

Sometimes it's best to kill a dream

When it comes to careers, there's a fine line between encouragement and false hope.

Compiled by MELINDA MULLEN

It takes a lot to convince people they aren't qualified to achieve the career of their dreams.

New research shows it's not enough to tell them they don't have the necessary grades or skills. People tend to cling to their hopes until it is clearly demonstrated to them not only why they're not qualified, but also what negative things could happen if they attempt to reach their goals and fail.

"You want to encourage students to pursue their dreams, but you don't want to give them false hope about their abilities and talents," said Patrick Carroll, assistant professor of psychology at the Lima regional campus. "It's a fine line."

Carroll believes that more than ever, students are focused on careers that offer security, vocational appeal, and long-term growth potential. "This research is important to understanding how students make revisions in their career goals and decide which career possibilities should be abandoned as unrealistic given their current qualifications," he said. "They can then zero in on more realistic possible [goals] that they actually are qualified to achieve."

The researchers studied groups of upper-level business and psychology students at Ohio State. The students had signed up to meet with a career adviser to learn about a new master's degree program that would train them for "high-paying consulting positions as business psychologists." The program didn't actually exist.

The researchers wanted to see how students reacted when faced with threats to their new goal of being a business psychologist. Some simply were told their grades were too low for admittance to the

program. Others were told they probably wouldn't be admitted and were given various reasons why they might not succeed even if they were.

Students in a third group were given "a very vivid picture of what might happen if they failed," Carroll said. The adviser told them they were not qualified for the program, and that if they somehow managed to get admitted, they probably would struggle with its demands and end up with no job prospects or working in low-paying office positions unrelated to business psychology.

Students in a control group and those who were told their grades were too low didn't give up the dream; in fact, their levels of self-doubt decreased and their commitment to pursuing the degree increased.

"We have a brilliant ability to spin, deflect, or outright dismiss undesired evidence that we can't do something," Carroll said.

However, students given the most discouraging picture showed more self-doubt, lower expectations, and a lower commitment to pursuing the career.

Carroll stresses that the findings should be applied only in extreme cases when a student continues to pour time, money, and hope into a dream he or she has no chance of achieving. "None of us, even parents and educators, have a crystal ball, and in many cases, even we cannot know with absolute certainty or confidence that a student would not be able to overcome reasonable, albeit difficult, roadblocks to success," he said.

"So, if there is any doubt about a student's ability to achieve their goals, I would recommend parents and educators let things run their natural course. Let the student test their limits and maybe, just maybe, they may surprise you." ■



Illustrations by MARIANO SANTILLAN