The resistant students most often show a lack of interest in the feedback that I provide. If I am conferencing with my students, these are the students who are usually quite passive and not fully engaged in the process. The resistant students never seek clarification, preferring to just nod and tell me all is understood. These students also never talk to me about my written comments; instead they ignore them, and rarely acknowledge the feedback. It appears that these students would almost prefer to not receive any feedback at all.

The students who are grateful behave very differently and seek out more feedback and support. They are the students who come to conferences prepared with a list of questions. These students are also always pleased to receive written comments, carefully reading each suggestion and seeking clarification when needed. They want extra help and are highly motivated to improve. These students appreciate the feedback and often say two little words to me at the end of class and at the end of conferences—“thank you.” The first time students thanked me for my work I was truly surprised. Why should I be thanked—I was only doing my job. Today when students thank me, I react differently. Instead of being
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surprised, I welcome the thank you, because I now view gratitude as a strong indicator of students’ attitudes, motivation, and determination to succeed.

Grateful students say thank you because they see the value in feedback. They have adopted an attitude of disciplined optimism. They work under the impression that they can make a change to improve their performance. They are not acting under the guise of blind optimism. Rather, these students understand the value of owning their problems and getting to work on removing whatever obstacles are in the way of their success.

Grateful students are thankful for the feedback because they have an enduring belief that they will be successful. At the same time, they are not in denial of their current academic situation. Acting as disciplined optimists, they feel secure in their abilities and they confront the harsh reality of their grades head-on and do what they can to improve.

This attitude is very different from that of resistant students. Resistant students engage in pessimistic behavior by self-handicapping; by resisting feedback, they deflect the cause of failure away from their ability and away from causes that may threaten their self-esteem.

1 See Clate Mask & Scott Martineau, Conquer the Chaos, How to Grow a Successful Small Business Without Going Crazy (2010). This book explains how disciplined optimism can help in the world of business. I believe many of the observations made by Mask and Martineau are equally applicable to law students. One study has suggested that defensive pessimism, as opposed to optimism, has been linked to stronger academic performance by law students. See Jason M. Satterfield et al., Law School Performance Predicted by Explanatory Style, 15 Behav. Sci. & L. 95 (1997). Disciplined optimism, however, is different from optimism and I hypothesize that it is also a strong predictor of law school success. “Optimism is defined as a ‘generalized outcome expectancy.’ In other words, optimists expect good things to happen.” Allison D. Martin & Kevin L. Rand, The Future’s So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades: Law School Through the Lens of Hope, 48 Duq. L. Rev. 203, 208 (2010) (citing Michael F. Scheier & Charles S. Carver, Optimism, Coping, and Health: Assessment and Implications of Generalized Outcome Expectancies, 4 Health Psychol. 219, 219, 223 (1985)). Disciplined optimism combines the positive attitude with hard work. Mask & Martineau, supra. It builds upon the Stockdale paradox of having the “faith you will prevail plus discipline to confront the brutal facts.” Id. at 82.

2 “Task-oriented individuals … are motivated to attain mastery rather than outperform others. They view tasks in terms of effort rather than ability and failure is seen as diagnostic feedback that can lead to improvement at a later time.” Martin, infra note 6, at 6 (citing Michael Muddleton & Carol Midgley, Avoiding the Demonstration of Lack of Ability: An Unexplored Aspect of Goal Theory, 89 J. Educ. Psychol. 710–718 (1997)). Martin explains that “[b]ecause of this effort and mastery orientation, task-oriented individuals are not so threatened by failure because failure reflects on their effort rather than their ability. From a self-worth motivation perspective their self-worth is not at stake because their private and public sense of ability is not threatened.” Id. (citing Martin Covington, Making the Grade: A Self-Worth Perspective on Motivation and School Reform (1992)). “[T]ask-oriented individuals choose challenging tasks (reflecting some level of optimism) and are less inclined to worry about performance.” …” Id. (citing Joan Duda, Motivation in Sport Settings: A Goal Perspective Approach, in Motivation in Sport and Exercise (G.C. Roberts ed., 1992)). Disciplined optimists are task-oriented individuals because they work on the tasks needed to improve their performance. Mask & Martineau, supra note 1 at 83.

