




Student Retention

by: George Kirby




"A Sensei's Lament"

(sung to "Home on the Range")

Verse:

I enrolled a whole bunch 
But I had a hunch,
That many of them would soon leave.
And they really did split. 
It gave me a fit. 
But so many I didn't believe.

Chorus:

Why, why did they go? 
Was I teaching too fast or too slow?
I'll never find out 
but they left me with doubts 
For my effort I've little to show.

Need I go on? I could, but I think you get the point. It is hard to keep students in a martial arts program. The dropout rate for the first few weeks is horrendous: 70–80%. That number is really upsetting to park departments, community service coordinators, YMCA directors and yes, even sensei who see their potential black belts disappear into the haze (if you live in Los Angeles).

How do you keep students from leaving, or more positively stated: how do you retain students?

First, you have to realize that the high dropout rate is not a reflection on you personally, 70–80% dropout in the first few weeks is normal. The bright side of the coin is that (at least

in my dojo) if I can keep them beyond week 5–6, they are usually in for the long term unless they move, parents can't afford to pay for classes any longer, etc.

How do you retain students?

1. First and foremost you must be supportive of them. They are coming into your program feeling tremendously awkward and clumsy. (Remember, you were this way too when you started.) You need to give them positive reinforcement during this critical 5–6 week period. After 5–6 weeks things start coming together and they realize they can do this “stuff”.
2. Treat all students with courtesy and respect. All questions deserve an appropriate and polite answer.
3. Do not overburden new students with a bunch of rules and formalities. They will eventually learn them all — if they stay in your class. Your goal is to keep them in your class. This does not mean you have to coddle them or allow them to violate safety rules. But it does mean that you do not put a whole bunch of rules and formalities in the way of learning.
4. Keep activities appropriate to their belt rank. This applies to new and old students. Do not expect new students to be able to execute advanced techniques.
5. Keep the class moving. Maximize mat time. If you do not sit you do not get bored (mainly for kids but this applies to adults too).
6. Have activities that all students can participate in, regardless of belt rank or experience. This reduces a feeling of isolation by new students as they feel they are being included in the entire program. During the second hour of class (my classes are two hours long) I usually bring all the students together and find common techniques they can work on, with modifications based upon belt rank. (One thing that will

happen here is that lower ranked students will end up learning more advanced techniques from higher ranks — because they are interested. It is important to allow this as long as the students are not endangering themselves, mainly because it helps build class spirit and a sense of value for all students.)

7. Test on a periodic basis and make sure students know the testing requirements ahead of time. A student handbook containing all testing requirements is a very worthwhile asset for students and sensei alike.
8. Personal attention always helps. Call students up if they have missed 1–2 weeks. It lets them know you are interested in them. You may also find out that they are just sick or were injured (doing something else hopefully) and will be back in class the following week or so.
9. Have students evaluate your classes periodically. Have a simple form that just takes a minute or two to complete. It is amazing what you can learn — it can also help you improve your program.

These are just a few thoughts off the top of my head; there are many other things you can do to retain students. If you have any suggestions just send them into the AJA Newsletter and they will get printed. After all, singing “A Sensei’s Lament” is a real bummer.

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