Academic Success:
Barriers and Strategies

A Qualitative Study of Students Who Have Improved Their Academic Performance

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Executive Summary

This study examines the strategies that Grinnell College students have used to increase their grade point averages (GPAs) substantially in the course of one semester, and then maintain it at a similarly higher level. As part of arriving at that knowledge, it also uncovered some barriers to academic success which, once removed, allowed students to perform academically to the best abilities.

The barriers and strategies described here are those of the students who volunteered to participate. While clear commonalities and themes arose from the data, this study does not claim to represent all barriers and strategies, or all lived experiences of students at Grinnell College.

Participants

Of the thirty-nine students invited to participate, twenty-two completed semi-structured interviews. These students were in their third to seventh semesters, predominantly white but with representation from all racial classifications used by the college. Each interview, which lasted between 20 and 90 minutes, averaging about an hour. These interviews produced 190,799 words of data.

Results

Participants described barriers to academic success as pertaining to their

- Choices of classes
- Perception of or interactions with faculty
- Study behaviors and attitudes toward academic work
- Mental health or executive functioning ability
- Adjustment to the Grinnell environment, and
- Lack of seeking help

Factors that promoted academic success were broadly aligned with barriers, but also included a more nuanced understanding of some factors that then became stand-alone themes. Factors included

- Choices of classes
- Faculty
- Academic reframing
- Study habits
- Student behaviors
    - Help-seeking
    - Resource use
    - Self-care
    - Organization
    - Extra-curricular activities
- Friends

The first semester emerged as a complex period where the factors described above intertwine to hinder academic success. In addition, students are often surprised by the quantity and quality of work expected. Participants described having difficulty finding a sense of belonging, arriving at a comfortable relationship with faculty, and establishing a routine for themselves. We include a narrative that ties the barriers to academic success together to illustrate the difficulty of the first semester.

Participants provided advice to other Grinnell students wishing to improve their GPAs. They also discussed changes that would have prevented or removed a barrier to academic success, or further facilitated their improvement. Direct quotations of advice from students are provided.

Action Points

For Students

Course Choice

- Choose a variety of classes early in your Grinnell career, even if you think you know your major.
- Register early for classes, paying attention to class times and faculty teaching the section.
- Ask friends about different faculty members' pedagogical styles, and consider what will work for you.
- Do not take all courses that are known to be difficult in one semester.
- Strategize about whether you can or should take a reduced course-load in any semester.
- If you do well in a class, consider other courses in the same discipline or with the same professor.
- Discuss the implications of course choices with your advisor (work load, type of work, topics).
- Choose courses in which you have a genuine interest.
- Consider a short course if you are not sure you have an interest in a subject.
- Organize your classes so you have different types of work — a mixture of worksheets, problem sets, reading, and writing.

Studying

- Study for learning's sake, not for a grade.
- Take charge of your learning, and find a faculty collaborator to help you identify what skills and knowledge will complement your existing skills, knowledge, and interests.
- Try to participate in class regularly, and prepare with this expectation in mind..
- Make friends with people in your classes, and try to discuss material outside of class together.
- Form a study group if that helps you.
- Strive to connect what you are learning in the classroom with your lived experience.
- Even if you can't keep up with the homework, attend class.
- Find a location that is conducive to effective studying.
- Create a daily routine with scheduled study time.
- Study earlier in the day when you even have a short period of time available.
- Ask older students how long they spend studying for particular classes to get a realistic sense of what you should be doing.
- Experiment with different study techniques to find what works for you.
- Find a work-study job that allows you to study while performing your duties (such as desk attendant).

Help-Seeking

- Talk to the faculty member as soon as you start to fall behind.
- Introduce yourself to faculty members early in the semester, and attend office hours to discuss your progress several times a semester.
- Know that faculty prefer you to talk about areas where you are struggling than to keep quiet about them; they will not judge you poorly for asking for help.
- Go see Academic Advising staff members if you start to fall behind.
- Do not judge yourself harshly if you struggle to keep up academically —many students feel that way.
- Ask for help from faculty, friends, tutors, mentors, and all the academic resource centers.
- If you are nervous to going, ask friends to walk with you to go to see professors or attend office hours.
- If you see friends starting to miss class, talk to them, and encourage them to reach out for help (faculty, CAs, RLCs, academic advising).
- If you do not feel comfortable asking people in the college community for help, talk to your parents.

Helpful Behaviors and Self-Care

- Prioritize your sleep and a regular sleep schedule.
- Remind yourself of all the things that you are accomplishing—even the basics, like attending class.
- Schedule regular exercise.
- Join a club and attend it regularly.
- Find an extra-curricular activity in which you are really interested and consider how you can apply or further that interest in your academic work.
- Schedule your days, prioritizing tasks and allotting them adequate time.
- Remember that you got into Grinnell, therefore you belong here academically.
- Go home during Fall or Thanksgiving breaks, if at all possible.
- Track your grades for each assignment carefully, so you are not surprised by your final grade.
- Build and nourish your support network.
- Ask you friends to hold you accountable for studying and hold them accountable too.
- Do not feel the need to be a counselor to your friends, but be a good friend if they are in need of support.
- Offer to walk with friends to office hours, to help them feel more comfortable going.

For Faculty

Advising

- Spend considerable time with advisees, particularly first-generation students, discussing class choices.
- Make clear for students the implications of their class choices, in terms of type of work, amount of work, topics, class times, faculty personalities, and who else they may know in the class.
- Encourage advisees to find a balance of courses, both more and less challenging, each semester.
- Advise students to take a variety of disciplines and types of courses initially.
- Suggest that classes that the student finds intrinsically interesting make up the bulk of their class choices.
- Question students who come in with a set notion of what they want to major in to ascertain whether they really want it or whether they are echoing their parents' (or others') wishes.
- Repeatedly exhort your advisees to use college resources. Talk to them about the available resources and how students can benefit from the resources, even if they are not particularly struggling at that point.
- If students appear to be struggling, make every effort to build up their self-efficacy. Remind them that they are at Grinnell because they deserve to be, that Grinnell is difficult both in terms of quality and quantity of work, and that there are many and varied sources of support.
- Discuss with advisees expectations of time spent on homework.
- Offer to help develop a daily schedule with students who appear to need it (or as part of a class).
- Reinforce to advisees in the first semester your understanding of the large adjustment they are experiencing as they enter college. Be sympathetic to their situations.

Office Hours

- Strongly encourage students to attend office hours, including time to get to know them.
- Give positive feedback for even small improvements, recognizing that in some cases this may be the result of an inordinate and unusual amount of effort.
- Display your human side (for example, previous struggles or failures, hobbies that might be relevant to students' interests), and have non-class material-related conversations with your students.
- Repeat to students, in and out of class, a formative, rather than summative, viewpoint of their studies.

- Take time to encourage students to make the material personally relevant and tell them how to do this.
- Be clear with students who are seeking help that you are not judging them, even if they have missed several classes. Applaud their help-seeking, and strategize with them how to improve their performance.
- Discuss healthy sleep habits and self-care with students, in the knowledge that they are unlikely to perform their best academically if they are not meeting their basic needs.

For Staff

- Prioritize and communicate your concern for students' sleep habits, stressing the importance of good sleep and self-care.
- Remind students of all the things that they are accomplishing — even the basics, like attending class.
- Encourage other aspects of self-care, such as regular exercise, meditation or time for oneself.
- Make clear the benefits of joining a club, and help students work out how to fit in the time commitments of attending a club activity.
- Show students how to organize their schedule, prioritizing tasks and allotting them adequate time.
- Remind students that they got into Grinnell and therefore belong here academically.
- Offer to help students who are struggling find appropriate sources of support.
- Make students' support networks visible to them.
- Assure students that they do not need to be their friends' counselors and help them judge when to suggest friends find professional sources of support.
- Talk to students about their courses to help them work out where their intrinsic interests lie. This may involve a discussion to link their extra-curricular activities back to their academic work.
- Suggest to students the work-study jobs in which they can perform their duties while also studying.
- Brainstorm with students the types of work they might enjoy and that may pertain to their interests.
- Create study groups and study sessions for different groups (e.g., PCPOP students), similar to what currently exists for Questbridge scholars.

For Parents

- Remind your child that Grinnell is academically rigorous and that they are unlikely to be able to rely on the same study techniques they used in high school.
- Communicate to your child that you understand how difficult Grinnell academic work is and that all you ask for is their best effort.
- Encourage your child to take a variety of classes, rather than focusing on their intended major early on.
- Strongly advise your child to come home, or at least get off campus, for one of the breaks in their first semester.
- Offer a non-judgmental, listening ear about problems or adjustments to college life.
- Remind your child of the various sources of support on campus and encourage them to use the many available resources.

Barriers

The more I bottled it up, the worse it got.

When you see your grades falling, on the inside, you just have chaos.

I felt awkward when I went to classes, and I really didn't feel like I connected with my professors on a one-on-one basis. … I felt really black when I came to campus.

Your full job is to study, and so it takes hours. And I just did not budget my time very well.

Getting these grades was wrecking me. I felt horrible. But I felt relatively helpless at the same time because I didn't have motivation to do my work and/or sleep, really. I was a whole mess.

I have a hard time talking to professors who I don't know, but then I won't get to know them unless I talk to them.

It's hard to prioritize academics when you have issues that feel more pressing. It's hard to muster up the energy to really care about pulling an A- or an A, when you can't get out of bed.

I felt like I was prepared because I was at the top of my class. But then I got here, and when you're not at the top anymore, it's a hard realization,

[I was not] as involved as I should have been, taking a back seat to my education, instead of pursuing it.

I just felt like I was set here. Alone. I was just trying to do everything by myself and not get help from people.

I had to kind of hit a tipping point where I was so uncomfortable I had to change.

I didn't feel comfortable participating in those classes, because I just didn't know the information well enough. So switching over and actually being interested and enjoying what I was learning helped with that a lot.

Our GPAs are like our salaries here because people don't share that. People are very confidential about their grades.

I felt like I just landed here, and I was just stuck here, and I just didn't know what to do. I didn't know who to talk to. I didn't have any friends to talk to. I didn't want to talk to my parents about it. And [it] just kind of snowballed. And I just fell further and further behind.

I knew the situation I was in, and it kept piling up on me, and there was no-one I could talk to for help. So after a while, after it just kept piling on, piling on, it was like, 'I'll never get this work done. I'll never be able to catch back up, or be able to get my grades up, so there's no point in trying so hard.

Looking back on that semester from now, I had so much time, I just didn't use it wisely.

Strategies

I have found that professors are people too.

You can work a lot harder than you think you can.

It's never too late to make a right decision.

Working out and deadlifting 225 pounds—that feeling is so much more rewarding than getting drunk on Tuesday morning.

Scheduling myself more helped me be more productive.

Clubs really help you find friends.

I surround myself with people who are going to encourage the acts that are beneficial to me in the long run.

Having a very busy schedule is a good way to learn how to navigate a busy schedule!

You don't drink when you have 3 classes the next day. That's a general rule of thumb.

If I didn't manage my time, if I didn't prioritize certain things, or I didn't schedule everything, I wouldn't get anything done.

You finish that homework before you go to sleep.

I had a lot of people behind me, backing me up, and helping me throughout the entire second semester.

Calm, consistent working. Nothing super-human. Just keep working. Just keep going. And if you just do that, it does work.

Everything's going [well]. I'm going to office hours, talking to professors, trying to be proactive about all of my work and get everything done on time. And sometimes even before time.

You feel like nothing can hinder you when you're with your friends here.

She believed in me at a time I didn't believe in me.

I have an angel in academic advising. They're doing something good over there. Hitting them up is a smart thing to do.

