



# Level Up

A Program Guide  
for Managing the Transition to College

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## Session 10

# When the Going Gets Tough

## **SEL FOCUS:** SELF-AWARENESS

**Story:** “How I Survived My Psychology Lecture Class” by Gabby Felitto

**Story Summary:** Gabby, an otherwise excellent student, struggles in her huge psychology lecture class due to the unfamiliar demands. She learns who to go to for help and the options available to complete the credit.

### **Learning Objectives**

**Youth will build their SEL by:**

- Discussing the importance of knowing your limits and adjusting your self-perception
- Explaining their learning and studying style and preferences

**Youth will increase their literacy by:**

- Making meaning of text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Writing to express personal connections and insights

### **Materials**

- Group Agreements and agenda, posted
- Level Up* anthologies, one for each group member
- Markers

### **Preparation**

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Write and post the four chart papers for the Gallery Walk, using the **bolded** prompts in the session plan.
- Make copies of the Learning Preference Self-Assessment handout, one for each group member (p. 118).

## GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

### Agenda: When the Going Gets Tough

- Review Group Agreements
- Opening Activity: Gallery Walk
- Read and Discuss: “How I Survived My Psychology Lecture Class” by Gabby Felitto
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Learning Preference Self-Assessment
- Closing Circle

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## OPENING ACTIVITY — GALLERY WALK (10 minutes)

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell the group that they are going to do an activity where they consider how they react to obstacles and challenges.
2. While the group is still seated, review the directions. Tell them:
  - “I have posted four posters around the room, each with a prompt on it.”
  - “You will spend two minutes at each poster in small groups, discussing and writing your responses to each question on chart paper.”
  - “When I call time, you will rotate one poster clockwise with your group. At your new poster, read what has been written.”
  - “Add your ideas and comment on what’s already there with new thoughts or questions.”
  - “Wait for more instructions when you have completed a full lap and have returned to your first poster.”
3. Read the numbered signs in each corner aloud, check for understanding about each choice:
  - 1-When I come up against an obstacle, I...**
  - 2-When I don’t know something, I...**
  - 3-For me, change is....**
  - 4-When I fail, I...**

4. Divide the group into four groups by having them count off 1 to 4, directing each group to its numbered poster (1s go to poster 1, etc.).
5. Hand out one or two markers per group. Tell them to discuss their responses to the prompt at their poster and take notes while you keep track of time.
6. While the small groups write and discuss, move around the room to listen and support them.
7. In two minutes, or when the hum of conversation dies down, regain everyone's attention and tell all groups to rotate one spot clockwise.
8. Repeat steps 6 and 7 until groups have traveled to all posters.
9. When groups are at their first poster again, regain their attention. Tell them:
  - "Walk around the room and read what your peers have written."
10. Time permitting, have group members share points of agreement or disagreement, new ideas, or questions.
11. Have group members return to their seats and thank them for sharing.

## READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (20 minutes)

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young woman who struggles to succeed in a large lecture class.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. TK in their anthologies. (See the leader's version in this guide for stories with discussion questions included.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.



## How I Survived My Psychology Lecture Class

By Gabby Felitto

When I started college at the University of Vermont, I felt nervous but confident. I enrolled in seven classes: linguistics, race and racism in the U.S., global health anthropology, approaches to health, cultural crossroads, communication and science, and intro to psychology. While my parents and teachers were surprised by how many classes I was taking, I felt like I would be able to handle it because I'd taken a lot of classes in high school.

But I felt overwhelmed by my psychology class right away. It was my only huge lecture, with close to 300 students compared to around 30 in my other classes. The lecture format made it hard for me to pay attention; I am not used to having teachers drone on for an hour and a half with no activity in between. Plus, psychology was more about learning the content on your own since it was a lecture. My other professors were more hands-on, like my high school teachers.

Although my other classes had many readings, they didn't feel as extensive as the ones for psychology, where each chapter was about 30 dense pages. I spent two and a half hours a night trying to get through those long chapters and taking notes so I could understand the context.

The further I read, the foggier my mind became. I thought learning about how the brain works and how behaviors develop would be more exciting. I thought we would learn why crimes happen, like in *Criminal Minds*, and about how we store memories. Instead, I found the content boring and I lost interest.

