School Smarts
The Four Cs of Academic Success

Jim Burke
To my students, for all they teach me about school and life,

and to Tom Nieman, friend, colleague, mentor
Education! Which of the various me's do you propose to educate?

—D. H. Lawrence

A traveler in a foreign land best learns names of people and places, how to express ideas, ways to carry on a conversation by moving around in the culture, participating as fully as he can, making mistakes, saying things half-right, blushing then being encouraged by a friendly native speaker to try again.

—Mike Rose, Lives on the Boundary
Contents

Acknowledgments / vii
A Personal Prologue: The Student I Was, the Student I Became, the Teacher I Am / ix

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION—UNDERSTANDING ACADEMIC SUCCESS
The Country Called School / 1
Academic Demands / 4
Demystifying School Success / 6
Pursuing and Experiencing Academic Success / 9
Evolving Notions of Literacy / 13
Teaching Academic Success / 18
The Four Cs of Academic Success / 25

CHAPTER TWO: THE FOUR Cs OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS
Personal Perspective / 33

CHAPTER THREE: COMMITMENT
Commitment: What It Is / 39
What Factors Affect Commitment? / 48

CHAPTER FOUR: CONTENT
Content: What It Is / 60
What Factors Affect Content? / 73

CHAPTER FIVE: COMPETENCIES
Competencies: What They Are / 84
What Factors Affect Competencies? / 101

CHAPTER SIX: CAPACITY
Capacity: What It Is / 115
What Factors Affect Capacity? / 119
CHAPTER SEVEN: A PRACTICAL POSTSCRIPT—
THE FOUR CS IN ACTION  126

1. Commitment / 126
2. Content / 133
3. Competencies / 138
4. Capacity / 139

APPENDICES  143

A  Works Cited / 143
B  Executive Summary from Academic Literacy:
   A Statement of Competencies / 150

Index / 157
Acknowledgments

For four years I have been involved in a conversation with teachers around the country about the question of academic success and how those of us in the schools—whether teachers or administrators—can help students achieve it. It is the central question we all face as we move deeper into the work of helping all students succeed in school and life, in the classroom and at work, on class assignments and state tests. Throughout the journey of the last few years I have relied on many people, some of them students, others colleagues, still others fellow writers. I am grateful to them all for their teachings.

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A Personal Prologue: The Student I Was, the Student I Became, the Teacher I Am

I try never to let schooling get in the way of my education.

—Mark Twain

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Burke:

This letter is to inform you that your son Jim Burke will be ineligible to graduate or to participate in the graduation ceremonies on June 8th unless he passes his English class. Enclosed you will find a copy of his most recent progress report and his current transcript. His teacher, Mr. Kitchener, has informed us that Jim’s grade in his senior English class as of June 3rd is an F. He must pass this class, as it is a graduation requirement; it is also the last five units he needs to achieve the required number of units to graduate.

Students who do not have the required 210 units in the proper subject areas will not participate in the graduation ceremony. Students can complete any graduation deficits over the summer to earn a diploma. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call me.

Sincerely,

Bruce Wells
Counselor

I would like to be able to tell you that when this letter arrived in the last weeks of my high school career, I was working hard on the latest assignment I had decided not to do; the truth, however, is that I was lounging by the pool in our backyard with my friends Dave and Doug, both of whom were heading off to college in the fall.

When my mother erupted out of the house waving the letter in her hand, I already knew something was up: I could hear her voice from the front hall,
where she had stood reading the letter that capped years of academic mediocrity and, at times, failure.

“What the hell is this all about?” she demanded as Dave and Doug dove into the pool for a little refreshment—and distance.

“Oh . . . that? I thought they said they weren’t going to send that. It’s all taken care of, Mom. I swear. I didn’t turn that project into Ken [my English teacher, who insisted we call him by his first name] on time, so he hadn’t graded it. He said he’d grade it this weekend. Not to worry, Mom.”

“It better be squared away, that’s all I have to say.” With that, she retreated to the cool interior of the house, leaving me to wonder how I would get out of such a mess this time. Doug and Dave both propped themselves up on the edge of the pool, grinning, shaking their heads at me, saying only that their parents would kill them if they got into such a situation.

Over the next week I would consult with Ken—ironically, the teacher most responsible for me becoming a teacher—about my standing, asking what I could do to pass his class. It’s a conversation those of you reading this know too well. And ultimately it worked out: I received the “gift D−” I needed to walk the stage. The problem was that on the other side of that stage stood the realization that all my friends were leaving for college by summer’s end to begin preparing for a future I had never allowed myself to consider.

As my transcript shows (see Figure 1), I drifted between what appealed to me and what the school required.