It's easier to have a set schedule of lots of different things than to just have a whole bunch of free time!

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Purpose

This study intended to uncover the strategies that students use to increase their grade point averages (GPAs) substantially in the course of one semester, and then maintain it at a similarly higher level. As part of arriving at that knowledge, it also sought to understand the barriers to academic success which, once removed, would allow students to perform academically to the best abilities.

Method

Qualitative methods help researchers "to understand the meaning people have constructed about their world and their experiences."[1]They provide rich descriptions of complex phenomena, capture the range of interpretations held by a variety of constituents around key events and campus conventions, describe motivations for behaviors and choices, and can uncover the constructs and factors at play in particular focal areas. Qualitative methods are particularly helpful when there are limited individuals related to the topic of interest, and when the topic is sensitive and/or complicated. The multiple layers of complexity that likely are involved in students' substantially improved grades make qualitative methods the most appropriate method for this study. Awareness of these factors may then, subsequently, allow them to be included on quantitative data-collection efforts, if appropriate

Narrative research data consist of stories detailing the narrators' experiences of lived events.[2] People understand, explain, and make sense of their lives and the world about them through stories. They then use these stories to articulate the meaning they have subsequently constructed from their experiences. Narrative methods seek to uncover both the inner and outer meanings individuals create from their lived experiences, i.e., what the experiences mean on a personal level to the individuals, as well as on a social level in terms of an existing external environment.[3] This study thus solicited stories around a particular topic—students' experiences of academic difficulty before increasing their grades markedly at Grinnell—to reveal the meaning-making they had performed at the time and subsequently, as well as the strategies they employed to improve their academic performance.

We received approval for this study from the Grinnell College Institutional Review Board. To recruit participants, we used two different methods. We first looked for students in their third and fourth years who had any semester GPA that was more than 0.5 of a grade point higher than the previous cumulative GPA. We excluded students who had an increase of more than 0.5 immediately following a leave of any sort (off-campus study, personal, medical, or academic). We also excluded students who did not maintain their higher GPA, following their initial academic improvement. From this point, we engaged in purposeful sampling.[4] Members of OASIR each independently assigned an interest score on the semester-by-semester GPA paths of these students, ranking them as a potentially very interesting, potentially moderately interesting, or potentially less interesting case. We aggregated the scores, and invited students with the highest interest score to participate. This process was done in two waves, with the fourth years being selected and interviewed first. Thus, by the time we purposefully sampled the third years, we were able to exclude GPA paths already substantially represented in the data.

Simultaneously, OASIR collated a list of the top twenty students with the largest increases in their GPA in the spring 2016 semester, compared to their previous cumulative GPA. To be included in this group, students had to be active students, on campus in fall 2016, and with a fall 2015 GPA between 0.01 and 3.0. These twenty students were contacted by President Kington to congratulate them on their academic improvement, and became part of the potential participant pool.

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1. p.4-5 of Merriam, S. B. (2002). Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
2. Ibid
3. . Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (1998). Personal experience methods. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials (pp. 150-178). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
4. Patton, M. Q. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis.. Health Serv Res. 34(5 Pt 2): 1189–1208.

We contacted students of interest by email, following up three times over the course of more than a month, unless students requested they not be contacted again. Those who volunteered arranged a time to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted in a private office or conference room, after the volunteer had orally consented to participate.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 20 and 90 minutes. Interview questions are included in the Appendix. Semi-structured interviews allow for a more conversational style, with the interviewee taking the lead and retaining the power to direct the conversation as they feel is appropriate. The interviewer ensures that all topics are covered, following the lead of the interviewee for the order of the questions, so that conversations may flow naturally. Interviews were conducted in person, with the exception of one student who was studying abroad, who was interviewed by Skype. Pseudonyms were assigned, and interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 190,799 words of data.

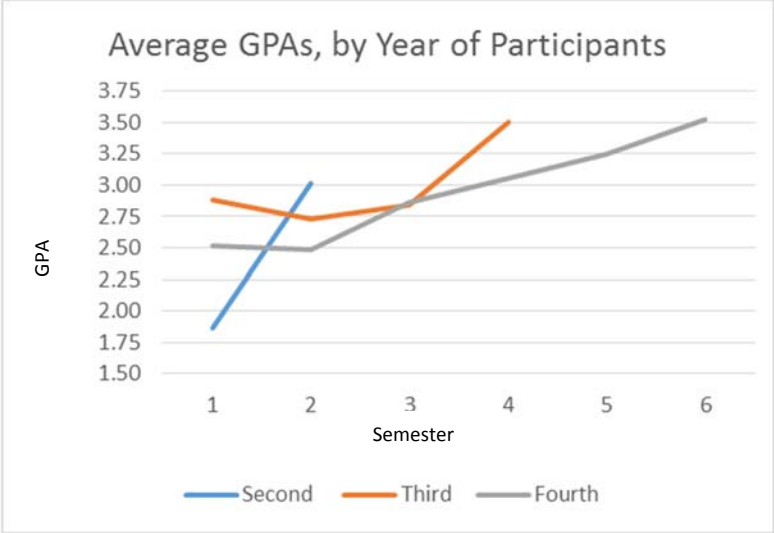
The data were analyzed using NVivo 10. Coding began deductively, based on the interview questions. In the course of coding, themes were added inductively as they emerged and clarified. Transcripts were coded multiple times to ensure all new themes were coded, with analytical memoing and writing forming the early analytical stages.

Participants

The quantitative selection of potential participants resulted in a pool of 55 third and fourth year students. Following the OASIR purposeful sampling exercise and the compilation of the list for President Kington, we invited 39 students to participate. There was substantial overlap between the two methods, with most in the list for President Kington being of interest following the purposeful sampling.

Of the 39 invited students, 26 agreed to participate, 3 responded that they did not want to participate (one gave no explanation; one stated it was due to a lack of time; one sent a brief explanation of the reasons behind their academic improvement) and 10 did not respond. Of the 26 volunteers, 22 scheduled an interview and turned up for the interview (3 did not schedule an interview; 1 did not attend the scheduled interview). Participants' class level and race are shown in the table below. The graph presents GPAs (Y axis) of the participants in each of their semesters (X axis), aggregated by year of participant at the time of the study.

Class	Invited	Interviewed
SO1	11	9
SO2	2	1
JR1	10	5
JR2	2	0
SR1	14	7
Sex		
Female	18	12
Male	21	10
Race		
Asian	3	2
Black or African-American	8	4
Hispanic (of any race)	4	1
Non-resident alien	4	2
Two or more races	2	1
White	18	12



Reasons for Lower Academic Performance

"That's such a big part of it, getting excited about the materials. That was a lot of the struggle for me; I was in classes where I had no interest." (Quinn)

"It just wasn't what I expected from the class, and I was kind of miserable. … It was just really boring to me. I just realized [that] English [is] something I like to read, but it's not really something I'd like to study… and it kind of made reading a chore for me because I love to read. But as soon as soon as we had to pick it apart and talk it to death, I just stopped enjoying it. I would dread having to pick up the Shakespeare, and so I would put it off, and I would fall behind." (Quinn)

"I wasn't taking any science classes my first year, so it was a lot of reading. And I realized now that if half my classes are problem sets and the other half have readings, going back and forth is a lot easier for me to concentrate because I can switch topics. Whereas when I just had all readings, it was a little long, and wasn't interesting." (Katie)

"There was no lecture; we just learned the course material by doing hands-on experiments, and that really didn't work for me at all. I really would have preferred just a lecture three times a week and a lab once a week. So that really made it harder for me to learn in that class." (Walter)

The 22 participants described multiple and wide-ranging reasons for poor academic performance from which they were then able to improve and show substantial increase in their GPA. To understand the context of the actions that students took to improve their grades, it is helpful to understand in detail the barriers students faced academically. Students described reasons that broadly pertain to class choice, faculty, study behaviors and attitudes, health and personal behaviors, entry-shock into the college environment, and a lack of help-seeking. Some students also experienced personal circumstances not pertaining to their academics or campus that affected their motivations or abilities to study, but which are not detailed here.

Class Choice

A sizeable proportion of participants attributed their lower academic performance to having chosen the wrong classes; they experienced a poor fit with the class, either because of the class material, the epistemological basis, or the pedagogical style. Once participants were in a class, they often found they were not interested in the material. This happened because they had limited knowledge of the subject when they registered for the class, or because the class differed from their experience of a similar class in high school.

Some students realized, once they were entrenched in their classes, that they performed better in disciplines that commonly had a particular type of homework. Whereas Katie struggled when her classes demanded a lot of reading, Bill was disengaged and uninspired when he had to complete problem sets and worksheets, since his classes "weren't conducive to [his] intuitive study habits." In addition, Bill discovered, through the course of his studies, that he identifies epistemologically as a constructivist, which meant that while he could recognize the utility of some of the material he was learning in some classes, the post-positivist framework of examining it and the associated exercises as homework were not fundamentally in line with how he thought about it. Therefore he ceased being concerned about his grade because he could not attribute value to thinking about or using the material in the proscribed way. Finding the right epistemological fit, as well as a combination of classes that promotes effective studying requires self-knowledge that may be found only through disciplinary exploration. However, until an individually appropriate combination is found, some students may struggle to perform.

Other students discovered through trial and error that the classes for which they registered were fundamentally a poor fit in terms of pedagogical style, such as struggling with workshop physics due to an innate

Note: Quotes on each page broadly align with analysis and commentary on the same page.

preference to reading or listening to material. Other students struggled with the repetitive nature of mastering vocabulary and grammatical knowledge when learning a language, while simultaneously being unable to express anything interesting in the language.

Once participants were unhappy in one class for any reason, they reported a decline in motivation or interest for their other classes. After one behavior, such as not completing assigned readings, becomes a pattern for one class, it appeared contagious if another class were demanding or uninteresting. Upon reaching such a point, some participants appeared unwilling or unable to connect their poor study behaviors with the accompanying poor outcomes, or perhaps they were unconcerned by the outcomes because the effort necessary in the present was overwhelming.

Other students recounted that they had ended up in classes that felt beyond their academic ability. If they made the necessary effort in these difficult classes, it detracted from the time available to study for other classes, lowering their GPA for the semester.

Understanding motivations for class choices, therefore, appears critical to ascertaining potential challenges that students may face. Some participants recounted that their parents had clearly articulated preferences or expectations about major choice and future professions. Four of the 22 participants had parents who had expected them to major in chemistry, either as preparation for medical school or because they thought it would confer higher earning potential upon graduation. These students struggled academically with chemistry and related courses. Once they discovered other subjects that they loved, they not only had to do the internal emotional labor to decide whether to deviate from their parents' plans or wishes, they also had to communicate with and seek approval from their parents about their new proposed plans.

Students like these appear to have received little effective advising. This could occur for several reasons: some students were intent on pursuing their predetermined path, and therefore advice from professors was immaterial to their course choice. In the case of others, advisors encouraged them to take courses outside of their comfort zone, without helping them choose the exact course that would position them best for success. Other students' advisors did not discuss course choice with them, or even look to see where the student's strengths may lie. Extreme difficulty in a particular class or in classes within a particular discipline eventually made some students reevaluate their academic goals, particularly in terms of major choice. While this is an important developmental and scholarly step, some advisors were ineffective in encouraging a broader approach to pursuit of a major.

A lack of discussion about the work entailed in a course or what it would mean to take different classes was particularly relevant for first-generation students, whose parents were not able to impart this knowledge and advice to them.