3 Blind optimism also differs from optimism and disciplined optimism. Blind optimists tend to hold on to false hope. See generally Catherine Gage O’Grady, Cognitive Optimism and Professional Pessimism in the Large-Firm Practice of Law: The Optimistic Associate, 30 Law & Psychol. Rev. 23 (2006).

4 Mask & Martineau, supra note 1, at 83. The book explains the three components of disciplined optimism for small businesses. The components include (1) an undying belief that the business will achieve success, (2) confronting the “brutal facts” of the business’s current reality; and (3) attacking those facts because the business owner wants to do so, not because of a need to do so. Id. Law students should also confront the reality of their academic standing and work on improving their positions because they want, instead of need, to do so.

5 See id. The book presents the idea that for businesses to survive the business owners must be able to handle the hard times with confidence. Id. This concept is applicable to law students. When students are struggling in law school, it would help them to remain confident in their abilities.

6 “According to the self-worth theory of motivation, the need to protect one’s self-worth arises primarily from a fear of failure and the implications this failure may have for one’s private and public sense of ability and subsequent self-worth.” Andrew J. Martin et al., Self-Handicapping and Defensive Pessimism: A Model of Self-Protection from a Longitudinal Perspective, 28 Contemp. Educ. Psychol. 1, 2 (2003). Martin explains psychologist Martin Covington’s self-worth theory “that failure holds implications for students’ self-worth because failure is interpreted as being indicative of low ability and low ability is equated with a lack of self-worth. Thus, many students go to great lengths to avoid failure or to alter its meaning. Two strategies they can use to do this are self-handicapping and defensive pessimism.” Id. (citing Martin Covington, The Motive for Self-Worth, in Research on Motivation in Education (Raymond Ames & C. Ames eds., 1984) and Martin Covington, Making the Grade: A Self-Worth Perspective on Motivation and School Reform (1992).

7 Although the use of defensive pessimism has been found to decrease undergraduate students’ academic success, it has been linked to increased success for law students. See generally Satterfield, supra note 1. I am not disputing this study. Rather, I am suggesting that when pessimism, not defensive pessimism, is coupled with self-handicapping, students’ chances of academic success greatly decrease.

8 “Self-handicappers alter the meaning of failure by deflecting its cause away from their ability and on to factors, such as a lack of effort, that are less likely to threaten their self-esteem.” Martin, supra note 6, at 2–3.
They do not express gratitude for feedback because to do so would make them more fully engaged in the educational process and open themselves up for blame if they fail.\textsuperscript{9} By ignoring feedback, they try to shield themselves from the pain of their undoubted future failure.\textsuperscript{10} They believe their destiny is set.\textsuperscript{11} A lack of confidence in their abilities causes them to view their academic struggles as permanent. This view of permanence\textsuperscript{12} that pessimists generally have translates into a belief that no amount of feedback or suggestions from a professor will make a difference. They think it is best not to try because their efforts will not impact their chances of success.\textsuperscript{13}

Pessimistic students view problems as pervasive and unchangeable,\textsuperscript{14} whereas disciplined, optimistic students view problems as limited in scope and fixable.\textsuperscript{15} This optimistic outlook is expressed by their gratitude for feedback and instruction. They place a high value on the help they receive because they are confident that the feedback will help them improve their chances for academic success.\textsuperscript{16}

Students who want to increase their chances of academic success should consider adopting a more appreciative, and thus more optimistic, attitude. Professors can help their students become more grateful and more receptive to feedback by tempering their critical feedback with praise, modeling gratitude, and sharing stories emphasizing the value and benefits of being grateful.

When students read comments about their strengths instead of just their weaknesses, it helps them adopt a more open attitude to critiques and suggestions for improvements. Students tend to value suggestions more, even the critical ones, when they get a sense that the professor is not just telling them how poorly they are doing. By pointing out strengths to students, professors can work to break down student hostility and replace it with confidence. When students read comments such as “This is well done because …” they learn they can do good work, are grateful for the encouragement, and are motivated to keep trying.

Gratitude can also be taught to students by modeling it in the classroom. For example, when students point out something a professor overlooked or a mistake a professor made, instead of reacting defensively or becoming embarrassed, the professor could thank the students and explain that the error would not have been caught without their help. This allows the professor to demonstrate how we all benefit when we allow our sense of self-significance to disappear and are open to correcting our mistakes.

Finally, sharing stories of thankfulness about our former students or from our own lives can help our

\textsuperscript{9} Id.