My poor academic performance was by no means limited to senior year or even high school. I can still see my great friend John Russell and myself trying to “fix” our middle school report cards so that the Ds resembled Bs—sort of. I spent much more time in middle school trying to see the legendary hickies on Renee Mell’s neck than trying to jot down what Mr. Longwell told us about math or Mrs. Cook said about history as she stood straight and stared at the red dot on the back wall, so uncomfortable was she about speaking in front of groups. When I wasn’t doctoring report cards or speculating about Renee’s neck, I was playing basketball or waiting to get into the woodshop to work on my lathe projects, which offered a pleasant calm in the middle of an otherwise disorienting day.

Only one teacher stands out in my mind from middle school: Mr. Rothshiller, the hardest, most demanding, and most unique teacher in the whole school. He taught zoology, had arms covered with tattoos, had been a boxer, and demanded more of students than all the other teachers combined. You knew you were in for it on those days when you entered his class and saw the
FIGURE 1. My high school transcript. While my cumulative GPA was 2.5, my academic GPA (based on required academic classes) was 1.7. It's worth noting that my sister, three years younger than I am, held approximately the same class rank and earned an even lower GPA (but, alas, earned much higher rankings in tennis than I did).
dreaded skull perched atop his desk: this meant a pop quiz on something like the bones of the hand or the respiratory system of sharks.

Something in me responded to Mr. Rothshiller: he was one of those teachers you wanted to please, whose opinion of you mattered, and who asked you to go inside yourself and find the stuff needed to do what he asked. Try as I might, however, I lacked the academic sensibilities that told others which pieces of information mattered most, or how to solve a complicated problem such as dissecting a shark and then displaying it, properly labeled, and without formaldehyde dripping all over the posterboard. Tests were just another chance to fail, as they would be through much of high school. Somehow school smarts seemed a genetic gift I had not received. My dad taught me how to build and fix things, how to hunt and fish, how to throw a curveball, but somehow note taking and test taking never got onto our menu.

In some misguided effort to prove my intelligence to both Mr. Rothshiller and myself, I spent an entire weekend holed up in my room staring at what passed for notes so that I might not just pass but excel on the next test. Lacking any method, any strategies, any sense of my own mind and how it learned, I was beaten before I began. I might as well have been down at the river hunting lizards or riding my motorcycle through the fields that surrounded our house. When I failed the big zoology test that prevented me from continuing on in the class, I did not pitch a fit or cry; I probably went home and watched television or rode my motorcycle.

By eighth grade, however, something entered my life that would eventually change me in ways I could not then anticipate: tennis. Everything else became irrelevant as I sought to master this sport that I had somehow stumbled upon one Saturday morning when my buddy Wayne Schloemer asked me if I wanted to go play tennis. From the age of eleven until the end of high school, despite failure or general lack of direction in other areas of my life, I devoted myself to tennis with a passion that gave my life a sense of purpose and let me taste success on a daily basis. It established my identity as a successful person, a competent person, a feeling I rarely experienced in school. Eventually I would rank among the top fourteen-year-olds in California.

Meanwhile, I was also beginning high school when I was fourteen. Though my father had dropped out of high school to begin working for the Office of State Printing, he had worked hard to get our family into nicer parts of Sacramento, hoping that better schools could make the difference in our lives that they did not in his when he was younger. My mother provided a different example, but one no less influential: a high school graduate who had her
first child (me) at nineteen, she pursued her interest in real estate, locking herself away in their bedroom to study for her license, a process of intense self-education and focused study that culminated in her success on the test and in the business.

Ours was not a literate household in the same way my friend Micky’s was. His father, who was a doctor, routinely sat at the kitchen table, where all could see him reading articles, journals, newspapers, contracts, and stock reports. Micky grew up surrounded by expectations that he would go to college, swathed in reminders of the importance of doing well in school, and supported in those endeavors early on by parents and siblings who offered resources, guidance, strategies, and whatever else was needed to help him succeed in school. In elementary school Mick focused on school, while John Russell and I planned out how many suckers we should buy after school to sell the next day, or while I used my budding writing skills to court girls, asking Kim Simmons if she wanted to “go study with me,” by which I meant “go steady.” Thus began the first of many two-week school relationships that would prepare me for the day, years later, when I would write the woman I would eventually marry, asking her to “stop by and visit me in Tunisia,” where I was serving in the Peace Corps; she was living in Japan at the time and I had not yet addressed my gross lack of geographical knowledge. No doubt Kim Simmons, reading my note of proposal, thought, as my wife did when she read my note in Japan, “He’s a nice guy. Not too bright, but nice.”

In many respects, this sums up the way I saw myself and others saw me during the high school years: nice and not too bright. I had no real sense of what it was all for, what it led to, how it might help me. Some ask me if I was just bored, felt uninspired or not challenged; but this just wasn’t the case. As my report card shows, I showed up and behaved well (thus getting good-citizenship grades) and rarely did my work. I had no real sense of how to do the work I was asked to complete; so much of it seemed to require skills and capacities that I lacked. When friends like Micky turned their work in, on time, done well, it just confirmed my own sense that I was not cut out for academic work. In biology, when assigned a big group project, I had no idea how to approach such work, leaving it to greater minds to tell me what to do.

