

# A crooked path to success

**Becoming a successful student, particularly for those who have fallen behind, requires motivation, engagement with school, and authentic ownership of one's own education.**

Who would not want their children to be straight-A students? For parents and teachers, the implications of having youngsters earn near-perfect grades are quite clear. Straight-A elementary and middle school students commonly have more access to learning and educational enrichment opportunities as they move into high school. That includes Advanced Placement courses, magnet school selections, and school leadership posts. If this pattern of success continues through high school, colleges across the country will certainly be interested in welcoming them as students. For straight-A or nearly straight-A students, schools know quite clearly what to do: Provide highly challenging courses and rich extracurricular opportunities, and things should work out just fine. These long-standing high achievers tend to be motivated and equipped to build on their accomplishments each step of the way.

What about those students who don't possess such academic success though they have the potential for similar accomplishments under different circumstances? How might they get on track after falling behind their straight-A peers,

potentially for years on end?

Consider the Crooked-A students. These are students with nonlinear academic success. They are students whose academic pathways might include early school failure or substantial underachievement. They are students who might have suffered profound losses that derailed them from school success for long periods of time. They are students who might have done well by their own standards when doing so means earning above-average grades in below-average schools. They emerge at some point as top performers although their early histories wouldn't have predicted such outcomes.

## The three initiatives

The data for this article come from three educational initiatives explicitly designed to alter various aspects of high school in order to boost student engagement and achievement.

The **Early College High School** ([www.earlycolleges.org](http://www.earlycolleges.org)) initiative is designed to help lower-income and minority students earn as much as an associate's degree while completing their high school diploma.



Its goal is to assist all students in becoming high-level performers who can succeed in college even if they begin high school two or more years behind grade level. These youth often want to pursue careers that require a college education but lack the preparation to succeed in college because they don't know what preparation entails or because they aren't positioned to readily access such preparation even if they know about it. The ECHS initiative provides intensive advisories and exposure to college campuses and college academic norms from the 9th grade onward. Students have access to college courses through articulation agreements with local higher education partners and by providing enriched college-level courses on the high school campus.

The **Second Chance High School Study** includes alternative schools created to help struggling and often failing students earn their high school diplomas (Nakkula & Harris, 2010). A good number of students in the three second-chance schools in the study were experiencing high levels of academic success for the first time in their school careers

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or for the first time since early elementary school. As such, many of these students were now aiming toward college and professional careers, recognizing that a high school diploma would be inadequate for the lives they hoped to live. These students often had histories of educational failure and, in many cases, involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Students at the **Facing History School in New York City** run the gamut from youth whose families are simply seeking the next stop on their children's passage through the city's massive school system to those who know of the school's civic engagement and social justice focus. Whatever brings students to the school, the larger student body is representative of the average pool of incoming New York 9th graders. On average, they're neither the high achievers who attend the city's competitive magnet schools, nor students with extensive histories of failure. The Facing History School is built around the mission of Facing History and Ourselves ([www.facing.org](http://www.facing.org)), the educational nonprofit organization that uses anti-bias education, civic engagement, and social justice strategies to support teacher development in areas such as history, literature, and social science. The Crooked-A students in this school tend to be those who have become inspired by the school's focus and hope to pursue careers that will allow them to act on the civic engagement and social justice mission.

My colleagues and I used

two primary lenses — *academic identity development* and *student-centered learning* — to examine the data from these initiatives. These lenses allow us to see how Crooked-A students view themselves in relation to their performance. Academic identity development refers to the ways in which students see themselves as formal learners over time. Student-centered learning provides a framework for examining the contributions of motivation, engagement, and student voice to academic identity development (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

