

Accentuating the Positive Revisited

Dear Sue,
Records show that you have
not missed any classes since
the first test. Hope you keep up
the good attendance.

RENEE NEELY AND PHYLLIS MUSGROVE

Every so often a journal article strikes a responsive chord and really sets us to thinking. Sometimes it even inspires us to action. "Our School's Campaign to Accentuate the Positive," by James H. Van-Seiver [October 1979] was action-provoking!

The article describes a high school's program to overcome education's current bad press. The school uses radio and newspaper media to disseminate positive messages. They also recognize accomplishments of the "silent majority" of good-citizen students by sending complimentary postcards and letters to their homes. Needless to say, the program receives very enthusiastic responses from the community.

We wondered how university students would respond to a campaign of positive comments from their professors, so we borrowed the postcard idea and in January began writing messages to students. The results? Fascinating!

We decided to target students enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course. After each of the first three major tests, we identified students who had an A or B on the test or who had not missed any classes since

the previous test. In addition, we found students who had a 15-point or larger gain from the first to the third test.

Then the instructor sent postcards with a handwritten message to students who met the criteria. The messages were brief, such as "Dear John, Congratulations on making an A on the first test. Keep up the good work!" or "Dear Sue, Records show that you have not missed any classes since the first test. Hope you keep up the good attendance." Cards were mailed one to five days after the test.

The psychology course included a total of 146 students. Fifty-five students received cards after the first test, 73 after the second, and 64 after the third.

Responses to the cards were interesting. First of all, recipients were surprised that a professor had taken time to send them a personal message. Their comments indicated that they valued the interest shown in them as people and the expression of care about their performance.

And do you know what? We professors also felt a nice warm tingle when our students brought their postcards to class, compared messages, acknowledged that it took a lot of time to write the cards, smiled broadly when we looked their way, and dropped by the office for an unexpected visit. Accentuating the positive is a two-way street! ■

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