**Grit: A Powerful Tool for Student Success**

Psychologists have found that one of the most important factors related to success in college is grit. What is grit? Grit is defined as a combination of perseverance and passion. Psychologist Angela Duckworth studied students who were successful at the United States Military Academy at West Point, one of the most selective colleges in the country.7 Even though only the top students are admitted, 20% of these students drop out before graduation. Most of the drop outs leave during the first two months of college. What is the difference between those who are successful and those who drop out? **Those who are successful have a “never give up” attitude, or grit**. They are constantly tested with tasks that challenge their skills and are successful because they have grit, and not because of superior academic or athletic ability. The successful students can keep going through challenges and even failure.

Grit includes the element of passion, or the drive to constantly improve. Successful students have a goal or vision of the future and they strive to achieve it. Their goals are achievable because they match their interests and personal strengths. For this reason, having goals that match your personal strengths and interests is essential to your success. These goals give you the motivation and grit to continue when the going gets tough. Some of you have clear goals for the future while others are re-evaluating or beginning to work on them. The material in the following chapters helps you to think about your interests and personal strengths to set goals for the future and increase the motivation to complete your education.

**What is more important, talent or grit?** We have traditionally assumed that talent or intelligence is the key to success. In fact, there is a bias in society in which people assume that success is the result of talent. We look at successful people, admire their talent, and assume that their unusual talent made them successful. However, “our talent is one thing. What we do with it is quite another.”8 The most talented individuals are not always the most successful. The great philosopher Nietzsche proposed that we think of gifted individuals as people who worked hard to become geniuses.

**How do famous people achieve excellence?** Psychologists have studied famous musicians, athletes, scientists, and others to find out what makes them successful. Rather than talent, the characteristic connected to success is **effortful training.** Effortful training involves identifying a goal that challenges your skills, finding your weaknesses, and working to improve them one small step at a time. Life is easier if you can establish a habit or daily ritual of effortful practice. For example, you can make it a habit of exercising first thing in the morning. You can make a habit of studying at a certain time and place each day. If you are in the habit of doing something, you don’t have to think about it; you just do it.

It is estimated that it takes about 10,000 hours to learn a complex skill.9 The practice is often difficult and boring, but motivated individuals persist by keeping in mind what they want to accomplish. Here are some examples of effortful practice:

* Do you want to become an NBA superstar? Superstars such as Kobe Bryant, Lebron James, and James Hardin spend at least five hours a day for seven days a week practicing.10
* Do you want to be an all pro football player? Tom Brady spends 16 hours a day practicing, viewing films, and preparing for meetings before a Super Bowl game.11
* Do you want to become an Olympic gold medalist swimmer? Michael Phelps swims 50 miles a week. He also trains for 5-6 hours a day for six days a week.12
* Do you want to become a world-famous violinist? Itzhak Perlman suggests that students spend four to five hours of effortful practicing each day.13

These successful musicians and athletes have true grit and practice until their performance becomes a habit. The key idea is that learning complex skills is challenging, takes time, and is accomplished through effortful practice one small step at a time.



**How does grit apply to college students?** To be successful in college, it is important to spend a significant amount of time on your studies. A common rule is to spend two hours a week for each unit enrolled. For example, a three-unit course would require 3 hours a week in class and 6 hours outside of class reading and studying. Of course, the time required varies with the difficulty of the subject and your prior knowledge. In math courses, students may need to spend 10 hours per week studying and practicing problems to be successful. Start spending time studying from the very beginning. Remember that most dropouts happen early in the semester as students quickly realize that they are too behind to catch up.

Most importantly, don’t give up! It is important to understand that college is challenging and requires a great deal of effort to be successful. Because college is difficult, there may be times that you may struggle or even receive a failing grade. Maintain a positive attitude, spend more time on the subject, and ask for help. Seek out tutoring or see your college professor during office hours if you need extra help. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. College professors generally respect students who are interested enough in their field of expertise to ask for help. Colleges set up programs such as tutoring to help students be successful.

**Are there times when it is better to give up?** Don’t give up your important goals just because you think they are difficult. However, if you realize that the goals you have set for yourself do not match your interests, it is better to set new goals and follow a different path. Prioritize how you spend your time so that you are spending it on what is most important. If you realize that the time spent on your current goal is a distraction to accomplishing more important goals, then it is better to change directions. There may be times when you must take courses that you don’t consider interesting to complete your long-term goal of a college degree. In this case, it is best to think about your long-term goal of graduating from college, be gritty, and persevere.

**How can you develop grit?** The good news is that grit is related to the growth mindset and can be learned. Here are three steps for learning grit:

1. The first step in learning grit is finding interest. Become aware of what you enjoy doing and follow your interests. Chapter 3 in this textbook helps you to explore your interests and values.
2. Invest your time in practice. Find your weaknesses and strive to improve them. Practice frequently and work one small step at a time.
3. Find your purpose. One of the most difficult questions you may ask yourself is, “What is my purpose in life?” To answer this important question, ask yourself why your work is important and how it will help others. Knowing about your purpose helps you to maintain interest, invest your time in practice, and become passionate about your work.14

Activity: How Gritty Are You?

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly  Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly  Disagree |
| I have a “never give up” attitude. | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| I spend a significant amount of time studying each week. | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| A failing grade shows a lack of intelligence | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Failure is an opportunity to figure out what went wrong and fix it. | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| I believe that the most talented and intelligent people will become the most successful. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| When work is challenging, I tend to get discouraged and lose interest. | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| I have a good awareness of my interests and what I enjoy doing. | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| I can write a statement about what is my purpose in life. | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| I have goals in life and spend my time on what is most important. | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| I would describe myself as a person who has grit. | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |

Write your total points here: \_\_\_\_\_

25-30 Your grittiness will help you to be successful in college, careers, and life.

20-24 You have many qualities of a gritty person, but could benefit from thinking more  
 about how to increase your grit.   
15-19 You have some qualities of a gritty person, but would benefit from re-reading  
 the information about grit and thinking about how you can use this material to  
 increase your success.   
14 or less Re-read the material on grit and think about how you can apply it to   
 improve your success in college.