### **The pathway linking motivational attitudes and active engagement becomes a busy two-way street over time.**

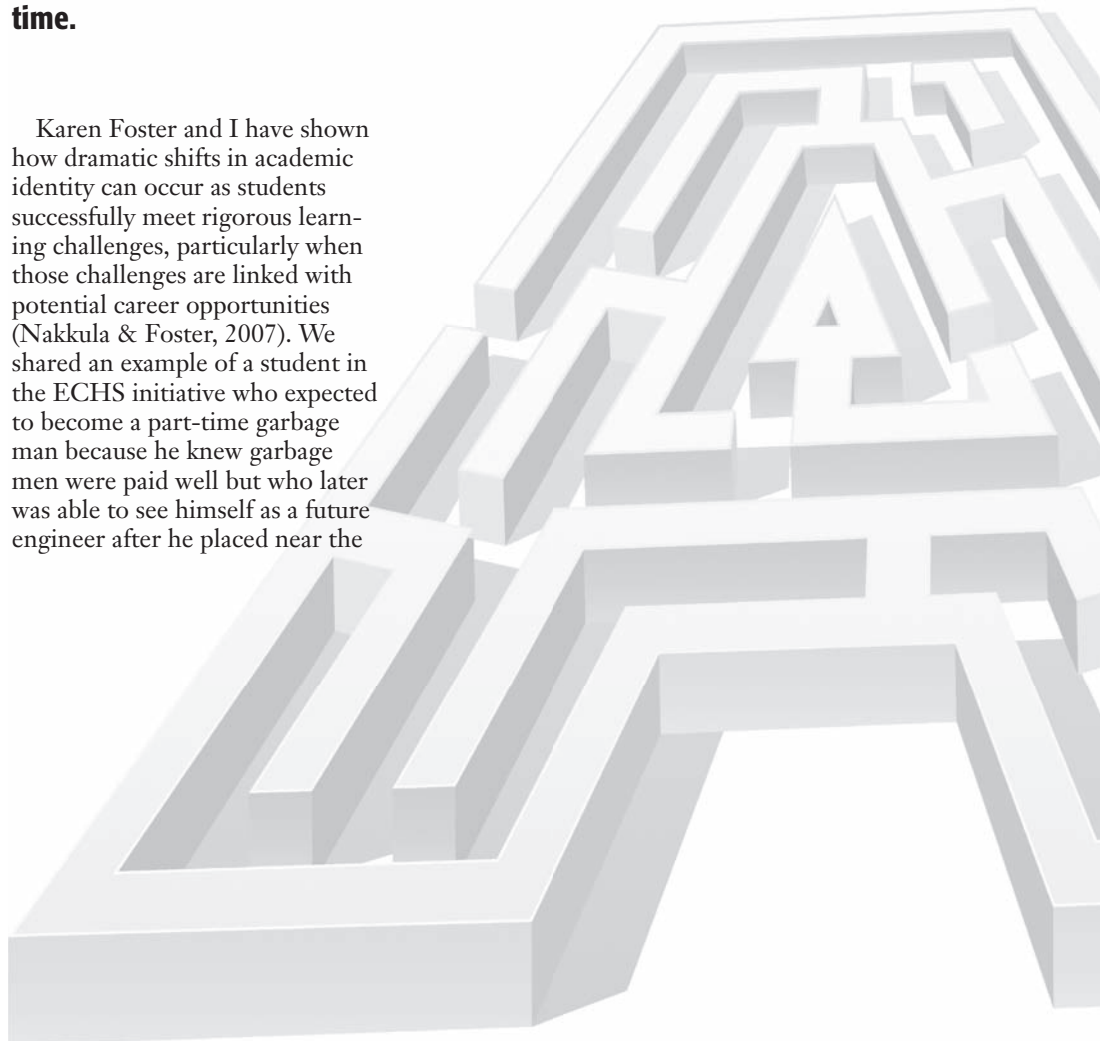
Karen Foster and I have shown how dramatic shifts in academic identity can occur as students successfully meet rigorous learning challenges, particularly when those challenges are linked with potential career opportunities (Nakkula & Foster, 2007). We shared an example of a student in the ECHS initiative who expected to become a part-time garbage man because he knew garbage men were paid well but who later was able to see himself as a future engineer after he placed near the

top of his class in a college-level math course. Changing his self-perspective, however, required that teachers help him see the relationship between math success and careers such as engineering. New experiences of academic success without real opportunity awareness typically are not strong enough to shift academic identity in meaningful ways.

### **Motivation**

Motivation reflects students' attitudes and beliefs about particular tasks or goals. Although we may loosely discuss motivated and unmotivated students, such conceptions are largely inaccurate. Most students are motivated. Some are motivated to have fun with their friends, others to perform as exceptional athletes, musicians, or academic achievers. Questions of motivation are as

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much about what one is motivated to do as they are about the extent to which one is motivated.

Carol Dweck (1999) and her colleagues have convincingly shown that an individual's beliefs about intelligence and related forms of competence influence motivation. Specifically, if one believes that her intelligence or competencies in a particular area are fixed or largely unchangeable, then she is likely to remain motivated to accomplish goals consistent with positive self-conceptions and unmotivated to accomplish goals associated with negative self-conceptions. On the other hand, if one believes that success comes through effort rather than innate or fixed ability, then she is freed to pursue challenging goals that are associated with working hard. Motivational attitudes are informed by achievement beliefs.

For the Crooked-A students in our studies, their first A often reflects a shift in motivational Attitude — a shift in their attitude toward achievement rooted in an experience of hard-earned academic success, short-term inspiration, or both.

At the Facing History School, 11th- and 12th-grade students described such attitudinal shifts when they were exposed to and subsequently immersed in civic engagement projects that they found inspiring. Through such opportunities as working on immigration rights or homelessness, students became inspired to make a contribution in these areas both in the short-term and as potential careers. Initially, students saw little connection between formal schooling and such inspiration. Wanting to contribute meaningfully to society did not deeply change their motivation to achieve academically. So, the first A for these Crooked-A students was an unstable, emerging A, an A that needed support from a powerful companion or form of scaffolding: school engagement.

