

If Students Had This One Trait, They Could Be Successful

Keith W. Sun // University of Cincinnati

Abstract

Not all students shine equally when climbing the professional ladder of success. There is a particular trait that is underneath a lot of the soft skills and professionalism students learn inside and outside the classroom. Humility leads to success. Through helpful examples, professional illustrations, and practical tips for educators, this article will explore humility in its multiple dimensions to help readers discern when humility is present and celebrate its fruits as students demonstrate them.

I come across a lot of students. It helps working in the Lindner Career Services Center at the University of Cincinnati. We teach, coach, and counsel students towards career success for internships and co-ops, especially full-time employment upon graduation. Including both individual and drop-in coaching appointments, I see more than 500 students annually. I teach more than 180 students every school year in undergraduate Career Success Strategies courses. Suffice it to say, there are a lot of students that I interact with, who come and go through the office door and the classroom.

Some students are more successful than others in the present, or will be in the near future. I define success as someone who has developed strong skills and relational connections that can be leveraged towards professional or personal accomplishment with enduring life satisfaction.

What distinguishes these students from the rest? What is one trait that endears them to my memory and gives me confidence in their personal and professional lives?

Is it technical skills? No.

Is it a great smile on their face? Nope.

Is it straight A's? Not even.

The one trait that makes students successful is humility.

Why do I say that? Here's how humility looks to me and why it gives me such confidence in students' future success from a career services standpoint:

- Humility means you sometimes take on jobs and tasks that are less than ideal in order to achieve the flashier, bigger dream goals.
- Humility means you adopt a learning posture when interacting with established business professionals.

- Humility means seeking to engage productively in professionalism classes, even when you have come across the content before.
- Humility means you are not afraid to ask questions when you need help, instead of doing things on your own and making potentially disastrous mistakes.
- Humility means you take initiative to help other students/peers with academic or work responsibilities through mentorship and service, even when there's no immediate benefit to yourself.
- Humility means being slow to blame others for mistakes and unfortunate circumstances, and taking responsibility for your actions in order to solve problems and offer solutions.
- Humility means giving the person in front of you the proper attention, undistracted by your cell phone, tablet, or computer, in order to produce a true human interaction.
- Humility means responding in a timely manner to faculty, staff, employers, professionals, and peers out of respect for their time and effort in contacting you.
- Humility means not being afraid to try new things and make mistakes in order to learn from them, because you realize you don't know everything and need to be challenged.
- Humility means looking at the person in the mirror and remembering how your accomplishments to date are not just because of your own sweat and talent, but also because of the time and money invested by friends, families, mentors, teachers, and neighborly strangers.
- Humility means not just having an ambition to achieve, but an ambition to do good and serve others.

Adam is a fourth-year business student at the University of Cincinnati. He studies Operations Management and transferred into the business college as a sophomore from a different university. Because he had to pay his way through college, Adam worked two jobs while enrolled as a full-time student. He served as a cashier at a major international supermarket, and simultaneously worked a second shift in a warehouse distribution center as a fulfillment associate. I've had the opportunity to teach Adam in a class as well as meet with him individually on his career goals. I've never found Adam on his cell phone or tablet, distracted from the people around him, even while waiting to see me. He always spoke about the valuable skills he learned in his jobs, despite not having experienced an internship like many of his peers. Adam never complained and effusively expressed his gratitude to me and any other college employee he came across. When in my morning class, other students would doze off and overlook the importance of the lecture content. Adam never wavered in being prepared and having the willingness to ask questions, without giving others any hint that he was sleep-deprived and stressed from the long hours at work.

His humility was evident, and Adam recently secured two offers for internships working in facilities management and automotive manufacturing.

This is what humility can lead to:

- A professor or supervisor's enthusiasm in writing your recommendation letter
- A desire from employers to hire you to join their workplace culture
- An increased sense of confidence in the face of difficulties

- A deeper level of friendship with others
- A freedom from envying the successes of others
- An increased ease in working together with those who are unlike you
- An improved performance in your classes and on exams and projects
- An integrity that earns trust and convinces supervisors that you can handle important responsibilities

Mallory is a third-year business student at the University of Cincinnati. She studies Marketing and Entrepreneurship as her declared majors, after having transferred into the business college as a sophomore from a liberal arts program on campus. Mallory is also a student-athlete who won a full-tuition scholarship to run track and cross-country here at UC. Having gotten to know Mallory through teaching her in class, Mallory approached me to introduce herself and to express concern about a potential conflict between her track meets and our class meeting times. Over the course of the semester, she consistently stood out as one who raised her hand in every awkward silence. Though Mallory was an accomplished athlete, she never flaunted any kind of ego, entitlement, disrespect, or disengagement. She willingly came to her career coach for multiple individual appointments, always asking for extra ways to improve on her resume and job search. Mallory ultimately threw her resume in to apply for a Teaching Assistant position for the Career Success Strategies undergraduate course. After competing against other candidates who were all honors students, she became the only non-honors student to obtain a TA position. Mallory easily won the respect of my colleagues who interviewed her because she communicated how much she benefited from the course and how she wanted

to give back to those who were less informed or less concerned about their career goals.

In her humility, Mallory maintained poise in the face of managing a grueling training schedule with full-time classes. Her teammates nominated her at the end of the season to be the next school year's Team Captain. Mallory did not concern herself with how she was viewed when she asked questions or sat in a group of polished honors students. She chose not to stop calling me "Professor," out of respect, even though I made it clear to students that I prefer to be addressed on a first-name basis.

How can we as educators celebrate and teach humility? There are multiple possibilities and the context of each university may inform different practices. However, here are a few suggestions:

First, refine the university's admissions process for students in order to emphasize humility factors – overcoming difficult challenges, volunteering with the socially overlooked or forgotten, enthusiastically giving credit to others more than themselves, or having a strong network of mentors.

Second, include more assignments that require students to reflect on and assess mistakes they've made, failures they've experienced, and risks that didn't turn out the way they hoped. Let students dig deeply into what they've learned and what good outcomes came from experiencing what they did.

Third, get rid of self-nominations for any awards given to students for exemplary service or leadership. If someone is truly humble, they won't be thinking of themselves, but thinking of others. Let the award reflect others' praise and not their own.

Fourth, encourage mentorship wherever possible. The more students realize they don't know as much as they suppose, the less inflated an ego they will possess.

Lastly, celebrate professors and campus staff who are willing to help with tasks and projects that would be considered beneath their pay grade. For example, recognize a powerful educational administrator who willingly gives up a reserved parking spot for a day so that a student with a long commute can make it to class on time. If students see that strong acknowledgment is given to those who occasionally give up their privileges for the benefit of others, the culture changes and humility can be contagious.

A wise proverb once said:

“Pride leads to destruction, but humility leads to honor.” (*Contemporary English Version*, Proverbs 18:12)

My hope is that we honor the students who have humility, and that there may be more students who "get it" and build humility into their lives.

References

Contemporary English Version. Bible Gateway, www.biblegateway.com. Accessed March 30, 2019.