"It drew my attention to [that class] only, and at the same time, I wasn't doing well in it. I question if it was worth it, because it was taking so much of my time, I'm already not doing well in my other classes, and I'm not doing well in my class I'm trying my hardest in. So I told myself, "What's the point?" (Xanthe)

"My mom had been telling me to major in chemistry, and that's what I should do. So I felt like that's what I wanted. Not the case, but I didn't know that my first year. And so I went into it, taking chemistry, taking physics, taking calculus; all these really dense and difficult classes at once. And it did not turn out well for me!" (Harriet)

"I grew up with the path to success already set out for me: you have to go into the hard sciences, do research, and all that stuff. And I was like, 'Well, I hate research, I hate chemistry.' I want to do practical stuff." (Charles)

"I was taking classes that I felt were important, that I thought it would make me look well-rounded. But I wasn't enjoying them, I didn't feel engaged with them … But I was so focused on being this well-rounded student that I was shooting myself in the foot. I was taking these super hard classes that I wasn't enjoying: the class feeling tedious, the readings I didn't want to do, they all just started spiraling into this whole harmful cycle." (Charles)

"I really don't like math, and my tutorial advisor really recommended taking a science or a math. We talked about it and I picked astronomy. I ended up in extra tutoring, on top of the required tutoring for the class. The math was just [so difficult]. I'd never taken calculus in high school." (Quinn)

"I was just really lost as far as advising. I was taking a lot of courses I shouldn't have been in. No-one really talked through them with me to help me figure out [what I should take.]" (Isobel)

"I got a D in that class, and I was like, 'Oh my God!' And I felt horrible. I was like, 'I'm doing everything I can.' And so then I just decided that I needed to change my intended major." (Denise)

"I don't think a lot of people know that professors aren't trying to fail you. … For the most part, if you need to, they're going to meet with you every day if they can. And I didn't know that in my first semester. I thought they were just these uppity douchebags!" (Victor)

"I just didn't feel comfortable with any of the professors. Some of the professors were just too scary for me. They were not informal in class at all, and that was just really difficult to overcome." (Isobel)

"My tutorial advisor, I really didn't mix well with her because at first she told me I should take a semester off of school because I was doing poorly. I was like, 'Nope.' [I felt] like, 'Just because I'm doing poorly this one semester, I know myself, I know I'm one of the kids [who can] bounce back.'" (Frank)

"There was this two weeks straight, during the first half of the semester that [advisor] … was telling me to go home. She was telling me to withdraw … I remember the line she said: 'I know students who have been in your position, and they can't do it.'" (Rupert)

"It was also me not wanting to go to my professors' office hours, even though I know I needed the help … I didn't want to go to my professor because I wasn't sure what they would think of me. Or even just the right approach to go to them. Because I've never had to go to a professor's office hours before. So I was like, 'What are you supposed to do? How do you do it? What do you say?' " (Frank)

"I definitely had some professors who would be like, 'If you come to office hours, make sure you know what you're going to ask me.' And I would be like, 'Uh….' A lot of times I would be so lost, I wouldn't even know what questions to ask." (Isobel)

"It's very scary to go up to academic people and professors and ask for them to invest time in you, … [when] you still know what you're capable of, and have done. Capable of in terms of the lack of doing things, you're capable of failing. And so, I suppose it is some sort of a fear of failure that keeps me from. really saying, 'All right, [I'll ask] this person.'" (Adrian)

Faculty

Faculty were barriers to the academic success of a number of participants, initially. Interacting with faculty forced these students—who had all experienced academic challenges—to confront their insecurities. After performing poorly in classes, asking faculty for help felt like tackling the issue of their lack of success a little too directly and was intensely uncomfortable. Students did not want professors to judge them poorly for lack of knowledge or preparation for college in their first year, were often unsure of how to interact with faculty, or did not know the correct way of approaching them.

A few participants had some unpleasant encounters with faculty, which then soured their whole belief system about faculty as enablers and supporters of academic success. Two participants were told, either by faculty or staff advisors, to leave Grinnell, temporarily or permanently, because they were not capable of keeping up academically. Such a lack of confidence in their ability to overcome their challenges was a shock to both students. They fortunately used their shock as motivation to succeed and demonstrate to these naysayers their true mettle.

Other students felt intimidated by faculty, and saw them as unapproachable, which stemmed both from their assumptions and from faculty actions. This was particularly the case for DSOC or first generation participants, who described an initial inflated sense of awe regarding faculty work lives and accomplishments. They had trouble relating to faculty as people, placing them on an academic pedestal that then encompassed their whole being, almost deifying them for the achievements in having earned a PhD and secured a position at Grinnell. These students' sense of faculty unapproachability was not helped by faculty behavior, such as when faculty were curt, discussed only class material, or did not let more human aspects of themselves come through in their speech or behavior.

Study Behaviors and Attitudes

A number of participants attributed their lower academic performance to suboptimal behaviors and attitudes toward their studies. Participants described falling into a pattern of skipping classes, having ineffective or few study habits, and feeling unable to prioritize their studies, either because of competing demands, because the reward for doing so was unclear, or because it felt too difficult to do so. There were varied reasons for missing classes. Some were as simple as not wanting to go to early morning classes. Others experienced mental health issues that made class attendance difficult or a low priority; they were anxious about the repercussions of going after an absence, or they had lost the rhythm and habit of attending. There was also an incomplete recognition of the importance of regular class attendance.

"Study habits weren't really in my vocabulary, and I didn't make a habit of putting them in my vocabulary. I think it was still this idea of, 'Just do the work, and do it acceptably well, and it will be fine.' Which only works up to a point!" (Bill)

"I had those darn eight o 'clocks, and I just didn't go to those, because why would I?" (Jenny)

"I would do my favorite classes [first], and then I would run out of time. It was just a way to avoid doing the work I didn't like. So I would, like, do my favorite stuff, and then I would run out of time and never get to the other stuff." (Quinn)

"My top priorities [were] hanging out with friends, having fun, sleeping, watching Netflix for the first time. Looking back, I felt like I'd [spent] so much time on education in high school, surely it would trickle down and just happen here, sort of thing!" (Jenny)

Many students were not cognizant of the level of effort necessary to succeed academically at Grinnell. The effort that other students put into their studies seemed invisible. Struggling or working hard was not commonly discussed socially, thereby normalizing the appearance of minimal effort. The depth of misunderstanding about the appropriate effort varied among students, as did the timing of its emergence; if it did not become apparent in the first semester, it emerged during the second year when students began taking more advanced courses.

I surrounded myself with people [who] made it seem like they didn't do that much work, so I thought that was normal. And then through that, [my self-talk] was kind of like, 'They're not doing work, I probably don't have to do work; it'll be fine in the end.'" (Marnie)

Other participants had not acquired effective study habits during high school, or were unable to take the necessary steps to allow themselves to succeed. For example, in Isobel's case, she was unable to find a required textbook on reserve at the library and it was too expensive for her to buy. Late in the semester she and a friend were able to pool resources to rent an online version, but prior to that, she had no access to it.

"My lowest grade that semester was in [class]. And I think one of the reasons is that I didn't have the book for most of the semester." (Isobel)

A few students found their first semester so difficult that they passed what they perceived as the point of no return. As they fell progressively further behind, the impossibility of ever catching up loomed large in their minds, and they stopped trying. Students like these were unable to see the point in continuing to make an academic effort or study. Whereas these students reached this point due to difficulty in classes (for a variety of reasons), others arrived at Grinnell without the necessary mindset to study hard. Some were burned out from high school; others were unable to frame their studies as a valuable experience in which they had to invest time and energy.

"There were one or two in this [lowest] semester that I didn't even take the final for, because I hadn't gone to the classes since half way through the semester." (Adrian)

Some participants who recognized the effort necessary to succeed academically at Grinnell, did not assign their studies the highest priority. Rather, they would, through choice or perceived necessity, put other pursuits first, including socializing, sports or employment.

"First year, where I accidentally missed a day of class, I'd be so anxious to go back. And I just wouldn't go for the next two classes, because I'd be so worried about what would happen if I did go to the class." (Katie)

"A lot of my problems first semester were my own fault. I just didn't accord enough attention to my classes, and I didn't like my classes, so I didn't try." (Quinn)

It was kind of the slippery slope effect. I felt myself going downhill, but I just couldn't stop it. And once it got started and I got behind on work, I stopped, kind of gave up, I felt like, 'What's the point?' So at one point, I just kind of gave up, and I just stopped reading the lessons, I just stopped doing homework." (Thomas)

"It was such a drag, going through school work. It just didn't feel important. I think I was having a hard time connecting it back to my life or my experiences as a person." (Bill)

"It was like, 'I'm not going to pass if I do something, I'm not going to pass if I don't do anything.' It's like, 'Hey, you might as well not do anything.' And, it was basically like I was giving up." (Victor)

"When you [say], 'Oh I'm going to sleep whenever,' you're able to procrastinate, or feel, 'I can take my time on this paper or this reading, because I can just go to sleep in the morning, or I'll just go to sleep at 2, 3am.'" (Charles)

"I had a lot of trouble with my sleep patterns. I had a [subject] class early in the morning, and I had real trouble getting to that one, and a few others. But it was also classes that I didn't feel as motivated to go to, so sometimes I just couldn't get up." (Isobel)

"First year, my sleep schedule was really, really bad. Terrible. … Monday, Wednesday, Friday, I had class, 8 to 11. And so I would sleep for 2 hours, go to this class, eat lunch, and then come back to my room … and sleep for four hours, and go to [sports] practice. And then [I would] stay up til 4, doing just shit. Just doing stuff. Like, not necessarily schoolwork, but just… I don't know!" (Bill)

Mental Health and Executive Functioning

Suboptimal mental health accompanied lower academic performance in some cases, but the roles of cause and effect varied. For some, mental health problems lead to academic problems; for others, academic stress led to a lack of self-care, limited organization or executive functioning, which ultimately led to mental health difficulties. A minority experienced physical health problems that directly affected their ability to complete their academic work (not detailed here).

Several students clearly articulated that academic work becomes a lower priority when one has mental health problems. Students in such a situation described ceasing to care about the outcome of their classes, being unable to motivate themselves to study, or feeling stuck in a web of despair. Sleep disturbances also played a large role for some participants. Being exhausted made it difficult for some students to motivate themselves to attend a morning class or impossible for them even to get out of bed.

A few students described feeling so stressed from their academic poor performance and workload that they fell into addictive, escapist behaviors. Students mentioned substance use and video game addictions in this context, but were very clear that they engaged in these behaviors because they were trying to avoid facing the academic stress, rather than these behaviors causing academic poor performance.

There were varied reasons for participants having limited executive functioning—the ability to organize their time and their responsibilities in such a way that they could complete all that was required. The result, however, was broadly similar: a notable hindrance to accomplishing the myriad of demands that are a part of daily life for most Grinnell students.

