



Succoring: A Means of Student Success

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Natalie (name has been changed) walked across the graduation stage with tears streaming down her cheeks. She accepted her diploma and then came to me, her teacher. As she walked, I recalled the many challenges that she had overcome on this road to graduation.

“I didn’t think I could do this,” she whispered as I hugged her. “Somehow, my teachers must have believed in me. Thank you for being one of them.”

These tender moments are an even better part of teaching at BYU–Idaho than a paycheck.

President Clark Gilbert recently asked me about the skills faculty members can have that help struggling students like Natalie be successful. For me, it came down to one word: succor.

Doctrine and Covenants 81:15 explains what it means. “Wherefore, be faithful; stand in the office which I have appointed unto you; succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees.” Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said that succor “is used often in the scriptures to describe Christ’s care for and attention to us. It means literally ‘to run to’ (Holland, 1997).

It doesn’t mean coddling students or decreasing course rigor; instead, it involves helping them feel confident so that they can make themselves successful. Students who know they are cared about and believe they can accomplish the tasks of class often do.

For faculty members, I believe that to succor is to be aware, care, understand, and love. We are to “run to” and look after the students we teach. Our goal is for each one of them to be successful.

Over my years as a teacher, I have often been reminded of a favorite statement from the Talmud: “I have learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, and the most from my students.” Each of these groups has helped teach me how to succor.

FROM MY TEACHERS: TO SUCCOR IS TO BE AWARE

Upon being hired at Ricks College, I attended a “teacher tune-up course” that forever changed the way I view students. We studied the thoughts that education scholar Peter Frederick said may go through students’ minds the first day of class.

“I think students are asking these three questions, 1) Does the teacher like me? 2) Am I any good? 3) Will I make it?... The first emotions in the class are not about whether this faculty member knows his or her stuff [or whether] this [is] going to be a good course, but ‘In what ways does this teacher understand me,



and in what ways can this teacher connect this stuff to me [and] my issues?" (Frederick, 1993)

As teachers, we need to be aware of what might be going on in the minds of our students. To succor them is to help them answer the questions Frederick outlined. It doesn't mean coddling students or decreasing course rigor; instead, it involves helping them feel confident so that they can make themselves successful. Students who know they are cared about and believe they can accomplish the tasks of class often do.

My teachers have also taught me that it's important to help students understand why they have the assignments and to give students a plan for getting things done. I have tried to implement this information in the following ways:

ANSWER QUESTIONS TO EVERYONE One of my education professors said that teaching was to ask questions, to encourage questions, and then to listen. If one student asks a question, try to answer it not just for him or her but for all because others were probably wondering similar things. Make questions a natural part of class by frequently asking students whether they have questions and making class a safe place to ask them.

PROVIDE CLASS INFORMATION IN MULTIPLE FORMATS. I include my expectations for assignments in my course syllabi, and then each week, I outline them in greater detail on I-Learn. In class, I provide examples and often finish class with a summary or self-evaluation. T.A.'s can also send reminders via email or phone app.

LISTEN BEYOND THE QUESTION. The most important part of what my education professor shared is to listen, not only to the question itself but also to the need that is behind the question.

FROM MY COLLEAGUES: TO SUCCOR IS TO CARE

While serving as the dean of the College of Business and Communication, I read a colleague's evaluation in which a student

wrote, "This is a great teacher. Not only does he know my name, he also knows all kinds of things about me, like what I want to do after graduation. He cares about what and how I learn." Succoring means caring for each student as an individual, a process we begin in the first moments of class when students internally ask the question, "Does this teacher like me?"

KNOW THE ONE. I have learned from several colleagues' methods for memorizing student names each semester. Some make flashcards. Others use the digital version of the roster now available online. Many in the Business Management Department use name tents with names printed on both sides so that the faculty member and other students can learn each other's names.

ESTABLISH AN EARLY FOUNDATION. I have found interviewing each student during the first two weeks of the semester to be helpful. These appointments help students know where my office is, which makes future visits less intimidating. I use the meetings to see what questions they have and how I can help. I also interview students the last week of class to discuss what they have learned.

CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE STUDENTS FEEL COMFORTABLE. I know of a colleague who meets with her students at the Crossroads instead of in her office. They know the times she will be there, and she feels it is more convenient and comfortable. The Math Department invested in a popcorn machine where aroma of fresh popcorn invite students to come for help.

HAVE TIME FOR THE ONE. Many in the English Department offer one-on-one editing sessions in their offices that are tailored to the individual and his or her needs. Other departments have expeditions or field trips where students can also connect more personally with their teachers.

LET THEM TEACH ONE ANOTHER. While on an internship expedition, I asked a colleague and business owner what we should teach our students so that they would be more competitive in their field of interest. The response was “Teach them to work as a team.” Group work can build friendships and teach students how to collaborate. I like to see students bond in their groups and as a class. I challenge them to go out of their way to see students from class outside of class.

CREATE A HOLISTIC EDUCATION. My colleagues have taught me to look beyond what a student needs now and remember to provide tools for the future. Students should learn how to succor their own needs by directing them to other resources: the Financial Aid office, the Counseling Center, the Tutoring Center, the Presentation Practice center, or Academic Advising. Give students the map to a clear pathway toward developing themselves as well-rounded people.

FROM MY STUDENTS: TO SUCCOR IS TO UNDERSTAND

In my student interviews, I ask, “What can I do as your teacher to help you as a student learn better?” Some are shocked at first, but I have found that students give great ideas. These ideas given throughout the semester provide opportunities for improved teaching that I might have missed had I not listened to my students’ suggestions. These examples of useful feedback illustrates how my seeking to understand their perspective has helped me develop my courses to be more effective:

TAKE SUGGESTIONS ON TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA. Their ideas have made my I-Learn classroom platform more user friendly. Students have shown me different ways that a course calendar and Google documents can help them. One student created a private Facebook page where class members could upload videos introducing themselves.

LET THEM STEP UP. In a three-hour evening class, students suggested taking a break and having a snack each class. It has since become a tradition, and we assign a “snack person” to our groups. We all look forward to a break where students sharing their culinary skills, new and savory treats, and service to one another through a simple, personal contribution.

CREATE A TEAM. In the past, I assigned students to read a series of articles. However, one student suggested that they each read one and then summarize it for the rest of the class. This has become a great assignment for synthesizing information and using presentation skills. I appreciate when students look out for one another and work together.



REFLECT. I heard a student in a hall mention that he had no idea why they were doing a particular assignment. Today, weekly reflection essays are a part of each course I teach so that students have the opportunity to understand the “why” behind each assignment and what it has taught them.

ARRIVE EARLY AND LINGER. Students have told me that they like to come early or stay after classes when they have concerns. I try to be in the classroom at least 10 minutes before we begin, and I always linger after it is over in case a question arises or students need help.

FROM THE SAVIOR: TO SUCCOR IS TO LOVE

I learned about this principle from the Savior, who exemplified love through teaching, through simple parables, through healing, and through His time. Elder Holland said that sometimes the only thing we can do as teachers is to love our students, “and if you love them today, maybe you can teach them tomorrow.” (Holland, 2007)

LEAVE THEM WITH LOVE. The Savior is the greatest Teacher of succoring. Because of His example I try to never let my students leave a course without knowing that I am aware, that I care, and that I understand and love them. I try to share those things at their interviews, in grading their assignments, in class discussions, and in casual conversations.

REALIZE GROWTH. I hold the final exams for my courses at my home. We eat and talk about how people changed during the semester, our favorite days of class, the most important lessons they learned, and things I should consider changing for future semesters. It is a time of introspection and gratitude. The students share ideas that help me be a better teacher. In many ways, they succor me so that I learn to teach more as the Savior would. As I look around my home while they are there, I realize these wonderful people that I’ve spent the semester learning with are no longer just my students; they have become my friends.

I hope I will always continue learning from the examples of my teachers, colleagues, students, and the Savior how to succor those that I have stewardship to teach. In the end, all students should know that their teacher believes in them, and in turn, they will learn how to believe in themselves.

References

- Holland, Jeffrey. “Come Unto Me,” CES Fireside for Young Adults. Mar 1997.
- Frederick, Peter. Student of Process, 1993, p. 11.
- Holland, Jeffrey. Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting: Teaching and Learning, Feb 2007.