\textsuperscript{10} Through their actions, self-handicappers build in external, rather than internal, excuses for failure. “Self-handicappers choose impediments or obstacles to successful performance that enable them to deflect the cause of failure away from their competence and on to the acquired impediments. ... Self-handicapping can take a variety of forms. Typical examples include procrastination, the choice of performance-debilitating circumstances, engaging in little or no practice for upcoming tasks, and the strategic reduction of effort.” Martin, supra note 6, at 3 (citing Stephen Berglas & Edward Jones, Drug Choice as a Self-Handicapping Strategy in Response to Noncontingent Success, 36 J. Personality & Soc. Psychol., 405–417 (1978)); Raymond L. Higgins & Robert N. Harris, Strategic Alcohol Use: Drinking to Self-Handicap, 6 J. Soc. & Clinical Psychol. 191–202 (1988); Diane M. Tice & Roy F. Baumeister, Self-Esteem, Self-Handicapping, and Self-Presentation: The Strategy of Inadequate Practice, 58 J. Personality 443–464 (1999)).

\textsuperscript{11} Uncertain personal control is a factor in self-protecting. Martin, supra note 6, at 7 (citing Ted Thompson, Self-Worth Protection: Review and Implications for the Classroom, 46 Educ. Rev. 259–274 (1994)). Some psychologists have argued that the “central cause of self-handicapping appears to be some form of induced insecurity about future performances.” Id.

\textsuperscript{12} See generally, Martin Seligman, Learned Optimism (2006).

\textsuperscript{13} “Perceived control is relevant to self-worth motivation in that individuals who feel they have little control over outcomes are increasingly uncertain as to whether they can avoid failure or bring about success and may choose to self-protect in response to this.” See Martin, supra note 6, at 8. I am suggesting that one way law students self-protect is by not being grateful for and thus receptive to their professors’ feedback.

\textsuperscript{14} Seligman, supra note 12.

\textsuperscript{15} The belief that problems are fixable gives students the ability to confront their current academic reality and to work on improving. These are two of the components Mask and Martineau list as being needed for disciplined optimism. See Mask & Martineau, supra note 1, at 83.

\textsuperscript{16} This belief corresponds to the first component Mask and Martineau list as being a crucial attribute for disciplined optimism and the success of small businesses. See id. at 84.
students acknowledge and identify gratitude as a positive attribute. Perhaps a story of a particularly grateful former student’s success could be shared to help make the benefits of gratitude and optimism more obvious and tangible to students. Professors could also share their own personal experiences, possibly detailing their gratitude to another professor for all of the helpful feedback they received when working on scholarship or on teaching. These stories provide students with examples of how being appreciative of help has benefited others and could suggest to them that gratefulness might benefit them as well.

Providing positive feedback, modeling, and presenting students with examples of how gratitude and disciplined optimism work together can increase students’ chances for academic success.17 By being receptive to feedback, students can start to let go of their fear of criticism and failure. Feedback allows students to grow and gain a mind-set that can ultimately help them achieve their goals.

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17 In 1994, psychologist Ted Thompson “argued that an important means of remediating self-protective strategies such as self-handicapping is to encourage students to make internal attributions for success.” Martin, supra note 6, at 7.

Another Perspective

“On July 20, 1969, when we were very small children, our mothers propped us up in front of the television set to watch Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walk on the moon. At the time, the idea that we could send a tin can many thousands of miles into space to land on what many believed to be green cheese seemed to be an impossible one. For the next several years, we would regularly launch men into the stratosphere to learn what lay beyond. Why? Perhaps it was to beat the Russians in a race that seemed, at the time, to be an indicator of which world power would prevail. Perhaps it was for adventure: because the moon was there. And perhaps, as President Kennedy posited, it was to discover new landscapes, to test our mettle in achieving a truly difficult feat.

But what we achieved through Apollo 13 was perhaps even more profound. In the words of Fred Haise, the mission’s lunar module pilot,

[Apollo 13] offers a graphic example and a very dramatic example … [of] what can happen if you do have … the right people, the right skill mix, that are trained and they’re assembled in this team and they work together under the right leadership. You know, what a miracle can happen. And that’s what was the case of Apollo 13.

As law professors, we are really very privileged to work with law students in this thin slice of time, these three or four years, when they are learning the skills they need to represent clients. If we do it well, we may help them reach the moon; if we fall back on tradition, they may never even launch.”