About a month and a half into my first semester, the professor told us to start preparing for the first test. He recommended making flashcards for each chapter. But I spent so much time rewriting the information from my notes onto my flashcards that I barely had time to test myself on them.

On test day, I wore my plaid mini skirt and yellow cherry sweater to feel more confident. I shuffled to my seat, anxious. My stomach churned.

I had to guess the answers for a majority of the questions. I knew that I didn't do that well, but I was devastated when I found out I got a 51 out of 100.



**READ-ALoud  
QUESTION**

**["What are the differences between high school and college that Gabby is running into?"]**

I felt horrible. If only I'd gotten a few more points I would have at least passed! What made me feel even worse was that unlike in high school, professors don't tell you what your average is until you get the final grade at the end of the semester. All I knew was that I had an awful, red 51 as one of my grades. I knew little about my participation, attendance scores, and quiz grades, except that they were mostly in the 60s.

During the first week of college, advisors have individual meetings with students to check in and see if they are struggling with anything. When I met my advisor in August, we instantly clicked. So after I failed this test, I scheduled a meeting with her.

The next afternoon, I sat down in my academic advisor's office and I told her I felt overwhelmed, and about my awful test grade although I'd studied so hard. I felt relieved to get my feelings off my chest. She told me the first steps were to get study tips from both the class teaching assistant (TA) and the professor.

Although I appreciated her advice and it made sense to me, it also scared me. I am shy about asking teachers for help no matter how comfortable I am with them. It makes me feel stupid because I compare myself to seemingly smarter students who I imagine don't need extra help. In high school, I asked my friends for help or tried to work it out myself. But I had no friends in psychology class, so I had no choice but to speak with my TA and professor.

**READ-ALoud  
QUESTION**

**["What steps does Gabby take to improve after she failed the first test? Why were some of them hard for her?"]**

Both advised me to do the activities in the online textbooks. I did them every night. As I persisted, I began to understand the content and got more of the study questions right. Instead of making my own flashcards, I used Quizlet, a website to make flashcards and find study sets, and I could quiz myself on what I knew. This was more efficient than making my own flashcards. I even took

practice quizzes on Quizlet when I was out with my friends. I felt better about myself.

For the second test, I got a 67. But it still wasn't high enough for me to feel confident about passing the course. I felt anxious no matter what I did. Just thinking about the class made me feel like crying.

Fortunately I was doing well in my other classes. For those, I had regularly assigned homework. My grades in these classes did not rely solely on my test grades and some didn't even have tests. Teachers also gave out study guides for their tests, just like in high school. Still, I stayed up at night worrying I'd lose my scholarship because the psychology class was bringing down my GPA.

Then I found out some kids had withdrawn from that class because it was too hard. I also heard that the deadline to withdraw from classes was a few days away. Knowing that other kids were having a hard time made me feel much better. That night I called my mom and asked her if I should withdraw. She told me to go to my advisor and the teaching assistant to try to calculate my average, and then we'd decide.

The next morning as I sped across the campus to the psychology building, I felt my heart racing. My calves ached from walking so fast.

But when I got there, I saw they had canceled office hours. I tried not to cry. I ran out of the building, collapsing on the cold stone stoop as I tried to calm down. I called my mom.

"They canceled office hours," I said in a wobbly voice.

"Would you feel better if you just dropped the class?" my mother asked in a calm voice.

"Yes, but can I?"

"If this is causing you so much stress, just drop it. I don't like seeing you like this," she replied.

“Have you ever dropped a class?” I felt like a failure.

“I wish that someone had told me to withdraw from some of my classes rather than taking a failing grade. It’s the right thing to do.”

My biggest fear about withdrawing and failing was letting down my family. My mom assured me that my well-being was what mattered most to her. I hung up feeling better.

**READ-ALoud  
QUESTION**

**[“What do you think about Gabby’s option to withdraw from the course? Do you think she should take this option? Would you?”]**

The following day, I met with my advisor. She calculated my average. When we discovered that I was barely passing, we discussed other options. If I withdrew, I could take the lecture next semester or at a New York City college during the summer and transfer the credits. She also suggested a “go at your pace” online version that I could take the following semester.