No matter how badly I did in school, however, I was unable to see myself as incompetent for the simple fact that I had an area—tennis—that earned me others’ respect and established that I could do something well. The only problem was that during my junior year of high school, I grew restless and eventually stopped playing competitive tennis. This would be the logical place in this
abbreviated memoir to describe my academic awakening, to tell about the day when the clouds parted and I realized that everything I did to master tennis—repetitive drills to improve my skills, weightlifting and running to develop my strength and stamina, even reading books about the great tennis players to learn their secrets—could help me master school. Instead of turning my attention to school, however, I did what many kids do at that age: got my first girlfriend, got my driver’s license, got a job (at the Bubble Machine car wash, where my flawed mathematical skills earned me the weekly privilege of cleaning out the trough that collected the dirt from all the cars), hung out with my friends—and did not do my schoolwork. Occasionally I played at being a student, the most memorable time being when I signed up to take the PSAT. I did this because my buddies, who were all college-bound, were taking it. I did not prepare for it; in fact, the night before the test turned out to be an unfortunate and untimely rite of passage: getting drunk for the first time at a party. I was so hung over the morning of the PSAT that I had to run out of the cafeteria before even completing the personal information page.

Ironically, this crucial failure led to an important but brief awakening. After running out of the cafeteria and getting sick behind the woodshop building, I fell asleep under the tree outside my English teacher’s room. On that Saturday, while the good children of my high school tackled the PSAT and dreamt of their future, I slept until the sun woke me hours later. The test was over and everyone was long gone. Instead of going home, I did something that still amazes me: I went to my locker and retrieved *Bless the Beasts and the Children*, which I was supposed to be reading in English, then sat down under the tree outside Mr. Baxter’s class and read—and read, and read, as I never had before. Hours later, having lost myself in that book, I lifted my head up to realize it was getting on toward dinner and my parents had no idea where I was. After returning the book to my locker, I began the long walk home.

You already know from the opening that my conversion did not last long. By the end of my senior year, I was ranked 301st out of 365 students and had an academic GPA of 1.7. After graduating, I took a job working in a printing shop downtown, where I spent my days working alongside women who lived to smoke cigarettes, drink Coke, and talk about soap operas before going back to the table where we stood folding and stuffing envelopes with brochures for weekend vacations none of us would ever be able to afford. As soon as I got off work the first week, I headed south to visit my friend Micky at the University of the Pacific, where he was just beginning his freshman year. Driving back home after the weekend, thinking about what his life—and mine—was like, I decided it was time to
see what school had to offer, and so that Monday I headed straight to American River Community College when I clocked out, and registered for classes.

Over the course of the next year I began to realize how complex school is, how demanding academic study is. I had no idea how to take notes during lectures or what to do while I read. So I began to watch others. Everyone else had highlighters, so I got one. The problem was that I thought every sentence was important, so I highlighted them all. I would have been better off reading with a can of spray paint; honestly, I highlighted whole pages. Only later did I realize how useless this was. I began to ask others if I could see their notes, to learn from them what was essential to write down and how to organize it on the page. My mind was something like a balloon that was being stretched for the first time; thus it became more elastic, more flexible, more capacious. I began to understand how academic classes worked, to recognize the different demands they made on writers, readers, thinkers, and speakers. Still, it was a slow process, as evidenced by my professor’s response to my paper on *Hamlet*. He simply crossed out the front page and wrote in three-inch-high letters: “So what?!” Eventually I gathered up the courage to visit him during his office hours, something I hadn’t realized you could do. This conference led to the beginning of a relationship that would help sustain me through that first year, a relationship that taught me to ask for what I needed to succeed and to take the necessary risks to achieve that success. Throughout this process, I had to learn not only about sociology but sociology professors; not just economics but listening, note taking, and test taking. Gradually my investment began to show returns: I earned Cs on papers and tests and could learn from those mistakes so I could do better next time. By the time I transferred to a four-year college, where I found professors like Dr. Triplet—he could draw and write with both hands simultaneously on the overhead, while explaining the concepts out loud—I was ready, but only because people began to teach me the culture, language, and customs of this strange new country called School.

I still lacked a full understanding of the purpose of education. Having come from a family in which no one had ever graduated from college, I thought you went to college to make money, which is why I majored in economics—until a summer job with kids revealed that my gifts lay elsewhere. By the time I graduated from college, I was already teaching kids with developmental disabilities. Soon thereafter I joined the Peace Corps and went to teach similar kids in Tunisia, an experience that required me to learn to speak Arabic, but by that point I knew how I learned. More important, I knew that I could learn. Two years later, having created a small school in the back of a mosque for kids with
learning difficulties, I came home and completed the courses needed to become an English teacher, which is all I dreamt of doing after reading on my verandah in Tunisia those last two years.

