

Student Vignette

Madeline Dougherty

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

In 2008, I began an 18-month STEM-centered vocational school. Female students were not rare, but we were not common either. Throughout the school, students were given constant written feedback in the form of grade sheets. My grades were consistent but below average, and the comments on my grade sheets tended to focus on areas where I could improve. The instructors offered useful, constructive criticism but almost no praise, even when I thought something had gone well. As a result, I began to believe that I was a terrible student; I had stacks of grade sheets to confirm my beliefs.

The more I listened to other students brag about their current aptitude and imagine their future post-graduation success, the more I felt that I did not belong in this community. Those who were most successful seemed to be large, loud, type-A personality men, not me. As the school continued, I learned to work harder and study smarter, but my grades continued to be below average. In fact, some of my worst grades came at the end of the course in areas where I knew I would be spending the majority of my professional career. However, despite my lack of confidence, I graduated with my peers and continued into work experience.

During the first two years of work experience, we continued to receive frequent written evaluations on our abilities. The grades themselves were pass/fail, so everyone received more or less the same score, but the comments continued as before: “Needs to improve . . .,” “Unable to . . .,” “Failed to . . .” Again, instructors gave respectful, constructive criticism but very few positive comments. After nearly two years, I approached the evaluation for a major qualification. Based on the written feedback I had received, I was so convinced of my ineptitude that I considered withdrawing from the qualification process. After one particularly difficult day, I began to mentally prepare myself to talk to my boss about declining the final evaluation. Luckily, my boss got to me first. Looking back, I think he had some idea of what was going through my head because he pulled me into his office, looked me straight in the eye, and said, “You know you’re really good at this, right?” I was flabbergasted. I had no idea. I knew I was working incredibly hard, but I felt that was the effort required to barely keep up with my peers. I didn’t know I had gone from below average to excelling because *no one ever told me*. Even as I improved, my graded comments continued to be the same lines of “Fix this. . .,” “Work on that. . .” After that conversation with my boss, I started to feel as if I belonged in my position in ways that I never had before. It only took one person telling me *Yes, you are good enough* for me to see myself as an equal member of the workforce.

Years later, I returned to the school as an instructor. More experienced instructors told me, “Be the instructor you wished you’d had.” I adapted my teaching strategy in many ways to abide by that advice, but one major technique was to tell students when they were doing well. I never blew smoke; I was always honest, but I was very careful to give credit where credit was due. I praised students verbally, and I wrote it down on their grade sheets. Of course, I provided the same constructive feedback that I had received, but if a student excelled, I made sure they knew it and had a reminder to read amongst all the generally negative written feedback. When I started training new instructors, I passed the technique along as a best practice. I taught new instructors that part of teaching is building confidence and belonging. I told them one of the easiest ways to do that is to tell the students when they are doing well and *write it down* so they can go back to it when their confidence starts to slip.