“Don’t worry, many kids have trouble with psych,” she said.

I decided I’d take the online course. My advisor emailed my professor for permission to withdraw.

That afternoon, she texted me the great news that he gave permission. This meant I wouldn’t have to stress about psychology for the rest of the semester and I’d have more time to focus on my other classes.

After about a week, I was also able to start writing for the school newspaper. I had more time to hang out with my friends. Just by asking for help from my advisor, I was able to finish my semester with a 4.0, have my name on the dean’s list, and keep my scholarship.

Still, I don’t intend to make a habit of withdrawing from classes, because I know having too many withdrawals might jeopardize my scholarship and it doesn’t look good to have too many on your transcript. I wish someone had told me not to take so many courses my first semester and that the course load is different

than it is in high school. I also wish that I had known sooner that a lot of students struggle in their first semester of college, and that it's OK to get help.

**["What did Gabby gain from admitting that the lecture psychology class was too much for her?"]**

READ-ALoud  
QUESTION

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*After high school, Gabby enrolled at the University of Vermont, where she wrote this essay.*

## **EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — LEARNING PREFERENCE SELF-ASSESSMENT** (11 minutes)

**During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.**

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
  - “Now that we’ve read the story, we’re going to do an activity to learn more about your learning preferences.”
2. Introduce the Learning Preference Self-Assessment handout. Tell them that they will be asked to rank their skills and preferences on a scale of 1 to 5 and answer some reflective questions.
3. Pass out the handout to group members (p. 118).
4. Review the directions and ask if there are any questions.
5. Tell the group that they will have seven minutes to complete the ranking and answer the short-answer questions at the bottom.
6. When seven minutes are up, tell group members to find a partner and share one part of their work on the self-assessment.
7. Debrief with the large group by asking these questions:
  - “Which skills are your strengths?”
  - “Which skills are difficult for you?”
  - “How do you think your strengths and challenges will impact your academic experience in college?”
8. Thank group members for participating and sharing.

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## **CLOSING CIRCLE** (5 minutes)

**In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.**

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

1. “What stood out for you in Gabby’s story, ‘How I Survived My Psychology Lecture Class,’ and our activities today?”
2. Finish this sentence: “When I face a difficult class in college, one action I will take is to...”

**LEADER REFLECTION**

**After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:**

- Did group members have a good sense of how they like to learn? If not, what additional opportunities to reflect and develop this self-awareness can you provide to them?
- How well does your school or organization prepare young people for a variety of instructional experiences they might face in college and beyond? What changes can be made to your curriculum and/or program to provide practice in a variety of learning experiences?



"How I Survived My Psychology Lecture Class" by Gabby Felitto

# Learning Preference Self-Assessment

This worksheet will help you assess your learning preferences to help inform the academic choices you make in college and identify what kind of help you'll need.

**Directions:** For each statement on the left, circle a corresponding number to the right, from 1 to 5, 1 being not true at all for you, 5 being very true for you. You can base your assessment on your experience or a prediction of how well you think you will do.

	NOT TRUE AT ALL				VERY TRUE
I learn best by talking with others about the material.	1	2	3	4	5
I learn best by listening to material.	1	2	3	4	5
I learn best by reading about the material.	1	2	3	4	5
I prefer learning in person, with others in a class.	1	2	3	4	5
I prefer to learn by myself using a book or a computer.	1	2	3	4	5
I prefer a class with a lot of quizzes and tests.	1	2	3	4	5
I prefer a class with a lot of hands-on activities, like science labs.	1	2	3	4	5
I prefer a class with a lot of discussion.	1	2	3	4	5
I prefer a class with a lot of writing assignments.	1	2	3	4	5
I could do well in a lecture class with 100 or more peers listening to a professor's organized lecture.	1	2	3	4	5
I do better learning in a small group, hearing other people's thoughts and having a lot of opportunities to ask questions and try out new ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
I need complete silence to study.	1	2	3	4	5
I need to be in a busy, noisy environment to study.	1	2	3	4	5
I learn best when I'm listening to music.	1	2	3	4	5
I need to take a break every 15-30 minutes in order to focus on what I'm learning.	1	2	3	4	5
I can focus for long periods of time.	1	2	3	4	5