"It's hard to prioritize academics when you have issues that feel more pressing. Like, it's hard to muster up the energy to really care about pulling an A- or an A when you can't get out of bed." (Bill)

"I was not regularly eating well last year because, for whatever reason, I had a lot of anxiety about going into the dining hall sometimes, which made eating really stressful. … And once one thing goes bad, you know, it affects everything else in your life." (Octavia)

"I had no semblance of any sort of structure, whatsoever, [in my] first year." (Jenny)

"I was the most depressed I've ever been. And it made it really difficult to do work. And I also had a terrible sleep disorder. It was really horrible, and I was staying up for 3 days at a time. … I was doing really badly in my classes, barely making it to them on time. And then there's the policy that if you miss more than two classes then your grade gets knocked down a letter each time, which is really harsh, and hard for someone who's struggling to get up in the mornings." (Octavia)

"I partied way too much! I was getting drunk every night, and I was doing drugs every couple of days. I was getting high and going to class. I was doing all this stuff, and I started to think, … 'Why am I doing this? Am I doing this because I enjoy it? Am I drinking because I want to drink? No, I'm drinking because I'm miserable. And why am I miserable? Because I'm overworked. And I sleep [poorly], and it means I have to take drugs because I have to be awake for class.'" (Charles)

"I didn't have a control mechanism for that part [addictive behavior] of my life. And also it was like escaping from my problems. And then, since I spent so much time escaping, that left me less time to actually deal with it. So it was an accumulation of just running away, and being so stressed out, and seeing everything as a huge glob of stress, rather than individual things I could tackle. And so I was just very overwhelmed. And then I just chose not to do anything, which was probably the worst decision that I could make." (Sean)

"When literally everything about your life changes … it's hard to prioritize your coursework, when you're still reconciling with every single other aspect of your life suddenly being different." (Bill)

"[At home], the public school systems are ninety percent African American, and the city is sixty percent African American, so it was a big change, coming from that to here. Just like, 'Wow!' Actually realizing the demographics of the United States. So it was something that was really challenging for me, just ... adjusting, and meeting new people outside of my own culture. So I was really clingy to people. I always felt like I needed someone to be there, and I always had to be around other people for me to be comfortable. That wasn't really productive. I wasn't really getting work done." (Thomas)

"It was just so overwhelming, having so many things to do., that I didn't really know how to balance everything. And then I think it was just that I also didn't know what the professors here were expecting." (Eloise)

Entry Shock

Coming to Grinnell was an experience fraught with difficulty for many participants. Academically, the work was considerably more difficult; professors' expectations were higher than those of their teachers in high school; and the workload was much greater. Many participants missed their established friends, cars, jobs, and substantial knowledge and competence in organizing their daily lives. Coming to Grinnell, this sense of competence was removed; they did not have secure friendships to help them in their times of need, nor did they have the freedom of movement or access to the shops and facilities to which they were accustomed. Domestic students of color, particularly, reported some difficulty with particular aspects of transitioning to rural Iowa and Grinnell life, especially if their home community mainly comprises people of color.

"I felt like I was plopped in the middle of these cornfields. And I had no idea what I was doing, and I was so lost, and everything felt so new." (Quinn)

"Coming here is hard. Being a first year is really difficult, because you don't really know anyone, there's a lot of social pressure, a lot of academic pressure." (Octavia)

Experiencing a difficult transition drew attention away from academics while students focused on finding their place socially, understanding academic expectations, establishing routines for themselves, and getting to know the institution.

"I didn't have to do that much work in high school, and when I came to college, I was expecting that sort of same thing. And then it was also a matter of not realizing how much work classes actually took." (Marnie)

Some students struggled more than others to find their sense of academic confidence, or self-efficacy. Feeling out of one's depth, academically, was an isolating experience for some, that led to personal doubt and questioning of their place in college. Absorbed in this mindset and introspection, there was little room for academic motivation or effort.

"It was just the feeling that I'm not good enough, or I won't be able to do it." (Rupert)

"I talk a different way from half of these people on this campus. I'll say the same thing, so say 2 + 2 = 4, but I'll say how we got there a different way from someone else. But the professor would look at me a different way because of how I say it. But [then another] student said the same thing that I said, but in a different way, and they get all the praise in the world, like they just discovered water, or something. Just because they said it a different way. That's the one thing I hate on this campus so much. Is that you can say the exact same thing, but just say it all a little different, your vernacular is a little different from this person's, and you're wrong. You're looked at as the bad guy." (Frank)

"You're trying to be like other people, even though you have your own culture that you've been immersed in for 18 years now. And you come to college, and it's brand new, and you're trying to fit in with other kids. … [But] your vocabulary might not be as advanced as other students, you don't want to seem like you're less than [they are]. So you might not speak as much, because then the professor would say, 'Oh, what did you say?' and it becomes awkward when the professor acts like they don't understand. Or they truly don't understand. Or they ask you to speak more academically or speak in this type of way." (Thomas)

"When you feel less than the people around you, you start to feel a little down. That's when you stop; you don't want to really go to class. Or, you know, [you go] to class just because you know you have to. I stopped hanging with friends for a while. I would just come from class, go straight to my room, get a box from the D-hall, go to my room, eat, and you know, just be lazy, just not do anything." (Victor)

"[I was] just going through, not asking for help, because I didn't know to ask for help. But me being scared of this new environment that I'm in, it held me back." (Frank)

"I was withdrawn. I got emails saying, "What's wrong?" And I would be too anxious to respond or to even react. I would show poor performance, and they would have no understanding of what's going on. And so they would just make assumptions, which leaves me no agency. Because it was just too much pressure, because I was sliding down [into] a bad rhythm, or just no rhythm. At the same time, it was just like, "Oh, we noticed, you're messing up, and we want to help you." But at the same time, like, I just felt so much pressure that I couldn't even ask for help. There was no easy access to resources. It was just me, on my own, struggling." (Sean)

"This entire failure had been me trying to do it on my own." (Adrian)

"The feeling of being alone leads to a chain of really painful events." (Xanthe)

"No-one's talking about failing courses. No-one's talking about having multiple APRs. No-one's talking about that. It's like, yeah, you're struggling, but you're still making it. So you don't really want to be around that. You don't want to hear how everyone's doing super well, and you're just failing here, by yourself. So you just don't want to be around them. So you hide." (Victor)

Lack of Help-Seeking

When students experienced any number of the challenges outlined above—mental health difficulties, reduced executive functioning, entry shock, academic struggles, poor study habits, limited self-care—it was common for them to try to shoulder these burdens alone. The reasons that participants gave for not seeking help varied. Some students did not know that they should or could ask for help. Others did not know who to ask for help.

Others still were afraid to, fearing that they would be judged poorly for needing help. Such judgement could come externally or internally, brought to the surface by the act of help seeking. In these situations, it was easier not to ask for help and therefore not have to acknowledge one's struggles.

Some students felt that they were not the type of people to get help from others because it would mean having to open up to other people and possibly be a burden on them. Some students with mental health problems were incapable of seeking help. The effect of trying to sort out one's problems alone was recognized as deleterious by most participants. Others succeeded in improving their GPAs without help, but recognized it would have been easier with help.

Factors that Promoted Academic Success

Many of the factors that hindered academic success were also present in participants' narratives and explanations for their academic improvement stories. Influential factors included: appropriate class choice, faculty, study habits, academic reframing, student behaviors, and friends.

Appropriate course choice

Participants who had initially taken courses that were not inherently interesting found that, once they discovered courses for which they had a passion or flair or that were relevant to their lived experiences, they discovered new intrinsic motivation for their studies. With interesting material, applying themselves to their work felt like less effort and the reward was greater because it came as increased (interesting) knowledge, rather than just completion of an assignment.

Intrinsically interesting and personally relevant material remained on students' minds beyond the time they spent studying. They thus expounded substantial mental energy on the course topics out of a natural inclination to ponder course material, either alone or with friends in the class. This kept their connection to the material strong and allowed them to think more deeply about it.

Some participants' grades naturally improved when they focused more on courses that allowed them to think in a way that was more natural to them, rather than fighting epistemologies or styles of work. Students who took courses that required use of their inherent strengths, unsurprisingly, performed better than when they were in classes that required a different set of skills.

When they started to find the right courses, either in terms of content or type, participants were far more intentional in their course choices, including choosing courses where they thought they would do the best. Being thoughtful about their choice of classes was often a new behavior.

Faculty personalities were pertinent to finding the right classes, and students relied on experience and knowledge from other students and their advisors to pick the most appropriate class or section for them. This could extend to

"Since I actually enjoy the work now, I engage with the work. It takes less time." (Charles)

"Halfway through my second semester, I started really to think about what I wanted, individually, and not my mom. And I realized that I want to work with people, and I want to be with people all of the time in my job, in the future, and that's just not chemistry. … And so I started taking psych[ology] classes my second year, and my GPA just started to go up and up, because I started taking classes that I really liked, and that I enjoyed and that I was interested in. And that helped immensely." (Harriet)

"I seriously sat myself down and I talked with my parents, and I thought, 'What am I going to major in, and what am I interested in? What did I not like about last semester, and what kind of classes would appeal to my strengths?' I think I'm a really good writer, and I enjoy reading. So it was a lot more serious, and I sat down and looked through the courses, and I read the descriptions, and I talked to other kids." (Quinn)

"It was a lot of written work, as opposed to tests. I'm a terrible test-taker. Studying for tests isn't really my forte. I much prefer writing assignments." (Bill)

"We're always talking through material. Even if we're not doing it like we do in class, we're still, I guess, keeping the dialogue." (Isobel)

"[With] calculus and other classes, I think, [it's] like, 'Here's the worksheet you have to do for tomorrow.' … Now it's more manageable, in the sense that I can do these papers instead of trying to rush to finish a take-home test, or a worksheet, or a thing [with] a deadline the next morning. [Now], I can do this reading, do this paper, write this summary, write this memo, write that part, and it's more the way I learn more." (Charles)

"I chose courses that not only interested me, but courses that I felt like I would do decently well in, but still were a challenge, to an extent. And I feel like that's literally what had happened that had led from my fourth semester up until now, for my GPA to improve." (Lucy)

"I was feeling pretty overwhelmed. I didn't expect college to be so hard. …. And I felt like I just wanted to take an easier course load because it would help me just focus on being more efficient at studying, and learning to enjoy my classes more." (Walter)

"Because of these social norms in Grinnell, it's like, 'You're taking three classes? You're lazy.' But it's like, I'm taking three classes, I'm engaging with my coursework, and I'm feeling a lot better about my classes." (Sean)

"Dropping that class also helped me focus a lot on my other classes. … It was great. It was the best decision I could have made. And I know I have a W on my transcript for now, but it's better than having a D." (Octavia)

"I got less scared of talking to professors. And once I talked to them enough, they were more familiar enough that I could say, 'I don't get this at all.' Whereas, before, I tried to hide [the fact that I didn't understand], and it was my failings, because I wasn't putting in enough effort. [Then] last year, I'd be like, 'I'm putting in just as much effort as everyone in the class, and I still don't get it. So it's okay for me to ask for help.'" (Katie)

"My [psychology] professor's teaching method got me really interested. She definitely emphasized active participation, not just sitting and taking notes, but making us get up, even though it was early in the morning, [and] walk around, and illustrate effects of psychology, and make us play roles. That was really nice of her. And she would perform her own little experiments on us. And it was fun. It was interesting." (Xanthe)

finding the professors who used pedagogical techniques that best enabled them to engage in the class sessions.

Decisions about the number of credits to take were important. A few participants intentionally took three four-credit classes, rather than the standard four, which helped them perform better in those three classes. This option was really only available to students who had attended high schools that offered AP classes. Taking a reduced course-load may require some courage, since it can be viewed negatively unless mandated or unintentional, through dropping a class. However, it can be reframed as an opportunity to study more thoroughly and have a chance to get to know the material better. Participants who dropped a class without adding another discovered that this was a helpful strategy academically.

Paying attention to course registration was also a helpful strategy for getting into the courses students wanted. Registering early for classes allows students to be in their preferred sections, both in terms of class time and faculty member. Advisors can facilitate this process by reminding advisees to register early and be persistent until students have registered

Faculty

Forming effective relationships with faculty was crucial to academic success. Faculty relationships did not feature heavily in the narratives of the students who entered Grinnell confident in their ability to interact with faculty and aware that faculty were there to help them learn. They did, however, play a sizeable role in the stories of many other participants.

To form effective relationships with faculty, students first had to overcome some preconceptions, assumption, and fears. Understanding that professors are humans with personal lives, feelings, struggles, and emotions was central to breaking down the fear barrier of approaching faculty.

