

Preface

ALTHOUGH this is a book about success, it is impossible to discuss that attractive subject without considering failure as well. Indeed, one of the points I make in the book is that success comes through learning how to fail, and failures may, in a sense, be considered as way stations on the road to success.

Not all students learn from failure, however. If past experience is any indication, more than half of the two million students who are starting college this year will drop out and will not complete the two-, three-, or four-year course they have started.

This prediction is all the more disturbing, since the great majority of those who will drop out have the capacity to succeed. As a citizen of the world, I am appalled at the wastage this loss of talent represents, for we are far short of having enough trained and educated people to provide essential services and to do the jobs that need doing. As a teacher and a counselor I am moved to sympathy by the frustration, discouragement, and psychic pain that most of these students will experience before they find out that, for one reason or another, they must leave college.

I am also in sympathy with a group of "partial failures"—those who *do* complete their courses but whose success in their chosen field will be something less than would be expected. These students will not fail, in the conventional sense, but their disappointments at not performing up to their expected standards will nonetheless be real and often poignant.

In addition to my sympathy for these educational casualties I also feel depressed when I realize that most of this could have been prevented if remedial measures had been taken at the right time. We have plenty of data to show that the majority of students who

are not doing very well or who even are at the very brink of failure can make dramatic recoveries if they participate in almost any type of organized help: tutoring, how-to-study courses, group therapy, counseling, reading clinics, and the like.

As we dig into the background of these failures and disappointments, we routinely run into two major causes: one that is attitudinal or emotional in nature, and the other, a matter of deficiency in one or more skills. These two types of shortcomings are generally interrelated. Students who have verbal problems—that is, students who cannot read rapidly and with comprehension and who cannot express themselves adequately in speech and writing when dealing with moderately complex material—are almost always individuals who, in the past, have not been particularly interested in developing such skills. Many of them, indeed, have felt quite negative about the insistence of high school English teachers that they read more books and improve their writing. Their attitudes and their deficiencies reinforce each other. Because of their apathy or their resistance, they did not learn the skills they now need, and because they had not learned the skills, they felt and also now feel negative toward them. I mention this particular interlocking set of attitudes and skills because it is a crucial one where college success is concerned—even practical junior college courses like floriculture, drafting, and practical nursing call for the use of communication skills. Attitudes toward getting involved academically and the ability to use study techniques are another pair of motives and skills that have a very important relationship to college success or failure, and there are still others.

The breakdown point at which students experience failure or disappointment comes when their skills fall short of instructor demands; hence the emphasis in most how-to-study books and courses is on the development of the necessary skills. My experience, however, leads me to believe that attitudes should have a higher priority than they ordinarily receive. In my opinion, when how-to-study measures succeed, they do so because students have developed the supporting and reinforcing motives that are needed before they can bring themselves to acquire and practice these skills. Indeed,

those students who have the drive and the dedication to succeed often develop the needed skills and techniques on their own without any outside help. This is shown by the relatively large numbers of "overachievers" who graduate each year, some of them with honors. These are students who have dedicated and committed themselves to the tasks of learning, but whose aptitudes, as measured by psychological tests, would have led one to expect failure of them, or, at best, only modest success.

Attitudes, in my opinion, are paramount. I say this partly because my professional biases lead me to trust human beings more than techniques, and attitudes, being largely emotional in character, are closer to the unique and human elements within us than are techniques. My appraisal is also based on more than thirty years of successes and failures in working with thousands of willing and unwilling learners of all ages, ranging from nursery schoolers to candidates for graduate degrees, adult education students, servicemen, and applicants for rehabilitation. During these years I have played many roles: teacher, counselor, adviser, therapist, and researcher. I have continued to work in this difficult and complex field because I am interested in learning and am fascinated by the problems, difficulties, and challenges it poses.

My conclusion regarding the importance of attitudes in success or failure in learning is drawn not only from countless hours of talking with students about their learning problems but from my own learning experiences as well. Time and time again, in my encounters with students, I have been struck by the fact that everyone seems to want to acquire better *techniques* of learning but is uninterested in or even resistive to the need to experience the kind of attitudinal or emotional changes that must precede or accompany any effort at learning if it is to succeed. The reasons for this reluctance are fascinating, and we shall examine them from time to time in this book. In fact, it was partly my interest in the emotional factors in learning that led me to write it.

And now we come to the main purpose of the book: it was written in the hope that the student who reads it will gain some new and useful perspectives on learning and its problems, perspec-

tives that will enable him to make a fresh start toward the successful completion of his college career.

As you go through the book, you will encounter a number of study techniques, some of which have been described in detail. I have, however, tried to keep these to the minimum. There are some excellent manuals specializing in study techniques that may be found in any college bookstore or library, and this book is not intended to supplant them, but rather to provide an antidote to what I consider to be one of their major failings. Whenever you are ready to make a real commitment to the tasks of learning, however, you would do well to read two or three of these manuals and to use whatever suits your special needs. If this book gets you as far as reading one of these manuals or, better yet, developing some of your own study techniques, it will have begun to succeed.

You will also find some advice in this book. I feel apologetic about this, for I know that if there is one thing that students have too much of, it is advice. Most of the advice they get is, furthermore, both unnecessary and irrelevant. But there are two problems that an author of a book like this faces. One is the difficulty of talking about learning and its problems without throwing out an occasional suggestion; the other is the need to provide something for students to start with—a kind of pump primer, so to speak. Although the advice I have included may be unnecessary, I feel reasonably sure that it is relevant.

Much of what I have said in this book has controversial overtones. I have already opened up one major controversy—that is, my affirmation that attitudes are basic to techniques, as far as learning is concerned. This controversy alone is worth several lively discussions, and I shall consider the book unsuccessful if it fails to stir up such debates. It does not matter whether I win the debate: one of my major objectives is to get you to think about learning and to raise questions about the way it should be done. When it comes to learning, most people are prisoners of a kind of “conventional wisdom,” as John Kenneth Galbraith would put it, and it is only by questioning it that progress can be made. After all, conventional wisdom has not been of much help to the millions of college students who fail

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each year. Perhaps what they need is a fresh viewpoint, and that is what is attempted here. In any event, controversy leads to discussions, and it is my devout hope that this book will provide enough controversial material to serve as the basis of many discussions among students.

I cannot, however, take full credit for the ideas in this book, controversial or otherwise. They have, all of them, been borrowed or stolen from colleagues and students too numerous to mention and most of them long forgotten. Only the setting I have given them is original. Nevertheless, I would like to mention the helpful suggestions and encouraging support received from Eugene Raxten of Los Angeles Valley College. Finally, I am particularly grateful for the assistance given me by Edythe Moore, who typed the manuscript and served as a one-person reaction panel for the ideas expressed.

Henry Clay Lindgren

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