake
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The number of academically unprepared and at-risk students enrolling in colleges and universities is increasing. In a national survey of college professors conducted by the Chronicle of Higher Education, 44% of college faculty members reported that their students “are ill prepared for the demands of higher education” (Sanoff, 2006, p. 1). Results from the American College Testing Program (ACT) in 2006 support the professors’ perception. These results show that 49% of high school graduates do not have the reading skills they need to succeed in college (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005, p. 1). For those who attend college, about 25% of first-time students at 4-year colleges and universities require at least 1 year of remedial courses (Adelman, 2004; Horn & Berger, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005, p. 1).

These statistics may be surprising, but they do not fully describe the attitude of many of today’s college students. As Weimer (2002) explains,

Students now arrive at college less well prepared than they once did. They often lack solid basic skills and now work many hours to pay for college and sometimes a car. . . . Many students lack confidence in themselves as learners and do not make responsible learning decisions. . . . Having little