

## *Research-based teaching tip*

# Emphasize effort and improvement over ability

*Give students explicit praise for effort or improvement in academic and learning tasks.*

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### **Rationale:**

Emphasizing student effort and persistence on tasks, instead of ability or intelligence, focuses student attention on academic mastery, rather than on academic performance. This results in improved student attitudes, enhanced learning outcomes, increased student engagement, and better academic performance. Research suggests that these outcomes may be particularly important for female and minority students.

### **Evidence:**

- Students who are praised for intelligence preferentially focus on performance goals over learning goals, enjoy tasks less, are less persistent on tasks, and have reduced task performance relative to students who are praised for effort.<sup>1</sup>
- Students whose classroom goals focus on mastery of materials have a better attitude, utilize more effective strategies, indicate a preference for challenging activities, and view effort as important to success. In comparison, students whose classroom goals focus on performance, including high grades and viewing success as achieving more than their peers, view failure of goals as related to lack of ability, and tend to evaluate their ability negatively.<sup>2</sup>
- When performance-related goals are emphasized, students avoid opportunities to refine skills when activities may lead to public mistakes.<sup>3</sup>
- When learning-related goals are emphasized, students' beliefs regarding their current skills do not impact seeking mastery, and students seek challenging tasks and new skills.<sup>3</sup>
- Students, and minorities in particular, who are taught to view ability as malleable instead of fixed experience increased engagement, enjoyment of academics, and higher grades.<sup>4</sup>
- Female students' perception of a mastery focus, instead of a performance focus, in course instruction predicts higher grades.<sup>5</sup>

### **Implementation:**

To the class, as a whole, and to individual students, use positive confirmation that focuses on student effort and improvement on learning tasks and activities where appropriate. Don't use confirmation with language that suggests innate ability or intelligence as responsible for performance.

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## Sources:

<sup>1</sup>Mueller CM, Dweck CS (1998). Praise for intelligence can undermine children's motivation and performance. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 75, 33–52.

<sup>2</sup>Ames C, Archer J (1998). Achievement goals in the classroom: students' learning strategies and motivation processes. *J Educ Psychol* 88, 260-267.

<sup>3</sup>Elliott ES, Dweck CS (1988). Goals: an approach to motivation and achievement. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 54, 5-12.

<sup>4</sup>Aronson J, Fried CB, Good C (2002). Reducing the effects of stereotype threat on African American college students by shaping theories of intelligence. *J Exp Soc Psychol* 38, 113–125.

<sup>5</sup>Good C, Rattan A, Dweck CS (2012). Why do women opt out? Sense of belonging and women's representation in mathematics. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 102, 700–717.