The story ends where it began: students much like myself arriving at Castro Valley High School, where I began my teaching career, not knowing how to “do school,” most of them from families like mine, some from other countries, and all of them wanting the same thing—success in school and in life. On occasion, during heated discussions in class, a student might ask me about my own faith, about what I believe in; my answer to this question has always been the same: I believe in education.
Introduction

The Four Cs of Academic Success

I admire and relish the clarity of Morris’ model. It gives me such insight into people and achievements I’ve always respected. It gives me a framework even for my own efforts in the classroom and at home. Yet it doesn’t have the simplicity I need to explain success to students; moreover, it lacks the kind of handle I need when designing instructional objectives or teaching my classes. Ultimately there is no one model, no One Way; each of us needs to find our own, to put this process and these ideas into our own language. Basketball coach John Wooden, for example, evolved over his career a now-famous Pyramid of Success that he taught to his players, something that helped account for their success on the court as much as in life after they left college (Wooden’s pyramid may be viewed at www.coachwooden.com).

Explaining aspects of the pyramid, Wooden (1988) wrote:

Now at the heart of the pyramid is condition. I stressed this point with my players. I don’t mean physical condition only. You cannot attain and maintain physical condition unless you are morally and mentally conditioned. . . . I always told my players that our team condition depended on two factors—how hard they worked on the floor during practice and how well they behaved between practices. . . . At the very center—the heart of the structure—is skill. Skill, as it pertains to basketball, is the knowledge and ability quickly and properly to execute the fundamentals. Being able to do them is not enough. They must be done quickly. And being able to do them quickly isn’t enough either. They must be done quickly and precisely at the right time. You must learn to react properly, almost instinctively. (90)

What does basketball have to do with academic success? Think about the kids who struggle and those who excel in your classes and school in general. They have not only skills but a level of fluency and automaticity that allows them to work efficiently, something academic classes and state exams demand. We know kids who have the skills but lack the stamina or the kind of commitment Wooden demanded and witnessed in his players.

Wooden’s and Morris’ ideas, along with those of many others, helped me recognize the pattern of success, the traits common to students who were succeeding in school. Borrowing from Morris’ idea of Cs, I identified the Four Cs of Academic Success (see Figure 1.4).

Each of the following end-of-the-year letters illustrates various aspects of the Four Cs just outlined. All of these students were freshmen in my classes. Two of them were in my honors English class; the other two were enrolled in
THE FOUR Cs OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Commitment

Commitment describes the extent to which students care about the work and maintain consistency in their attempt to succeed.

Key aspects of commitment are:

- **Consistency:** Everyone can be great or make heroic efforts for a day or even a week; real, sustainable success in a class or on large assignments requires consistent hard work and quality conscience.
- **Effort:** Some students resist making a serious effort when they do not believe they can succeed. Without such effort, neither success nor improvement is possible.
- **Emotional investment:** Refers to how much students care about their success and the quality of their work on this assignment or performance. Directly related to perceived relevance and importance. This is what Jaime Escalante calls *ganas*, which means “the urge to succeed, to achieve, to grow.”
- **Faith:** Students must believe that the effort they make will eventually lead to the result or success they seek. Faith applies to a method or means by which they hope to achieve success.
- **Permission:** Students must give themselves permission to learn and work hard and others permission to teach and support them if they are to improve and succeed.

Content

Content refers to information or processes students must know to complete a task or succeed on an assignment in class. Domains include academic, social, procedural, cultural, vocational, ethical, and cognitive.

Content knowledge includes:

- **Conventions** related to documents, procedures, genres, or experiences.
- **Cultural reference points** not specifically related to the subject but necessary to understand the material, such as:
  - People
  - Events
  - Trends
  - Ideas
  - Dates
- **Discipline- or subject-specific matter** such as names, concepts, and terms.
- **Features, cues, or other signals** that convey meaning during a process or within a text.
- **Language** needed to complete or understand the task.
- **Procedures** used during the course of the task or assignment.

FIGURE 1.4. The Four Cs of Academic Success

May be copied for classroom use. School Smarts by Jim Burke (Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH); © 2004.
THE FOUR C's OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

**Competencies**

*Competencies* are those skills students need to be able to complete the assignment or succeed at some task.

Representative, general *competencies* include the ability to:

- *Communicate* ideas and information to complete and convey results of the work.
- *Evaluate* and *make decisions* based on information needed to complete the assignment or succeed at the task.
- *Generate* ideas, solutions, and interpretations that will lead to the successful completion of the task.
- *Learn* while completing the assignment so students can improve their performance on similar assignments in the future.
- *Manage* resources (time, people, and materials) needed to complete the task; refers also to the ability to govern oneself.
- *Teach* others how to complete certain tasks and understand key concepts.
- *Use* a range of tools and strategies to solve the problems they encounter.

**Capacity**

*Capacities* account for the quantifiable aspects of performance; students can have great skills but lack the capacity to fully employ those skills.