This reconstruction process of participants' concept of the faculty was aided by understanding that faculty have had to learn and work hard to achieve their

"The things we discussed in class led me to want to talk to him after class about a lot of things that we discussed in class. And then … we would have interesting discussions. And I was like, 'Whoa, this guy, he's a genius, basically.' Well, I wouldn't say genius, but he's worked hard to get to where he is. He's a professor, he's a doctor, literally. So the fact that he just had a conversation with me, a first year, who just got to college, who doesn't really know too much … I haven't been through as many things as this guy has been through. But he's a human, who can talk to me. And the fact that he did that, it showed me the humanity in professors." (Victor)

"He proceeded to break everything down in simple terms that I knew how to understand. And I was like, 'Oh, so this guy plays video games. This professor, … this guy of high credibility, he plays video games. That's cool!' And it showed me the humanity of professors, that professors are real people. Real people don't fail other people; they are here to help. And even if they don't help you as much as they can, they are still people that you can have regular conversations with. It doesn't always have to be … pompous!" (Victor)

current status. Faculty sharing some of their experiences of failure with students had a large, positive, and motivating effect on some participants.

A number of participants were unsure of how to approach faculty and afraid of doing so, particularly in cases where the participants were struggling or had poor class attendance. They found it helpful to seek advice from other students who had been at Grinnell longer and could share appropriate approaches.

There are clear responsibilities for both faculty and students to establish a functional and helpful relationship. Students may be challenged to form a good relationship with a faculty member in whose class they are not performing well or not making an effort. It therefore helped to make enough effort to feel justified and/or sufficiently comfortable asking for help. When students were not working hard for a particular course, they did not feel it was appropriate to ask for help because they had not been helping themselves enough. However, if they were making an effort and still encountered academic challenges, they felt it was appropriate to request faculty help. Putting effort into a certain course often also brought with it additional encounters with faculty in the classroom, which further removed the barriers to approaching them.

Faculty need to recognize small successes and encourage informal conversations so that students can get to know them and vice-versa. They can also help a lot by offering struggling students encouragement. Students who had struggled and then showed even a small improvement appreciated faculty positive attention, rather than feeling like faculty saw them as finally achieving the bare minimum.

Without an effective relationship with faculty, students may be at risk of entering a cycle of disengagement. Participants recounted feeling afraid of faculty, particularly when they were doing poorly. Faculty appeared unapproachable to these participants either because of the difference in power differentials, life experience, or because they acted aloof. For any or a combination of these reasons, these participants did not ask faculty for help. Without this help, students continued to struggle, falling further behind in their comprehension of the topic and the work to be completed.

Once participants felt that their faculty knew them as people, they were less afraid or intimidated, and felt like faculty would not judge them poorly for needing help. Some participants found that seeing faculty form relationships with other students was sufficient to allow them to envision forming similar relationships with faculty. The barrier to interacting with faculty was dismantled by proximity to others who had effective relationships with these faculty members.

Having comfortable working relationships with faculty makes attending office hours easier. Doing so enabled students not only to ask for help with the content, it enabled them to reveal to faculty some of their personal challenges or factors that had been preventing them from performing well academically. Once participants who previously had not attended office hours started doing so, they found that their situations improved. Being persistent in asking professors to help them do better paid off in many cases.

"She told me that she had a lot of failures, back in the day when she took stats. And she showed me her actual 16 out of 100. And it was appalling to me because she's so intelligent. And then she showed me that she retook it, and she showed me the hundred that she got. And yeah, if she can go from a failure to be successful, I look[ed] at her ways of getting work done, [and] I tried to adapt to that, I guess." (Xanthe)

"Usually I feel comfortable talking to a professor. But it has more to do with how approachable I feel like they are, rather than how I'm doing in the course. [What makes a professor approachable is] just how personable they are. And if I feel comfortable walking into their office. If they're like, 'How can I help you?' Rather than, 'What do you want? I've got a lot of stuff to do.'" (Walter)

"If I didn't get an A, I was probably in a professor's office, asking, 'How can I improve this? How could I have gotten an A?' And stuff like that. I think [that is the reason for] the biggest improvement [in] my paper writing." (Eloise)

"[They told me], 'This is how to better talk to professors about what's going on, what I need.' [It helped] understanding that they will be flexible. Because I was very scared of talking to professors." (Katie)

"Nobody likes to go to office hours and be like, 'I don't understand this at all!' Or, worse yet, you can't go to office hours if you haven't done the reading. And so just putting in the time and effort necessary to even broach conversations with professors is important." (Bill)

"I'm more open to going to my professors now … to ask, 'When are you free for office hours? We don't even have to talk about the readings or whatever, can we just talk, so I can get to know you better?' That just helps me get to know my professor. And then that helps, in the long run. me just go in and be able to talk to them about the readings. Because if I'm just going to my random professor about what the reading is, I'm not sure how they're going to look at me. Because they don't know what my previous life was. They're just looking at the student and not looking at the person." (Frank)

"Part of the struggle for me was learning how to reach out and not being afraid to do so. Not being afraid to talk to my teachers about what was going on. My Spanish teacher was like, 'Oh, I didn't realize you had all this stuff going on. I thought you just hated this class.' And I was so upset about that, because it was the contrary. I loved the class, I just wasn't able to keep up." (Octavia)

"When you're doing well, it's easier to have a good conversation with your teacher. It's a little more fun, and less intimidating, when you have a really [good understanding]. And I don't think it's a matter of the grade, you know? I think it's a matter of one's grasp of the material, which are different things." (Bill)

"Many of my professors have told me they like the fact that I tell them that I have no idea what's going on. … Many of the things that we learn here make no sense at all. Make. No. Sense. At all. [And] students just try to do it on their own. And that's not the right way to do it." (Frank)

"The professors do make a huge difference. I loved my [discipline] professor, I loved going to that class." (Quinn)

"I kind of realized, 'It's not about grades so much as it is about learning as much as you can, and learning to enjoy your classes.'" (Walter)

Being open to faculty about not understanding material not only helps the student understand the material better; it helps the faculty teach the individual better. Understanding that people learn in different ways, and that it is necessary to find a pedagogical method or framing of material that speaks to the individual student, was helpful. It helped some participants to find a professor with whom they could connect, or whose enthusiasm was contagious.

Some participants came to a new understanding of the role faculty played in their education. At first, they described seeing faculty as directing their studies, requiring work be done for a grade. However, over time, they began to see faculty more as collaborators in their learning—mentors, rather than supervisors of their work. This change in role perception allowed students to feel more autonomous and responsible for their work, which often drove their motivation. Seeing faculty taking a formative approach freed some participants from the confining sense of being perpetually judged for their academic work.

Academic Reframing

Along with students reframing their understanding of faculty members' roles in their learning, students also changed how they thought about their learning, which we have termed academic reframing.

"Once I was in my major and I had friends in the major who were older, who had established a more extensive informal relationship with their professors, then I was definitely becoming more comfortable with going to office hours because you see that part of them through [their] relationships [with] upperclassmen." (Isobel)

"Going to office hours is a scary thing when my first assumption is that they see me as somebody that is at risk." (Adrian)

"What C student sees an A as something that's super attainable, if you're not receiving some kind of positive reinforcement?" (Charles)

"[She said], 'You do understand that this test is not to judge you. It's just to see where you are, and then, how I can help you better.' And I was like, 'That's what they all say!' I'm not joking around, that it's cool to know that this is how she really thinks about her class. In every exam and test that she gives, or quiz, this is literally what she's looking for. She tells you, 'I'm not trying to judge you.'" (Victor)

"[It is the idea of a] faculty member idea as a collaborator, and less of a director, a puppet master. … It really framed faculty members as people who were there to collaborate with you towards you reaching your academic and intellectual goals, as opposed to [being] there to push you in a certain direction, when I hate feeling pushed. It's one thing to be challenged, but I think the difference there is that when you're challenged, it's self-directed, whereas when you're pushed, it's like, even just in the term, it's not self-directed." (Bill)

"My relationship with two of the three professors was almost adversarial. And then, more recently, [I see] professors more as mentors." (Piper)

"Schoolwork became something that was very comforting. And still is, I would say. Like, a nice way to sit down and be very focused on something for an extended period of time, and kind of put on your academic blinders for a second. … It also positioned school work as just a general coping mechanism. Not only for this one instance, but for anything. So you'll be freaking out, and you're like, 'Damn! I've just got to do this reading real quickly. I'm just going to sit down and do this reading really well and slowly,' and then you come out of it and you feel calm, and you also feel like you've been productive. Like you've done something. That you turned a really poor mental headspace into something that needed to be done anyway." (Bill)

"I'm here. And I'm not on academic probation anymore. I'm not about to drop out. I have come back from academic probation, and if anything, I should see that as something to display proudly, to walk into a meeting with a faculty member and sit down and be like, 'I messed up. I'm working on fixing it.'" (Adrian)

Rather than learning something for a professor or writing a paper because it is required, some participants began to value their new knowledge and academic skills above their grades. Some also began to view their time at Grinnell more holistically, as a time of personal development, not just earning a college degree. This new way of looking at classwork and readings, increased their motivation to study because it was intrinsic rather than extrinsic. They also, therefore, started finding the process of studying and learning more rewarding.

The material these participants were covering in class became relevant to them in their other classes or in their broader interests. When this happened, they valued it and strove to do better so that they had a better mastery of the concept or material so that they could use it subsequently in other work.

Finding or reaffirming self-efficacy to perform the work was a helpful reframing exercise. Instead of doubting their ability to complete the academic work, or even doubting their place at the college, it was helpful for students to remind themselves that they did belong at Grinnell and had been admitted for their abilities, even among stiff competition. However, doing so appeared to be an unusual practice, despite its importance for retaining academic self-efficacy.

A few participants had specific ideas about how to manage one's academic identity, and the benefit or danger of merging one's global and academic identities. They sought to be seen as a particular type of student, or they allowed their academic and global identities to merge, meaning that they judged themselves mainly based on the results of their academic work. While it is beneficial to see oneself as a good student, it can be detrimental if one then struggles academically. Once students had affirmed their academic self-efficacy and worked out the optimal positioning of their academic identity vis-à-vis their global identity (see Sean's quote, below), they then were able to use that as a launch pad from which to strive for even better academic work.

"The approach I took to studying [changed]. Instead of just [studying] so I can do it, I did it so that I could better myself. Because, first semester, I would just do it because the professor told me to do this. And instead, I [now] did it so I can learn more about myself and learn more about what's around me. And it just opened up my mind to new things that I didn't know before." (Frank)

"A lot of things just kind of clicked in my head that transferred into a different outlook on what it meant to be a student and the value placed on successful coursework." (Bill)

"Grinnell has given me the opportunity, so I just have to keep [telling] myself that I'm here for a reason. I wouldn't be here if I was just supposed to flunk out. … You have to better yourself, and that's what Grinnell is trying to do. That helped me the most—understanding myself, and stuff." (Frank)

"Learning a language from a textbook is so dry, it's just grammar. But I started to think about meeting people, and what I wanted to do with the language, and actually getting involved in the culture and stuff. And so once I realized that you need to do some groundwork, you need to do some boring vocab, but there's going to be a payoff where it gets more interesting, and you can do more with the language, that kind of helped me power through the really boring flash cards, conjugation type stuff." (Quinn)

"Some people think of their academics as a key part of themselves. I am working on differentiating that. But because of that, they define themselves through their academics. And if they're struggling, they think everything about them is struggling. And they only focus on negative aspects. And that's not conducive to [success]; it's only hurting you." (Sean)

"I took a literary theory class this semester, which was really fantastic, and I just kept thinking to myself, 'Now I have another tool in my theoretical tool kit.' It's like I'm not interacting with this just to interact with it. I'm trying to understand these concepts so that I can use them later." (Bill)

"Viewing yourself as a smart person who is trying to learn [is important] because if that is not part of your self-image, then when you sit down to do an assignment, you're not the kid that loves to learn and wants to do the assignment." (Adrian)

"Now I have standards. So if I get a B+ on a homework, I want to get an A-. If I get an A-, I want to get an A. And it's the sense of 'I want to work towards higher grades.' And so I think that's been going well." (Marnie)

"Over break, I really reflected and sort of decided when I came back, I was just going to work like a dog. And that's basically what happened." (Piper)

"At the end of the day, I just stuck to it. I just kept going. I just worked hard. Every day. I realized that it wasn't a sprint, it was just a marathon. You'd have to do everything a little bit instead of just doing everything at the end." (Rupert)

"[I changed] the context of studying, Now, I can't focus in my room ever, because I keep studying in Kistle. So if I constantly keep studying in Kistle, it becomes a habit. And my mind is aware of the environment I study in. And then the environment says, 'Okay, you can focus here.' But in my room, I usually just don't study. So even if I try to study, the environment tells me, 'You can't focus.'" (Xanthe)

Study Habits

A range of new study habits proved effective for students who had increased their GPAs dramatically. These included putting in more effort, finding a suitable place to study, finding a study technique that worked for them, studying with friends or in a study group, and challenging themselves to participate regularly in class and then studying in a way that would prepare them to do so.