School engagement represents the second A for Crooked-A students: the A of Action. Ongoing participation in meaningful activities reinforces, redirects, and, ultimately, deepens motivational attitudes (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Actively engaging in rigorous learning motivates students toward

high achievement. Our second-chance high school interviews are replete with examples of students who said they had seen themselves as unintelligent, or perhaps street smart but not book smart (Hatt, 2007). Their self-perception began to shift as they were supported by caring teachers “who would not allow us to fail,” as many students put it. Ongoing teacher support that helped students apply themselves — apply effort — when they otherwise might have given up allowed for the shift in mindset that Dweck (2006) writes about: Students at the second-chance schools came to believe through ongoing engagement that their efforts could lead to success. This, in turn, helped them see themselves as capable learners rather than as unintelligent or inherently unsuccessful.

For these second-chance high school students the A of Action or active engagement in heavily teacher-supported learning helped stabilize their new motivation about achievement. Students were becoming more motivated to achieve because their active engagement in learning was paying off in higher grades and enhanced conceptions of themselves as competent learners. As students become more engaged in school, they become more motivated and, as they become motivated, they find new ways to engage with school and with learning. The pathway linking motivational attitudes and active engagement becomes a busy two-way street over time.

But, to stay on course, the Crooked-A student needs a third A: the A of Authentic Voice.

Students must feel that they are in control of their goals and work challenges, including goals and challenges related to high achievement (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001). If Crooked-A students believe their success depends on the direction, structuring, and even support of others, such as the efforts of the second-chance high school teachers, they are on shaky ground.

## Suggestions for supporting Crooked-A students in your schools

When a motivational spark is recognized, be sure to ignite it by openly acknowledging the related successes, interests, or inspiration. Crooked-A students often have histories of being acknowledged negatively rather than positively.

Develop a range of learning projects in and outside of school in order to create options for active engagement. As students become engaged in one or more projects, find ways to link their current engagement to future educational and career opportunities and to the formal academic curriculum. This will help make school more relevant to the students' emerging interests.

Help strengthen student voice by validating classroom contributions at every turn, encouraging leadership roles in and outside of the classroom, and inviting students to collaborate with you in problem solving and making the school a rich and welcoming learning environment.

As students become more motivated and engaged, emphasize the importance of seeking and pursuing their own direction. Self-directed learning is internally motivated and active learning. Remind students that they don't need to know where they'll end up. What's important is knowing that they can get there, wherever that might be, however crooked the path.

Crooked-A students must feel that they are responsible for their ongoing success. They require Authentic Voice, a voice that tells the student this motivation is mine, this engagement comes from me, these accomplishments are of my own direction and making. Developing such an autonomous and authentic voice — a voice that genuinely feels like one's own — requires, of course, substantial help from others.

**Newly experienced academic success without real opportunity awareness typically is not strong enough to shift academic identity in meaningful ways.**

Students may be at the center in student-centered learning, but they are not alone. They are supported by and interconnected with all the relational and academic supports their schools provide.

**HA: Human agency**

When the three A's of Attitude (motivation), Action (engagement), and Authentic Voice work in concert over time, Crooked-A students experience their AAA... HA moments. They recognize that "I am in charge of my learning and academic success, that whether I succeed or fail is largely a matter of my own effort, my own engagement in meaningful activities, and my own expression of what I need." This is known as human agency (Fielding, 2001; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

In the academic arena, human agency is self-directed learning. Within the Early College initiative, students who began to earn top grades ultimately decided which college courses to take in high school and which majors to pursue in college. They exercised agency in a broad range of choices, including the pursuit of leadership opportunities on campus, and even, in some cases, the choice to leave college, at least for

a while. One of the strongest students in our ECHS study chose to leave college in the middle of her senior year after her scholarship expired. She felt she was finishing the wrong way, not on her terms. Although that decision raised tremendous concerns among those who cared about her, it reflected an exercise of her own agency. In this case, her AAA...HA moment came when she realized she need not fear failure. She confidently pursued a nonlinear direction to success and future graduation. She took a turn that a student can take only when she is confident she will find the right way — the right way as defined by herself and her purpose.

Crooked-A students remind us that when attitudes, action, and authentic voice result in human agency, success can look different from our classic conceptions rooted in straight-A biases. Consider the second-chance high school student with a weak early history of formal education who wants to attend community college in order to build on recent successes. That doesn't fit our classic conception of high achievement. But she is entering college with nearly straight A's in her senior year. These are Crooked A's — but they are A's rooted in and contributing to a current sense of agency. We should not discount such AAA... HA moments as we wrap our heads around success for students who started out on an uneven playing field.

Finally, the Facing History School teaches us that not all A's begin or end in the classroom. For students inspired by social justice projects in their community, human agency might lead first to deeper civic engagement and commitments to social justice and perhaps later to related academic performance. But the Crooked-A students whose motivated attitudes, active engagement, and authentic voice interact to create successful civic leaders certainly should be recognized for being high achievers, even if their achievements don't lead to A's in the classroom. Crooked-A's show up

everywhere. Let's not miss the opportunity to recognize and support them in all their many forms. **K**

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