Recognizing Unconscious Bias

{ TIPS FOR CREATING AN AGELESS CLASSROOM

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My experience

Youngstown State University

- 30-35% non-traditional student enrollment

- Urban, commuter campus in a declining industrial city

- Open-enrollment university

Penn State Shenango

- 55% nontraditional enrollment

- Located in oldest county in PA

- Blend of urban and rural students

Who are non-traditional students?

Traditional answer: students older than 25

But also …
- Married students
- Veterans
- Parents
- High school students
- Commuters
- Part-time students

Some would argue for …
- First-generation students
- Students from low-income backgrounds
- Working students

In 2008:

More than a third of undergraduate students were older than 25

Nearly 25% were parents

46% were enrolled in school part time

Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success

Where are they?

Typically …

- Local state universities
- Online colleges and programs
- Community colleges
- Branch campuses

But increasingly …

- Larger state schools
- Research institutions
- Private colleges and universities

It is increasingly important for all faculty to be prepared for non-traditional students in the classroom and to understand that their needs are not always the same as traditional students.

In their own words …

"I've got a sixteen-hour a week work Commitment, and my employers demand every hour of it. It's a constant struggle between looking after the kids, work, and studying. I sometimes have to do my college work from eleven at night till four-thirty in the morning. Then I have a quick sleep, then breakfast, get the kids to school and then off to work. That' s what a day is like for me. It's hard but you've got to do it." (Jackie, female, late 20s)

"If you want people to succeed you have to make sure that the structures are in place for that to happen. That' s across the board, whether you' re men, women, parents, single, whatever, it has to be equal. It's not equal for adults that come in with responsibilities for families and children. There needs to be a little more flexibility within that, more resources, more support." (Stella, female, 30s)

Bamber, John and Lyn Tett. "Transforming the Learning Experiences of Non-traditional Students: a perspective from higher education." *Studies in Continuing Education,* Vol. 22, No. 1, 2000.

Classroom needs

- **<u>Flexibility and Accommodation</u>** – Nontraditional students need a "greater degree of flexibility" from their universities. "This means that the traditional organization of studies (full-time and classroom-based) will have to become more flexible by introducing, or expanding, methods of instruction and learning independent of place, time and other restrictions," (Schuetze and Slowey).

- **<u>Trust and Recognition</u>** – Many nontraditional students are well into adulthood, with children, jobs, mortgages, and a full range of experience, hardships, and responsibilities. Classroom policies that evoke a sense of paternalism can work against morale and a strong rapport. "The skills and qualifications that have been acquired in informal and non-formal learning settings – at the workplace, through the media, in community activities or everyday-life learning – [need] to be recognized," (Schuetze and Slowey).

Schuetze, Hans G. and Maria Slowey. "Participation and exclusion: A comparative analysis of non-traditional students and lifelong learners in higher education." *Higher Education* **44:** 309–327, 2002.

Unconscious bias

Policies, attitudes, assignments, and general teaching philosophies that are – whether deliberately or inadvertently – geared toward traditional students and therefore do not serve the needs of non-traditional students.

Too often, courses and universities are designed as one-size-fits all, with students who meet a very narrow demographic placed as the standard:

- 18-22
- High school graduate, usually in the top 15-20% of their graduating class
- Computer literate
- Enrolled in a four-year baccalaureate program
- Not reliant on employment for survival (campus job is for "spending money")
- Single, without children
- Lives in a dorm, or with parents or roommates.

Classroom Policies

Punitive – Assumes students are immature, irresponsible, and need to learn to follow rules.

- *Door closes and locks at 10:05. No exceptions!*

Helpful – Assumes students have other, legitimate responsibilities that need to be considered.

- *I am in my office until five minutes to the hour. Please call if you anticipate being late. Also, please enter quietly and sit toward the back of the room.*

Language and cultural references

Exclusive – Assumes all students are part of the same demographic.

- *Your generation has grown up taking the availability of technology for granted.*
- *Your grandparents will recall receiving the Polio vaccine.*

Inclusive – Acknowledges classroom is not chronologically homogenous

- *The millennial generation tends to take technology for granted.*
- *People over the age of 60 will recall receiving the Polio vaccine.*

Language tip: Something as simple as switching from first and second person to third person will correct this problem.

Generational Divide

Assignments

Exclusive Assignments – Require students to have a certain, limited vantage point, or a set of skills linked to their age or other demographic.

- How did social media influence your adolescence?
- Interview a parent or older relative about their memories/ experience of X, Y, or Z event.
- How do you plan to balance home and family life ten years from now?
- Survey your friends' Facebook pages for content that you think might look suspicious to a prospective employer.

Inclusive assignments – Allow students to draw from their unique experiences and perspectives.

- What major technological milestones influenced your adolescence?
- What memories do people have of Y, X, Z in history?
- What challenges do people face (and will continue to face) as they balance work and family?
- Investigate social media outlets for content that might be damaging to a person's perceived reputation.

Skills

Reasonable expectations – Certain skills are necessary for success in college, and students who don't possess these basic skills need to seek ways to learn them.

- Checking e-mail, general web browsing
- Basic writing and math skills

Reasonable refreshers – Some skills will be more familiar to students who've been in school in very recent years, while other information may have been forgotten over the years.

- Don't assume all students are on Facebook or have (or even know about) Twitter or Tumblr accounts.
- A student who needs a reminder of Pythagorean's Theorum or the classification of organisms is not a lost cause.

Final Thoughts

- Ensure reading selections represent a variety of perspectives and opinions.

- Consider extra credit options for students who engage in exercises to refresh their skills.

- Encourage student collaboration so that students become aware of the different experiences and perspectives represented in the class.

- Do not make assumptions about shared life experience.

- Allow in-class time for projects.

- Encourage students and vocalize your confidence in their abilities. "They respond especially well to faculty who genuinely believe in their potential for success."

Allen, Mary J. "Teaching Non-Traditional Students." Association for Psychological Science. Web.
http://www.psychologicalscience.org/teaching/tips/tips_0900.html