

Dr. Phil - unlikely sage for college students?



Not doing as well as you'd like to at college? Wonder what a TV shrink has to say that is relevant to college you? You might be surprised.

In more than 15 years of working at colleges, I have talked to students with a variety of complaints - grades that they think don't match their effort, long hours spent doing what their peers do in much less time, limited retention and comprehension of reading assignments, etc. Yet they are sometimes resistant to adopting the strategies that will help them turn things around. I have found myself repeating some Dr. Phil chestnuts as a way to get students to get past their resistance and embrace change.

Excuse - "I do my best work under pressure"



Dr. Phil's response - "How's that working out for ya?"*

To paraphrase a famous maxim, it makes no sense to keep doing the same thing over and over and expect a different result. You can continue to labor the way you have been because it is comfortable, but you can't expect your grades to improve or your stress levels to decrease.

You can tell yourself - as many students do - that you do your best work under pressure (i.e. during an all-nighter that runs into the day your assignment is due). But the truth is that you have no idea how you work when you're not under pressure, because you've never worked any other way. When you tell yourself that you can only achieve your best when you're bumping up against a deadline, you have to take a step back and think about the grades you receive and the stress you feel as a result of working this way. And you have to acknowledge that you have no experience that shows you how you can perform if you complete your assignments over a few days or weeks.

Excuses - "There isn't enough time to do all of the work" or "I don't have time to learn time management and study strategies"



Dr. Phil's response - "That dog won't hunt."*

I've never been entirely clear about what Dr. Phil means by this, but my take is that the excuses you're using to avoid changing the way you work are just that - *excuses*. And clinging to them will prevent you from making the changes you need to in order to get the results that you want.

Excuse - "I can't do better in school because I'm just not a good student."



Dr. Phil's response - "You have to set yourself up for success"*

Dr. Phil's point is pretty straightforward, and he's right on the money with this one. Being a successful student typically requires planning and forethought; it doesn't typically happen for students who live moment-to-moment. You need to establish a weekly schedule for academics and other commitments (like laundry and bill-paying) and stick to it. You have to study in a location where distractions are minimal, even if it means leaving your room or apartment and trudging to the library (or vice versa). You have to start each semester with a plan to complete weekly readings and assignments, beginning long-term papers and projects two or three weeks ahead of the due date and meeting interim deadlines that you set up for yourself.



The bottom line



Becoming a better student will take some time and planning, and the strategies you'll need may not take less time than what you're doing, but they will be much more effective, and you will live with much less stress. If you are ready to seek help because something is happening in your academic life that you don't like, then you need to be ready to embrace new ways of doing things. So listen to Dr. Phil and me - and start to make some changes.