Some participants had an epiphany, where they decided that they would start working very hard and consistently. They started completing work well before deadlines and continually sought to improve. Others recognized that to operate in the manner that they wished at Grinnell, they had to complete their work differently.

Finding a study location other than their room was helpful for a number of participants. By repetitively going to the same new place, their new study spot began to mean a distraction-free zone to them, so once they were there they were in the right mindset to study. Many also adopted as a new habit extra preparation for class periods, so that they could participate better, or reading in a different way so that they were ready to discuss material in class.

"I would just skim the textbook, and I would underline in the textbook. But that's not really learning, I've found. I wasn't really absorbing the information. And so now I take notes by hand. And that really seems to help me more." (Quinn)

Among the 22 participants, there were many other examples of different study techniques that students eventually found and adopted. While the actual techniques that were effective for each person varied, there was commonality in the experience of changing their study behaviors to something that allowed them to be productive and focused.

"A lot of it was finding out [for example] I can't have my phone next to me, because I will pick it up and I'll message, and I'll just get caught up in that." (Quinn)

Along with new study techniques, a new study schedule that aligned with their natural rhythm was helpful, as were more structure for dividing up work on larger assignments.

"[It was improvement through] repetition, keep writing in different classes, and getting the feedback from the professors, like, 'This is a good point, this isn't such a good point.' And then, [asking] them, 'How can I improve this point?' And just looking back and seeing how it all fits together and how I could make the papers better." (Eloise)

"I decided to collect all my thoughts and do some reflections on myself. And I tried to test out different ways of studying because I don't think I have found the best method for me, personally, to study. And I feel as if throughout my life, I was kind of told to just memorize and not really understand anything. So I didn't know what was best for me to understand things. And then that would carry on, and I would be able to remember it. So I tried new things and tested a lot." (Xanthe)

"I also changed my study habits a lot, just the way I approach learning. I used to really dread doing Spanish and the workbook pages, and so I would always do it last, and I would always run out of time. And so I moved that to first, so I always do the workbook pages first and just get it out of the way, and I would put philosophy last, because it was what I loved, and I wanted to do the readings, and so I would look forward to it." (Quinn)

"So on Sunday, I found my sources; on Monday I read them; Tuesday, I made a plan; and Wednesday I just wrote the paper. So each of those things just got added to my daily load of work. They just became another task I had to do. When I have something big do, I just divide it up over days." (Rupert)

"We discuss material outside of class. And we discuss it in real-world context outside of class, so it's like a holistic learning experience to have that." (Isobel)

"Doing the readings, you have to critically engage with them and really think about them. So I can't just read a page and be like, 'What did I just read?' You have to really pay attention to what it's saying to then discuss it with other people." (Harriet)

Finally, study groups—either formally established through mentor sessions, or informally with friends from the same class—were instrumental to some students. This was particularly so for students who also socialized with the same group of friends, because they were able to maintain the conversation about material beyond specific study sessions, making it relevant to their daily lives. With deeper thought about the material, engaging in class sessions and writing about it came more easily to these students.

"I would always go to [mentor sessions] the whole time, or try to, … and I would try to work on my homework. And that way I wouldn't wait until last minute to do my homework, so that was very helpful." (Sean)

Student Behaviors

In addition to new study behaviors, there were a range of different behaviors in many facets of their lives that facilitated participants' academic improvement.

"I'm just more open to going to [faculty] now, instead of how I was first semester because it was a new environment. But now, I'm totally down to just, if I need anything from a professor, if I need help, clarification, I'll email them quickly." (Frank)

Seeking Help

Getting to the stage of actively seeking help required self-honesty about the presence of a problem; courage to ask for help; and knowledge about whom to ask. However, once participants finally sought (and found) help, their experiences improved.

"I think you have to be really brutally honest with yourself, in the sense, like, am I doing everything that I can be doing to help myself? I think a lot of times, especially when my GPA was [low], it took a long time to actually criticize myself. And probably because it's really hard to do that. So I had to be critical, like, maybe there's something I'm doing wrong." (Charles)

Resources

Finding the right resources from which one could access the type of help needed was a large problem for many participants. It was commonly noted in interviews that Grinnell has many and wide-ranging resources. However, few participants were fully—or even mildly—aware of pertinent resources, particularly in their first year. The campus tour during New Student Orientation, when new students are commonly shown SHACS, the Writing Lab, and many other resources, for example, had been forgotten by many, or at least the details of what was shown was not clear even weeks later. Thus, finding out about available resources was an important first step for many participants. Once that had been achieved, finding the courage, organization, energy, or time to visit and use the resources was a further hurdle to effective resource use. Staff advisors were very helpful in providing access to resources, through knowledge of what is available, or increasing students' confidence to use the resources.

"Part of the struggle for me was learning how to reach out, and not being afraid to do so." (Octavia)

"What stopped [me] from using the resources in your first semester [was] not knowing what those resources were. [Advisor] really put me on to a lot of things. She was like, 'Hey, did you hear about this? Did you hear about this?'" (Victor)

The person that I had to meet with, that was actually in Academic Advising … I probably wouldn't be at Grinnell today if it wasn't for them. Just in terms of keeping me on track, and being able to go to somebody and [ask], 'How do you make a four year plan? And where can I go to [find] these resources?' Because to somebody that has seven actual homework assignments that need to be turned in at some point in the next week that they're not doing, looking for academic-based help is eighth on the list, as opposed to first. So it's not something that somebody in that position can get done on their own agency." (Adrian)

"I can't do well here if I'm not doing well myself. So that I can't expect myself to be doing well in school if I'm not doing well mentally or physically. So I think it's just a big juggling act with taking care of yourself and your body and your mind, and then also academics. And also, giving yourself time to relax and hang out with friends, do social things too." (Octavia)

"I just had an epiphany, just a thought of happiness. The thought was just, 'I have everything I need to be happy.' And that was the thought that I lived off of for spring semester." (Sean)

"I think it's more about taking a break for yourself, and emptying all the contents that are filling up your mind, and causing you a lot of stress. I think sometimes the reason why people feel trapped in the essence of rigorous academics is because they don't have time to think." (Xanthe)

"Being actually able to take a break, stepping back from school, and go home, and recuperate [helped a lot]." (Charles)

""I am getting more sleep; my classes aren't as early. So if I go to sleep at the same time, I can sleep later, which is good." (Nick)

Self-Care

Learning to care for themselves sufficiently to allow optimal wellness and functioning was a challenge for a number of participants. Once they learned to perform appropriate self-care, these students found that they had new or renewed energy and motivation to focus on their studies.

Participants had varied journeys to recognizing their need for self-care or what self-care would look like for them. These included: adopting a substance-free lifestyle, regular exercise, meditation, journaling, and taking the opportunity to go home, where possible.

Getting Organized

For students who had previously had a difficult time, finding healthy routines that allowed them to be productive was helpful both in terms of completing their responsibilities, but also in recognizing how far they had come from their low points. Creating healthy schedules allowed participants to improve their sleep habits, either because they planned their sleep, got into a routine of a regular bedtime, or did their work earlier so they did not have to stay awake late into the night.

Some students' improved sleep habits were a result of their actions and choices. However, others had changed extra-curricular or work commitments to allow them to sleep better. Organizing one's classes so that they were at optimal times for personal rhythms helped some students set schedules more conducive to productivity.

Devising an overall daily or weekly schedule allowed participants to plan when they would study or complete particular assignments, when they had time for other commitments, and when they would relax. By managing their time in this fashion, less time was wasted, and they were able to find time to do most of what they wanted or needed to. Several participants created their daily planners or weekly with color-coded time blocks, or lists of commitments and time to devote to each. These techniques were acquired individually, when students realized they needed a new system (or even any system), they were modelled after peers' behavior, or adopted after a staff or faculty member gave them the idea of how to get and stay organized.

Katie explained how a faculty member helped her create a spreadsheet that would allow her to calculate her semester grades, based on each assignment. She had to earn a particular GPA to regain her scholarship, and being able to track her performance was helpful in this endeavor as well as maintaining her

"I drink way, way less now. I don't do drugs any more. I've been clean for about six months, haven't done any of that, and I've been doing a lot better mentally and spiritually, I go to church more. … And also, I think for me, a big part of it was I started working out a lot more." (Charles)

"I just ended up having a better routine … I found better ways to do my work at set times so I could go to sleep, then I'd feel better. And then that would keep me [feeling], 'Oh, this works. I'm sleeping, I'm happier.'" (Katie)

"Scheduling is key, … I have all of my professors' office hours in my calendar. And they don't show up as reminders, but they're just there." (Adrian)

"Now I don't have to get up til 3.30 [a.m.], so I'll be able to go to sleep and actually fall asleep, and get 6 or 7 hours of sleep, which is great, because then I'm re-energized during my work shift, and then I just want to get homework done. It's way more productive. Because before, when I didn't have sleep, you're not productive after a certain point, when you're awake for that long, so I would just play games, and not [study during my work shift] at all." (Harriet)

"I've gotten way better at planning my schedule. In the last two or three years, I've really gotten into using a weekly planner, and you know, filling everything out that I need to do. And then, labeling it, like, this needs to get done first, this needs to get done second, what is most important. And then also a to-do list outside of classwork, on the side, and a calendar. Being organized really helps!" (Harriet)

"I would print out just a blank schedule, with the days of the week and the times, and I would color in when I had to go and do things. And having the visual representation of it, rather than just having to remember, I think made me see I have X amount of time to actually accomplish these things. And so I think it just kind of forced me to realize the amount of time I could spend on things. And just how to balance it in a way where I could still make time to go see friends or to go to bed." (Marnie)

motivation. Other students received substantial support from staff advisors in Academic Advising, in terms of motivation and organization, as well as access to resources.

Extra-curricular Activities

In their quest to organize and manage their time, many participants reported having extra-curriculars as helpful. With an amount of time in the day blocked out as unavailable for studying, they were able to make better use of the remaining time in the day to ensure they completed their responsibilities. Without these additional demands on their time, many participants reported that they had previously not used the time available to them as efficiently because they felt like it was a plentiful resource.

Engaging in extra-curricular activities was also helpful in two other ways: to help participants identify and clarify their interests and passions, and to find friends. Students who pursued their intellectual curiosities in extra-curricular activities found that this clarified which courses, internships, or fellowships might be worth investigating, as it gave them additional insights into themselves and their subjects of choice. The activity might be a club, an on-campus job, an off-campus job, or something else; all that mattered was that students were intellectually invested and engaged in it.

