

Opinion: Peer pressure can be a positive

By Philip Hoy

In every classroom, there is a kind of tipping point when the unmotivated students either get pulled along by the high achievers, or the unmotivated students hold the high achievers back.

I see this all the time teaching English at Coachella Valley High School in Southern California's Inland Empire. Most of my students come from low-income households, have had to learn English as a second language, and hope to be the first in their families to go to college. They've been told since they were in elementary school that higher education is their ticket to a better life, and many have come to believe this.

But high school is a big place, full of distractions. For many, school becomes about socializing, partying and striving to fit in. Other students are stressed by balancing school with a relationship, by responsibilities at home, or by a part-time job. Added to these pressures is the anxiety caused by the daunting cost of higher education. As a result of all these pressures – and low expectations – too few students are truly prepared for college by the time they graduate.

One way to keep our students focused on college is to make them aware of advanced placement courses as early as possible. Currently, we offer 14 AP courses at Coachella Valley High, from calculus to Spanish literature. While I know that our very highest achievers are going to take these courses and succeed, I believe that for the majority of students, the cultural mindset of their classmates is just as important as the educator in the front of the classroom. The sooner students with college ambitions take such courses the better

they'll be prepared for the rigors of college. And the more we can grow the AP program at our school, the more students will share goals and values – and this high-achieving mindset.

So this last November we formed the Coachella Valley High School Advanced Placement Club to support AP and future AP students and encourage more people to take these classes. How we would do this, I wasn't quite sure at first, but I agreed to be the advisor anyway. Maybe we could use my room as a study hall after school. Maybe club members would want to raise money for college field trips. Maybe we could all get T-shirts.

Mostly seniors and juniors – along with a few sophomores – packed into my classroom after school for our first meeting. We elected officers, approved our constitution, and formed our first committees: fundraising, T-shirts, and freshman awareness. We decided to meet on a weekly basis and then adjourned so that the committees could meet separately to discuss ideas and plans.

And then this wonderful thing happened. About 20 of the students who'd stayed for the freshman awareness committee gathered in a rough circle of chairs. Itcelia, a senior in my AP English literature class and our newly elected vice president, asked, "What do you know now that you wish someone had told you as a freshman?"

And then they all started sharing. I sat at my desk in the back of the room and just listened. They discussed the benefits of honors and AP classes, the importance of homework and time management, and the need to balance academics with activities, clubs, sports, community service, and so on. It was amazing. Here was a cross section of our school's highest achievers made up of a diversity of personality types and interests – not just the "nerd herd" but the drama kids, the artists, the athletes, the cheerleaders, the class officers, and students from career academies – building a master plan

for high school success.

They decided to bring that plan to the freshmen themselves. By the next meeting, Itcelia had contacted an administrator and gotten freshman teachers' permission to give presentations in their classrooms. She and the other freshman awareness committee members created a PowerPoint slideshow. Club members volunteered to present based on which of their own classes they could afford to miss.

After the presentations, the students gathered to debrief. Some of them had spoken to the freshmen about resisting the pressure to dumb down in order to stay popular, or to get someone to like you. Itcelia was thrilled that during one of her presentations a freshman girl had shared that she liked a boy until she found out he didn't know the difference between you and you're. "Smart is the new sexy," someone in the group said, defining the moment and themselves.

Surprisingly, one of the groups met resistance from a teacher who thought they were being unrealistic in encouraging students to take as many AP classes as possible. But Itcelia, presently enrolled in four AP classes, active in several clubs and community service projects, and in rehearsals for the school's production of "Grease", passionately disagreed. She remembered that when she was a freshman, some upperclassmen tried to discourage her from taking AP classes, saying they were too demanding and wouldn't leave room for anything else.

"But that just isn't true," she said. "It's all about setting priorities and managing your time."

The success of the presentations inspired me to create a club website with links to information on AP courses, colleges, careers, admission tests, financial aid, and scholarships.

The site also includes a weekly blog featuring essays from teachers, counselors, alumni, community professionals, and fellow students. Many wrote about their own paths to college

and the fears and obstacles they had to overcome, and others about the importance of reading or the value of stories in the community. One student wrote about the need for academic rivalries and another published a poem on immigration. We gave away T-shirts that display our blog address alongside inspirational quotes from authors and civil rights leaders or witty slogans like, "You had me at your proper use of you're." We got more freshmen to join the club, and at meetings we had great discussions that often began with questions for seniors from underclassmen, particularly juniors looking ahead at their last year of high school.

This next year, with new seniors and a clearer sense of direction, we will build on these successes. We want to increase membership, raise money for college field trips, and encourage more students to interact with and write for our blog.

High school peer pressure can work in positive as well as negative ways, and individual success is often the result of a community of support. With the help of student leaders like Itcelia, who, by the way, graduated as class salutatorian and will attend UC Berkeley in the fall, I believe we can continue to tip the scales of academic motivation in the right direction.

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