Primary *capacities* related to academic performance include:

- *Confidence* in their ideas, methods, skills, and overall abilities related to this task.
- *Dexterity*, which allows students, when needed, to do more than one task at the same time (aka multitasking).
- *Fluency* needed to handle problems or interpret ideas that vary from students’ past experience or learning.
- *Joy* one finds in doing the work well and in a way that satisfies that individual’s needs.
- *Memory*, so students can draw on useful background information or store information needed for subsequent tasks included in the assignment.
- *Resiliency* needed to persevere despite initial or periodic obstacles to success on the assignment or performance.
- *Speed* with which students can perform one or more tasks needed to complete the assignment or performance.
- *Stamina* required to maintain the requisite level of performance: includes physical and mental stamina.
my ACCESS class. All were successful, all ended the year having met not only academic but personal and social goals, which gave them each a sense of success that seemed a birthright to two and an elusive dream to the other two when they arrived in September. I asked them to write letters of advice to incoming freshmen to help them attain that same success.

Casey wrote:

Dear Freshman,

You are in for a very challenging and long year; although the advice I am going to give you in this letter will help you succeed in the days to come. In your 8th grade English class you probably breezed through the work with ease. Do not think you are going to breeze through this year’s work. Do not come in this class thinking you are going to get an easy A, but come to this class ready to listen, think, and work. If you do those things you will end up with an A.

After the first couple of months you will get used to the system and things will get a little easier for you.

To become a better student in the class you need to listen in class. I know it is hard to do, but if you have a friend in the class, try not to sit next to him/her. You will not be able to concentrate or listen to the teacher. If you are paying attention then everything will come easier to you. To get a better grade in the class just always do your homework because I know so many people who are getting Cs and Ds just because they do not do their homework. Probably one of the biggest setbacks of high school is drugs and alcohol. DO NOT get into that. There is no point and that stuff can really ruin your mind and mess up everything that was good about you.

Social life is a big thing to a high school student although many do not realize school is just as important. I believe that friends are everything and they get you through hard times, although school is the thing that will get you places. If there was a party on a Saturday night although you have not even started a project that was due on Monday, stay home and do the project. It will be tough to say no to the party although the feeling of finishing the project and having not to worry anymore is a great feeling. You can always be there for your friends although remember you always have to be there for your schoolwork.

The first year of high school is very fun and exciting but make sure you live it to the fullest because before you know it, the year is going to be over. If you think that things are too hard on you, just remember your family and friends will always be there for you. Remember that school is the most important and valuable thing you have so do not do things you think you will regret. Have a good freshman year and I guarantee if you follow my advice, your year will be one to remember.

Sincerely,

Casey Sturman
Mia Walker wrote:

Dear Freshmen Class of 2007,

On the first day of school, about a thousand papers will land on your desk in each class—material lists, rubrics, expectations, grading systems, rules, you name it. Beads of sweat will roll down your cheek, the air suddenly seeming heavier and hotter. Overwhelmed, you will then go to your counselor to be removed from honors classes because you realize this is too much for you. Your counselor will then tell you to give it two weeks, and if your mind does not change, then an adjustment can be negotiated. Trust me, your mind will change and honors will become your new home. Forget the papers stacked up on your desk, forget the essay on summer reading due in a week, forget the twenty-minute mile you just ran due to not running over the summer. It will get better and, by the end of the year, you will wonder how you ever survived without high school.

The keys to a successful year are organization and motivation. So many people told me that freshman year does not count for colleges or records, but they are completely wrong. Freshman year most certainly counts and brands you for the next four years. Shoot for a 4.0 GPA by completing all homework assignments, keeping your papers in order, remaining in control of all commitments, and remembering that high school is not all about social life. Have fun, but be a good student with clean and organized binders, and with a strong mental focus on what you are really here for—a good education.

Never take the easy way out. Do not skim books or articles; rather take helpful notes and do one hundred percent of every assignment. This way, tests will be much less stressful because you would have listened in class and processed information correctly. When taking tests, an answer will cross your mind instinctively and, usually, it is right. We all have semi-photographic memories, so by reading and concentrating thoroughly the answers will all store in your head. Study a sufficient amount, still, because information can be forgotten. Focusing and absorbing everything thrown at you in classes, however, will extremely help. By doing nothing less than one hundred percent in everything, the work will have gradually been done for you. You can never unlearn what you have learned, but you must learn it to begin with. The days when I did not completely pay attention in class turned out to be major losses, because I took steps backward in my progress and missed a lot of potentially important ideas. There exists nothing more frustrating than going home with complicated material explained in class, yet you failed to listen.

At the end of the year, I felt like a completely different person than the one who walked nervously into school the first day. I am more confident and less afraid of essays and projects. Everything became easy after I did it once. Just keep focused, surround yourself with awesome, supportive friends, and always do the hard tasks first. Then, the no-brainers will act as rewards and life will be less stressful.
Leave the inner eighth-grader inside you behind. You are in high school now and you must be more accepting and mutable. Freshman year is not the time to mess up, but to reinvent, discover, and learn from embarrassment.