Having a job in which the duties allowed students to study, such as managing a check-in desk, allowed students regular, scheduled study time. Completing their academic work while they were also at a job meant that they had time to have another job, if financially necessary.

Participants who came into Grinnell not knowing many people and not on a team found that extracurricular activities enabled them to make friends more readily because they could meet people with similar interests.

"I could keep a pretty thorough check, which was, in itself, a bit of a confidence booster, because I could see that my cumulative homework grade was still, a B+ even though sometimes I did poorly. And I was turning in almost everything, doing almost all of the readings, and going to almost all my classes. I mean, I think that I had a very clear goal in mind. And I think that helped me focus on this one thing." (Katie)

"Finding a job that really speaks to you [is a good idea]. So, if you love art, working in the art gallery. If you are really good at customer service, work at [a restaurant]. If you like a laid-back customer service atmosphere, work at Saint's Rest. You know, just finding something that more matches to you." (Jenny)

"I think it actually probably helped me with time management, knowing I have at least a 2-3 hour commitment … So I really need to get stuff done before that. And after that, I have to be really productive." (Eloise)

"There is so much time! Even if you're an athlete, even if you work 20 to 30 hours a week, there is still time for your homework, I promise! Like the two hours in between your morning and afternoon classes. Or, you get done at noon and you don't have practice until 5, that's five hours where you can do your homework. I learned what time is best for me in the morning to start going to class, so that I get enough sleep, because I'm not really a morning person. So I try to.. have all my classes start at 10. [I learned] what work schedule works best for me, when to do homework, when to hang out." (Jenny)

"There's a bunch of cool organizations that do stuff all the time. I think getting involved in stuff like that really helped me too. Even if it was a time commitment, getting involved in either groups, or clubs, or sports that you're interested in gives you a group of people, just from the start. Which I found to be helpful." (Octavia)

"Your social group definitely does influence your academics, whether or not people would like to admit that. So surrounding yourself with studious people is always a good move." (Bill)

"The team aspect is both on and off the field. Guys are always encouraging guys. It's like you always have another support group that will always be there to catch you when you fall, both on and off the field. So I think that that helped me find my footing and my place in Grinnell. They helped me, showed me different strategies on how to study, and what professors to take, just different things, like the different insights that you wouldn't have if you didn't know someone who has been there for a while." (Thomas)

"It helped so much to have a friend. People you could talk to who were kind of going through the same thing you were. And you could hang out with them. So that took a while. But once I got friends, that really helped, for me." (Quinn)

"If you want to be successful here, you need to network; you need to have people that you can rely on, people that can help you along the process." (Thomas)

Friends

Having friends proved helpful in a number of ways. Perhaps the most important was that friends provided a support network that helped reinforce behaviors conducive to academic success.

"I had friends in every year, which is really cool, because you sort of get their insight about how to make it here." (Octavia)

The specific mechanism of academic support provided by friends differed among participants and even different friends for the same participant. Having friends in the same classes was beneficial both because it provided some accountability and the opportunity to study together. Studying together helped students understand concepts more fully, spend regular time on homework, and examine issues from multiple perspectives outside of class. Friends also kept each other studying and attending class regularly, which in turn sometimes strengthened friendships, or at least social comfort, with others in the class.

"People will help you tremendously in ways that you can't even fathom. … So they'll help you. But for that to happen, either you take it upon yourself to make it a safe space to talk about these things, or you kind of just inch away, and try to talk about it. Because people do struggle here, but people are too ashamed to talk about it. But that's even more of the reason they should share it." (Sean)

Friends' advice was an important part of academic success in that it contributed knowledge to improve class choice, and it helped students find their own particular set of strategies that worked for them, both academically and socially. Having friends in different years is important in this regard, which happened most naturally in friendships made through extra-curricular activities, especially sports teams.

Following Maslow's hierarchy of needs,[1] holistic wellness and social comfort is an underlying necessity to being able to focus on one's studies at Grinnell. Therefore, also important to academic success was the social support network friends provided.

"Everyone in my courses I was very familiar with, and I could study with them, work on assignments with them, and really have a support group." (Isobel)

Making secure friendships took time and effort and, for some, a concerted decision to find people who could be friends, to allow friends to get close, to share personal information, and to establish a trusting relationship.

[1.] Maslow, A. (1943). A theory of human motivation. Psychological Review, 50, 370-396

"Friends hold you accountable, too. They don't let you completely disappear and not show up to class." (Isobel)

"One of my classes, I got a B+ in, and I think that was more so because one of my friends was in the class. So I think it was positive peer pressure." (Sean)

"Doing [major] classes helped, because there are so few of them and the mentor sessions are very much like, you sit down and you do your homework together, or you get help. And I started talking to people. And because it has a co-requisite of [discipline] classes at the same time, I had people with multiple classes." (Katie)

"We just need to find people that care about us, and we care about enough. You can't be closed and restricted off to people. You need to be talking, you need to be making those connections, you need to having those discussions." (Rupert)

A Portrait of the First Semester

A Time of Turmoil and Self-Discovery

The themes and factors that contribute to poor academic performance have thus far been presented as individual factors. This short section presents a narrative, drawing on the experience of all participants, of the experience of the first semester at Grinnell. Readers will likely recognize the themes described earlier in the report that contribute to lower academic performance. This narrative places the themes into a comprehensive context of the first semester and points out relationships among themes; in lived experience, themes are not separate and distinct as they are in the results section of this report.

College presents a new, unknown environment for many first year students. They know few, if any people; most are away from home for the first time; they are unfamiliar with the Grinnell culture and "how things work." Class choice may be a little random, or at least informed only through the catalog and a ten minute appointment with their advisor. Students may be afraid or unsure of approaching faculty and also unaware of the many places to which they could turn for help, despite being told about resources during NSO. They make friends with people in their residence hall perhaps, or their classes, or their extra-curricular activities if they join a club quickly or are on a college team. Those who do not join any clubs or are more socially anxious may be slow to make friends, finding they have few sources of emotional support.

Once classes begin, many students quickly find themselves feeling shell-shocked at the amount of work they have to do. Their daily schedule and homework habits from high school do not allow them to finish all their work, and they begin to skip readings or stay up late to complete assignments. Simultaneously, their study strategies from high school are ineffective at Grinnell. Skimming a reading ten minutes before class or rushing through an essay results in poor knowledge of the material or a poor product, which is reflected in their grades. They are shaken as their academic identity—one of the smartest students in their previous institution—comes into question, but are yet unaware of the academic identity work needed to emerge with strong academic self-efficacy. They are not used to having to work this hard, nor to receiving poor grades. Their confidence begins to wane, and yet seeking help feels like admitting they are not good enough to be at Grinnell—their innermost fear. At this juncture, there are multiple paths open to students: to escape mentally by ignoring the issue, to struggle on alone, to seek help, or some combination of other actions.

Ignoring the issue—the path of least resistance—may be the least damaging to their academic identity, but the most damaging to their grades and their learning. First readings, then assignments go uncompleted. Unsure of how to tell faculty why they have not completed their work, students stop going to class and may start ignoring attempts by faculty and advising to reach out to them. Ashamed of their lack of engagement and performance, they still may be paralyzed into inactivity. Their low grades either force upon them some help from the institution (or a leave of absence), or spur them to different action the following semester or year.

Struggling alone involves much effort, but frequently has a lower return than the next option—seeking help. Students who choose this path may engage in some deep self-reflection or reframing of their relationship to their academic work. They may withdraw from friends because they might feel compelled to discuss their struggles, which they are unwilling to do. Receiving their grades at the end of the semester may either spur them to seek help or to cement particular strategies that have been successful for them as they seek to improve their academic performance.

Help-seeking behavior is difficult because it involves admitting that help is necessary. Needing help is not

often discussed at Grinnell; nor is failure. While overwork and quasi-struggles are discussed and used as a badge of honor, truly struggling and receiving failing grades are kept quiet and something of which to be ashamed. However, if a friend, faculty or staff member, a coach, a CA, or other member of the college community notices a student struggling and is successful in encouraging the student to get help, there are sufficient resources to 'rescue' a student, in most cases. Hearing other people's struggles and how they implemented behavior change to overcome their challenges is very helpful in getting students to seek help.

During this period of frequent academic turmoil, where students are also perhaps questioning their class choices and the majors they intended to pursue before they arrived, they also may be going through social chaos. Many students experience intense homesickness after the initial excitement about being at college wears off. Having to manage one's schedule, fulfil responsibilities without parents to remind them, and form one's own support network after having a solid group of friends in high school is a common set of challenges.

Finding friends can be difficult and is frequently done in the first six weeks of the first semester. Students who come in on teams often have a built-in support network, as do those who rapidly join a club in which they are very active. Making friends in these ways provides access to upperclassmen, to whom first years can turn for advice on how to navigate Grinnell. They ask about courses, jobs, activities, professors, and any number of other pieces of information that helps improve their self-efficacy and knowledge about being successful at Grinnell. Students who make friends in their residence hall, mainly, tend to be friends with other first years. Therefore, they do not have such ready access to these important pieces of information and may find it more difficult to find and effectively use the resources they need.

Thus, the first semester is a period of intense change for many first years at Grinnell. Their academic expectations of themselves vis-à-vis the work quality and quantity at Grinnell must be reconciled, somehow, with reality. However, concentrating on academics can feel impossible if they are still struggling to find a social network, various sources of support (academic and social), and maintain a set of healthy behaviors—particularly a regular sleep schedule. Some students may also be absorbed with exploring their new freedom, away from home, or be experimenting with identities (as well as substances) as they build their friend groups.

When the first semester finally draws to a close, most students will have found some semblance of a routine that allows them to study effectively. Some, however, need to have help imposed upon them and to work intensely to remove their own set of barriers preventing them from reaching their academic potential. College faculty and staff, along with the student, can work together to promote their success.