Sincerely,
Mia Walker

Ben Pierce wrote:

My experience here at Burlingame has been one hard trip. I had come to this school with a 5th grade reading level and now, now I’m close to being at a 9th grade reading level. My grades at the beginning of the year was a 1.0 GPA. Now, well I have a 2.67. And none of my grades from the second semester would have been so much better than my first semester if it wasn’t for Mr. Burke. Mr. Burke not only taught me how to be a good student, but also taught me what it means to be a person. How to be a good person. If it weren’t for my reading every morning and the worksheets that we’ve done, I wouldn’t be as good as a test taker as I am now. I’m still learning of course, we as people will never stop learning, but Mr. Burke not only helped my intelligence but gave me a new mind to think with. I am not the same person I was a year ago. And if I was able to go back and change the mistakes in the past, I wouldn’t change them. If not for my failures and bad decisions during the year, I would not be the person I am today. And I like that person. I thank myself of course but Mr. Burke too for showing me the way to success. He showed me the way by opening up my mind, making me realize that without an education, you’ve got nothing. And not just reading did he help me with, there’s Algebra as well. When I was struggling in math, or didn’t know how to do something, I’d just walk across the hall, and I would be helped. If I were to take a test, say for World History, there was Mr. Burke, my teacher, to help me, to show me how and what to study, even tell us why to study. And now at the end of the school year, I don’t have to feel pressured about my report card.

Finally, Luba Kalinina wrote a speech titled “Believe in Yourself”:

It took me fourteen years to learn one of the biggest lessons of my life. Do you really think things are possible if you don’t think they are? If you have a goal in your life, you have to believe in yourself and not listen to others. Some people sit there and list what they can’t do. It’s not that they can’t do it, they don’t want to. You have to have a positive attitude about what you do because it’s your life you’re trying to improve.

Throughout my whole life I would try to learn new things like how to ride a bike or swim. I knew in my head that it’s possible and that I could do it if I tried harder. If I just gave up and said I can’t do it, maybe until this day I wouldn’t know how to do the basic things in life. I see people every day complaining how they can’t do things, and in my head I just think that they are lazy and are not even willing to try. Who says you have to be perfect and be able to do everything
on the first try. It takes time and effort to reach a stage in your life where you can say you learned something because you believed in yourself.

Before learning this lesson I was one of those people who thought I couldn't do things just because I can't. Then I realized that all I do is give up, and you will not get anywhere in life if you keep giving up. Other people will be ahead of you because they believed in themselves from the beginning. Sometimes when I have a problem doing something I just tell myself that I can do it. I want to succeed in life and I know no one is going to sit here and do it for me. I have to build up my own steps to reach that point. This year I got one step closer because I knew I could bring my grades up if I wanted to and I did. I feel very proud of myself, but feel bad for people who are stuck at the stage where I was.

As long as you believe in yourself, no matter what other people think or say, you can do anything. I don't want to be the person that I was because I want to succeed in what I do. With the encouragement of people who are very close to me and mainly myself I know I can be what I want to be.

As if to validate all that she said, the local newspaper included a photo of Luba at our end-of-the-year celebration at the neighborhood elementary school where she and others in my ACCESS program had been going all year to work with the kindergartners, who, thanks to kids like Luba, will no doubt feel more at home in the country called School than Luba or Ben did when they first arrived in September. (See Figure 1.5.)

FIGURE 1.5. © Burlingame Independent. Reprinted with permission.
READING: BHS program may soon be eliminated

Continued from 3A

When a group of teens walk in, the kindergartners wave their arms brightly. “Hi, Ben. Hi, Monica. Sit next to me, Greg,” they call out. As the seen tutors scoot into kiddie chairs, books in hand, banging their adolescent knees against the too-tall table tops, the 5-and-6-year-olds squeeze next to them and beam.

For Sue Glick, head of the Reading Buddies program, watching this kind of interaction is what makes her job so worthwhile. For the past seven years, Glick has built this program — which sends Burlington High School teens to local elementary schools to help the young students learn to read and write. She’s lovingly crafted it from the ground up.

But now, as the San Mateo Union High School District scrambles to find extra dollars amid the statewide budget crunch, Reading Buddies — and the entire community service learning program it’s a part of — is on the chopping block.

PAWS (People, Action, Work Service) was started in 1996 with special grant funding to help BHS students learn to serve in the wider community. Since then, Glick, also a BHS parent, has helped students organize food drives, fund-raisers, tutoring sessions and even a senior oral history project. But among the crown jewels has always been Reading Buddies.

“TIt’s an amazing program,” Glick said. “It takes a lot of coordination with the teachers to get them over here, but the kids and the teens both get so much out of it,” she said.

But the original three-year grant has long since run out. In order to keep the $29,000 program going, the principal and parents agreed to fund it for one year. After that, the district took it over. But with $1.1 million looking to cut $4.5 million from next year’s budget, special grant-launched programs like PAWS are facing the axe.

Now Glick fears her job and PAWS will come to an end unless BHS is able to find some alternate source of funding, such as a grant or private donor, to save the day. In the past few months, she’s sent out several grant applications, appealed to local clubs and recently also to the BHS parent group who saved the program once before.

Now, she’s keeping her fingers crossed that somebody will come through again.

“If we lose this, it’s really going to have an impact,” Glick said. “Not all kids learn by blackboard teaching — some of them really need something else to help them along.”

Eoghan, who has been teaching kindergarten for five years and participating in the Reading Buddies exchange for two agreed. “I would hate to lose it next year,” she said. “It really helps the kids. This way they get extra one-on-one attention that they can’t get during regular class time.”

On the other end of the spectrum, BHS English teacher Jim Burke said Reading Buddies enriches the lives of his students.

One of the first teachers to sign up for the program, Burke sends a small group of teens who have volunteered their study hall period twice a week to help Washington Elementary children learn to read.

“I’ve seen students grow so much in this program,” Burke said. “Some of them have never been around young children. They may not have siblings and getting to mentor these kids — to have the chance to be tutors and role models — is so good for them.”

One year, a junior he taught was so inspired that he and his classmates wrote a grant proposal — and raised $2,500 to buy books for their buddies.

Looking around the room, it’s easy to see that this kind of spirit will carry on as long as the program continues.

As one teacher, kindergartener Brennan Lynch carefully fills in his journal. Wearing a navy blue jersey, he bites down on his pencil and squints — trying to think of the right phrase. “How do you spell ‘because’?” he asks 15-year-old freshman Ben Pierce.

FIGURE 1.5. Continued
The Four Cs of Academic Success

Although some students show up at school as “intentional learners”—people who are already interested in doing whatever they need to do to learn academic subjects—they are the exception rather than the rule. Even if they are disposed to study, they probably need to learn how. But more fundamental than knowing how is developing a sense of oneself as a learner that makes it socially acceptable to engage in academic work.

—Magdalene Lampert, Teaching Problems and the Problems of Teaching

Personal Perspective

Sometimes we can best understand what we don’t yet grasp by examining what we do. Studying failure is self-defeating in many cases; we want to know what works, not what doesn’t. Researchers (Intrator 2003; Perry, Steele, and Hillard 2003; Marzano, Pickering, and Pollack 2001; Hrabowski, Maton, and Greif 1998; Langer 2002) focus more on who succeeds now and why, realizing, as Hrabowski et al. say, that much of the previous literature has focused on “deficiencies and weaknesses . . . instead of strengths. We believe that much can be gained by focusing on what produces success” (xii).
To understand my own academic experience and the Four Cs that follow, it seems most appropriate to study my most obvious and sustained success as a teenager: tennis. The Four Cs explain why I won, kept improving—and eventually traded my rackets for cameras, books, and, ultimately, the pen. The Cs also shed some light on why I was doing almost none of my schoolwork. The Four Cs do not, however, account for my passing grade in government, where someone—I swear it was not me!—stole Mr. Kernick’s gradebook and he had to ask each of us what our grade was. I thought hard and suggested mine was about a D which he dutifully recorded and gave me on my report card.

How to explain my success in tennis in a way that accounts for my failure in school? The Four Cs offer some clues. Commitment, the first C, is essential; without it, the others don’t matter. I committed myself to mastering tennis because I showed some talent, which allowed me to enjoy immediate satisfaction and subsequent rewards as a result of my efforts. Economists call such commitment economic behaviorism and use the term to explain people’s decisions; in other words, they find that we make decisions based on what rewards us, what pays off. So long as it pays off, we keep making the same decisions. We therefore commit ourselves to the extent that we believe we will succeed, that the investment will make a difference. Bill Bradley (1998) calls this the “virtuous circle”: “The harder you work, the sooner your skills improve. Then the virtuous circle takes over. As your skills grow, you get a rush of self-confidence, which spurs you to continue working, and your skills increase all the faster” (11). Writing on how the same virtuous circle applies to parents, Hrabowski et al. conclude: “What we do know is that the more attention we, as parents, give our [children], the higher our expectations of them, the more consistency in our approach to parenting, the greater our determination to work steadily with them, the greater the variety of educational and cultural experience we provide, the more likely they are to succeed” (1998, xi).

Not everyone accepts the premise that effort matters. Lauren Resnick (1999) observes, “Americans mostly assume that aptitude largely determines what people can learn in school, although they allow that hard work can compensate for lower doses of innate intelligence” (3). Resnick continues: “. . . what people believe about the nature of talent and intelligence—about what accounts for success and failure—is closely related to the amount and kind of effort they put forth in situations of learning or problem solving. [While some believe that intelligence is fixed, predetermined, and thus unchangeable,] others view ability as a repertoire of skills that is continuously expandable through one’s efforts. Intelligence is incremental. People get smart. When people think
this way, they tend to invest energy to learn something new or to increase their understanding and mastery” (4). This effectively sums up my experience in school and in life, beginning with tennis in high school.