Advice for Students to Improve Academic Performance

Guiding Principles

1. “Don’t give up. Your first semester GPA isn’t going to define you for the rest of college. Yeah, it’s been hard to climb from that 2.8 up to the 4.0 last semester, but there’s still so much room for improvement.” (Eloise)
2. “The biggest thing you can do in a situation like this is know that you can do it. That’s half the battle. That’s what I battled with my first half of that semester: I didn’t know if I could do it. And the day I decided I could, it happened.” (Rupert)
3. “You’re the one who’s going to need to motivate yourself.” (Walter)
4. “You’re probably smarter than you think you are.” (Walter)
5. “Going in, it’s going to be very difficult, because it’s going to be a new experience, new people, … a whole new environment. … And you might have times when you’re down. But you have to know yourself. Know yourself, and use your previous experiences and what you’ve seen in this life, and use that to better yourself.” (Frank)
6. “Stop comparing yourself to everybody else. Just focus on how well you are doing.” (Walter)
7. “Even if you’re not prepared going to class, unprepared is still better than skipping class.” (Katie)

Class choice

1. Pick classes where you can engage with the material of your own free will, rather than having to force yourself to engage with the material (Bill, paraphrased)
2. “Find the classes that work for you.” (Frank)
3. “Listen to your friends when they tell you not to take so many hard classes in a semester. I wouldn’t necessarily say make sure you always take an easy class, but … just knowing [that], not everyone can handle 4 super hard classes in a semester. Don’t think you’re superman, and you’re not weak for taking an easier class, instead of really having a hard schedule.” (Eloise)
4. “It’s totally different from high school, so the way things are is just hard to grasp at first. So adding on all these hard classes is not helpful to anybody.” (Harriet)
5. “Take 12 credits, take three classes. I made my 4-year plan, and the rest of my time here, I’m only taking 3 academic classes, and a dance class or a music lesson. Because this semester, I feel intellectually inferior, and I feel very academically overwhelmed.” (Sean)
6. “Some people I knew took three classes in their first semester. If you need that adjustment, take it. It’s okay.” (Lucy)
7. “If you struggled one semester, and maybe you struggled and were still taking three classes, … reflect on what you like about classes, and why you’re taking them, and just make sure you’re doing it for yourself.” (Sean)
8. “Talk to other people about what they went through in the same classes. This is a small school, and mostly everyone’s done the same classes that you [will go] through. So being able to talk to another person about classes and what they did in the same class also helps.” (Frank)
9. “The best thing I think you can do is not go in knowing or thinking you’re going to major in something. Just take it slow, don’t get ahead of yourself. … So I would say, just vary the types of classes you take, especially your first year.” (Harriet)
10. “Try out new things, whether that’s academically or extra-curricularly, in the beginning because I think

that will give you more of a sense of what you really want to do and what you're planning to do. I feel like the curriculum allows that to be easier for students to do." (Lucy)

11. "Go to your advisor, register for classes [early on in registration]. … You'll get the time slots that you want, so that if you like sleeping in, you don't have to go to class until 10 or 11, or have all afternoon [free]." (Jenny)
12. "It is important to have some early classes, … I just think 8 o'clock is a little extreme." (Nick)

Studying

1. "Don't skip readings!" (Bill)
2. "You need to motivate yourself to go to the library, or go to study somewhere. Finding a study space that was very conducive to me working was very important." (Marnie)
3. "Have specific benchmarks for yourself. Like when I had to try to participate in class at least once a day, and now [I] want to raise [my] hand as much as possible, when [I] can contribute. And so I think the benchmarks just emphasize the work that you need to put in." (Marnie)
4. "It's letting [yourself] be creative with the material. Thinking about the material not only as things to learn but as things to use. And kind of your own way of generating knowledge. … How you interact with the material will be different from how anyone else interacts with the material." (Bill)

Office Hours

1. "If you go into hours with a set plan of what you want to talk about and what you need to get out of it, that can be very helpful." (Frank)
2. "Definitely, definitely schedule some time [with professors]. Yes, meet with them on that first day, introduce yourself. But you go even further. Even when you don't really need the help, still go see your professors, just to make sure that you are on the right track. Because they know most things that you don't know that you don't know. There are known unknowns, and then there are unknown unknowns. They know both. So go see your professors and talk to them. They're real people. They're going to sit down and have these conversations. But at least, you know, strive to have these conversations." (Victor)

Resources

1. "Use your resources. I feel like the resources are what really helped me. Going to the writing lab a lot helped me structure my papers. (Eloise)
2. '[Use] resources, or mentors, whatever you have, to help, maybe, that transition [to college]. … Whether that be reaching out to your residence life coordinator for support or reaching out to Academic Advising for support, I think it is really important for students to utilize that." (Lucy)
3. Take advantage of these resources. You're paying for everything already, even if you're not using them, so you might as well use them." (Victor)
4. "There are just a ridiculous amount of resources at Grinnell. Taking advantage of those resources can help you so much." (Walter)

Time Management/Organization

1. "At the beginning of the semester, when you have the most drive, getting the most stuff done, so that when you … hit that low point, you have stuff to sort of fall back on." (Adrian)
2. "If you get the little things done early in the day, it opens up your entire afternoon." (Jenny)

3. “Everyone has a phone, so just have set times where you need to study. You have to hold yourself accountable or have friends that will hold you accountable to go and to have set times for reading this, or studying, or writing your paper.” (Victor)

Extra-curricular

1. “Join a couple of clubs, be social! Don’t sit in your room all day. That’s not cool!” (Victor)
2. “First year, getting involved with organizations … is really important and could be a good way to get your friend group or support team formed. … Without a support group, you’re just not going to make it, really.” (Isobel)
3. “It’s really helpful to have these extra-curriculars because essentially, I consider them a nice study break. Grinnell can get overwhelming and stressful. So it is important to find things that you really enjoy doing and find the opportunity to do them here.” (Lucy)

Friends

1. “Network. You never know when you’re going to need help from someone. You never know what someone has to offer or what you can help him with.” (Thomas)
2. “Get good connections. Because the feeling of being alone leads to a chain of really painful events. Connections is the first thing.” (Xanthe)
3. “I had friends in every year, which is really cool, because you sort of get their insight about how to make it here.” (Octavia)
4. “As people, we’re all designed to care about others. So we just need to find people that care about us, and we care about enough. And you can’t be closed and restricted off to people. You need to be talking, you need to be making those connections, you need to having those discussions. … So I think my advice on that would just be, ‘Go out. Don’t stay in your room,’ simply because it’s not worth it for your own health. You need that community to help you. That community needs to be pushing you to do well.” (Rupert)
5. “[Rather than being alone,] it can still be better to be around other people. And then I can talk to people about problems that I’m having, or whatever. Or I can talk to them about good things that’s going on, and, because they know me, they know what I’ve been through now. It’s easier to talk to these people. Once you get the big things out of the way, the little things are just little things. Just miniscule.” (Victor)

Seeking Help

1. “Be willing to just say, ‘I need help,’ and go to the right resources.” (Walter)
2. “Don’t feel afraid to reach out for help if you need it.” (Lucy)
3. “Talk to your professors” (Quinn and Marnie)
4. “Reach out to people.” (Octavia)
5. “Don’t just feel like you’re drowning alone. Reach out.” (Quinn)
6. “I will emphasize talking to seniors. That’s the best, because they will tell you things that you don’t necessarily hear during your orientation, or what your advisors will tell you.” (Denise)
7. “Even if you’re in your first semester, or … you’re going to go on probation, or your grades are falling, just talk to your parents. Simply because they’re the best support you have. At one point they won’t just care about academics; they want you to be fine. … No one gets you like your parents get you.” (Rupert)
8. Be comfortable failing, and talk about it. (Sean, paraphrased)

Self-Care

1. “Try to make time for yourself, and just meditate, or have moments of silence, where you just don’t think of anything.” (Xanthe)
2. “You don’t want to give up. … People will say, ‘Go home.’ If you think you can do it, don’t go home. But if you have a serious issue, obviously, go home.”
3. Remember that improvement is a continuum; there is not a dichotomy of failure and success. (Sean, paraphrased)

College-level Facilitators

Although many of the factors mentioned here currently exist on campus, these participants did not find them available for their use. There are several reasons for this lack of availability: the resources may not have during the time these participants needed them, the participants may not have been receptive to hearing about them (for any reason, volitional or not), or the resources may not have been told about the resources or found out about them for themselves.

Resources and Resource Promotion

1. “There’s got to be some sort of directory of student organizations, I’m sure. But [also important is] promoting more widespread knowledge that they exist. … And there’s an organization fair, with tables first years during NSO, but there are plenty of second years that don’t know certain things exist.” (Octavia)
2. “Creating ... a mentor program, pairing up an underclassman and an upperclassman, or something along those lines. Having them talk to them, be like, ‘How did you get through your first semester?’ And stuff like that.” (Eloise)
3. “Maybe having it so an upperclassman can be like, ‘Oh, this is what I did during my time here.’ Maybe if [there were], posters of it, because my friend, on Facebook [posted], ;How I survived my first year at Grinnell.’ And having resources like that for first years. Or even people that are coming back from having time off, having people write about it and see, ‘Oh, I’m not alone.’ Because you’re never alone. But because of how you’re thinking, you feel like that. So I guess just creating more relatable spaces and more mentor relationships.” (Sean)
4. “I think Grinnell needs to give every first year a list of resources, and maybe they did during NSO. NSO mostly, I was bored. A lot of the activities, they were like forcing us into groups and forcing us to talk, and you could tell a lot of the kids didn’t want to be there, or there was kids that would ditch. And the topics, we talked a lot about sexual assault, which is good, but I feel like we didn’t talk enough about the resources of the college. I can remember we toured the college super quick. They pointed out some of the main buildings, but I feel like Grinnell should try to make an effort [in that regard].” (Quinn)
5. “First year, if Questbridge had already been doing the regular group study session, I definitely would have gone to that.” (Isobel)
6. “The biggest thing they could do was probably tell the first years, during NSO, more about the resources available. And who they can talk to if they’re feeling overwhelmed. What the different buildings are for. Because I didn’t even know SHACS was a thing until maybe the end of my first year. I missed that, completely; did not know we had that on campus.” (Quinn)
7. “That information should be posted everywhere because I had no idea. And it’s probably somewhere.

Having it as a link on a website, it just wasn't [enough]. I feel like this stuff should be pinned to every board beside every door of every dorm your first year. 'These are the people you can go to. They can help you choose your classes.' They handed us papers during NSO, but they hand you so many papers, they hand you schedules, they hand you waivers you need to sign. And maybe they gave us this stuff, but it just got lost in the shuffle." (Quinn)

8. "[Having some of the NSO information reinforced in your tutorial a month in would help.] I just need to know what resources are available and not feel so lost. If they gave us a sheet of paper that they were really clear about. It wasn't just another sheet of paper for me. But, 'This paper, this is who you need to talk to. This is people that can help you.'" (Quinn)
9. "Maybe Grinnell could do more [for] that initial adjustment from high school-level classes to college-level classes. It feels like you're being thrown in a pool. … For me, it felt like 'Here are the readings, go ahead, figure it out.' And it was just awful. [Some kind of pre-orientation, 'here's how to study in college' program] would have helped me so much more than whatever little activities they had during NSO." (Quinn)

Help from Advisors, Both Staff and Faculty

1. "Having someone who can push you to use those resources is also really helpful." (Eloise, specifically talking about tutorial advisors)
2. "We're all here because we can do it. They wouldn't have taken us if we couldn't. And that's something that really stuck with me. That [advisor] said that. I think she said this very early on my first semester, but she kept saying this throughout. [She] said, 'I can know you can do it. Simply because you're here.' That needs to be reinforced, I think, because when you see your grades falling, on the inside you just have chaos. Because being in Grinnell, the type of school that it is, we've all been above-average students in high school." (Rupert)
3. "People take for granted what they're doing for themselves. They're showing up to class, they're doing work, all these things are great. But they're not reminded that they're great things. They're just expected. They see it as things that everyone should be doing anyways. But … pat yourself on the back for that!" (Sean)
4. "I think it needs to be emphasized more just how much time is expected for each class. That's something I didn't hear until this year. That you should be putting in X number of hours for each class, depending on how much time you spend in class and on the level." (Marnie)
5. "We always talk about time management, but I don't think, like, people take it as seriously as they should. Because that's a big thing. Once you come to college and you have all this free time, time management is something that should really be looked at. You know, after you find this friend group." (Victor)
6. "Longer individual meetings [with your advisor] would have been a big help. Because I don't think 10 minutes is enough for you to know what you're going to get into, your first semester of college. I just would like more individual [advising], because it's a smaller college." (Quinn)

Appendix: Interview Questions

1) Your GPA increased substantially recently; can you tell me what you did to improve it, or what happened to cause that change?
2) How did you get along with faculty teaching your classes, as well as your advisor, before and after your GPA improvement?
3) Do you feel at home at Grinnell? If so, when did you start to feel that and what contributed to it?
4) Tell me about your friends.
5) How has what you spend your time on changed, if at all – can you walk me through a typical week before your GPA improved and now?
6) What are you planning on doing upon graduation?
7) In what other extra-curricular activities are you engaged that we have not yet discussed?
8) Can you tell me about any non-school-related events that occurred that might have influenced your GPA?
9) What from your experience do you think could help others trying to improve their GPA as you did?