My investment of time and energy—or, to use Tom Morris' term, my emotional commitment—led to success, which inspired me to persist so long as the efforts brought about success. This meant I was willing to do things—lift weights, run, jump rope—that I would not otherwise do in a million years; I did them because they delivered the success I sought. Hitting five hundred topspin backhands down the line until I could repeatedly knock over tennis ball cans proved effective, as measured by my performance in matches and tournaments. Running a couple of miles every day gave me the stamina and strength others lacked, which meant more wins and, ultimately, deeper commitment.

By the time I arrived at high school, I was ranked among the top tennis players in California and experienced myself as a very successful, competent person. School seemed to offer only humiliation and failure, or at least struggle, and a feeling of disorientation. So I ignored it and committed myself to the domain (tennis) in which I excelled, thus reinforcing my identity as a successful person. In those few classes—Spanish, photography, woodshop—where I distinguished myself, I showed obvious commitment; I challenged myself and felt satisfied when I met those challenges. But it never occurred to me that the same commitment I made to tennis would translate into academic success if I applied the same principles of discipline, humility, and faith in my own ability to learn what was difficult and at times seemed impossible.

Out of this athletic commitment grew the other Cs: content, competencies, and capacity. I developed my content knowledge by reading everything I could get my hands on—repeatedly!—about tennis, the masters of the game, even the tournaments, such as Wimbledon. It all fed my commitment, like so much coal into the engine. If a match was on television, I didn't just watch it; I studied it. I read all the magazines. I gleaned content (i.e., knowledge about the game and how to play it) from anyone, anywhere; it all linked itself to the commitment and identity I was developing as a successful tennis player. I acquired and improved my competencies through daily, focused practice under the guidance of my coaches—Dave Harris, then Deepal Wannaqawatte, then Don Lowe, and finally, the inimitable Ralph Freund—to whom I gave complete permission to shape me into the athlete I wanted so badly to be. I developed my competencies through systematic practice against a range of carefully chosen opponents and through a series of regimens that resulted in the honing of specific shots that I could execute at will in competitive matches around the state. Capacity, as I
mentioned already, resulted from my disciplined workout routine: running, lifting, jumping rope. Such rituals, along with frequent competition against better players, developed both my mental and my physical stamina, speed, and fluency. Out there under the 110-degree Sacramento sun, on courts 10 degrees hotter, I persevered, working with passion toward mastery of a game that eventually lost its magic as my commitment began to wane in the face of an obvious reality: I was good but would never be great. My identity of myself as a great tennis player gave way to mounting evidence that I was, within the world of my peers, average—capable of scaring, but never beating, the very top players.

Commitment is, in its rawest form, energy. Looking back on those years now, I see a seventeen-year-old boy who ignored school but began to wonder who and what he was if he wasn’t a tennis player. Photography arrived at just that moment, a random course selection perhaps inspired by my father’s love of photography, which provided an outlet for all that energy. If I couldn’t get the school’s prettiest girls to go out with me, I could at least get them to pose for me. An early award in a local contest for one of those photographs gave me the same sense of pride that knocking down those tennis ball cans had and ripping a winning cross-court backhand used to. Meanwhile, I was bombing Mr. Thorne’s econ class, failing Ken Kitchener’s English class, and making Mrs. Leach, my biology teacher, laugh just enough to ensure she would pass me.

On the rare occasions when I did study hard, I lacked any sense of commitment, due, as I remember it, to the feeling that it wouldn’t make any difference. I enrolled in an SAT-prep class, but only because my two best friends and some cute girls did; instead of learning word roots and analogies, I spent the time cracking jokes and distracting the group, whose members, my friends included, came from college-educated parents that had instilled in them from early on the importance of school and education, and thus a commitment to a future they knew college would be sure to provide. I had little sense of commitment to either the class or the test, as the experience lacked any context for me; I didn’t understand what it led to, so I celebrated my lack of content and competencies in ways that tested my friends’ capacity for patience and friendship. They were committed, as were the others, because they understood that this test had nothing to do with analogies and everything to do with choices, with the life college would help them create for themselves. I had yet to learn that my life was, in fact, something I could create.

Months later, I watched those same friends drive away to the colleges that had accepted them, while I began the slow process of awakening, developing in myself the sense of purpose, the budding commitment to something I could
not yet name. Later, when I stepped on to the campus at American River Junior College in Sacramento, I did so with a commitment to the only thing I understood at that point: the desire for a good life, a better life than the men and women I worked with at the printing shop had, a life made through choices that spawned in me—or would—a sense of deeper commitment and eventually an identity as someone who could “do school,” could learn, could become what I had never been: a successful student.
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