

Both Sides Of The Fence: The Nontraditional Student Meets The New Adjunct

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Introduction

Nontraditional students are here to stay, and their numbers are increasing at the branch and regional campus level. They comprise up to 50% of the student population at these facilities, depending on which studies are examined (Kerka). Their expectations of higher education are markedly different from those of traditional students, and their needs vary as well. Among the many academic studies on the subject, there is much disagreement about what these characteristics and needs are; so, I will throw caution and protocol to the wind and use my direct experience and observations as the basis for this article. However anecdotal this research, conversations with faculty and students both at WSU—Lake and at other schools bear out the validity and commonality of my personal experience.

Definitions

Nontraditional students are difficult to categorize. A common criterion is age: over 25 is defined as nontraditional. However, this single-criteria categorization is misleading. Many under-25 students are also nontraditional in their needs and outlooks. In my experience, nontraditional students share these characteristics:

1. Mom and Dad are not paying for their education. Direct financial responsibility changes the nature of the student's attitude towards education; the non-trads see themselves not so much as students but as consumers. They want their money's worth and are not shy about protesting to the highest levels of administration if they feel shorted.

2. They work at real jobs. While the traditional student may be employed, very few work in their chosen career. To them, knowledge is something to be used someday and so remains somewhat theoretical. The non-trad applies knowledge immediately and makes constant assessments as to a course's validity and usefulness.

3. Nontraditional students are driven. Their expectations of their performance are very high, both as a function of workplace tuition reimbursement policies and as an inherent trait. People who work 60 hours a week (the 40-hour work week is a distant, fond memory in most industries) while taking a full class load and attending to family life border on the obsessive. Among fellow non-trads, in transitioning from the closed manufacturing facilities to higher education, I have observed markedly higher grade point averages and lower failure rates than occur in the traditional student group.

4. Nontraditional students work together. They form informal study groups that last through their school careers, provide emotional support, and act as a venting forum. The pressures of busy and stressful lives require much venting.

5. Nontraditional students talk back. In my experience, they view the class as a meeting of peers, with the instructor being the expert in the subject. Don't be surprised if some of your students know more than you do. They expect discussion and real-life examples of applications of the theories in the text; they have no patience with repetitive, boring examples. If their experience has proved a fault in a theory, they are not shy about challenging either the text or you.

The New Adjunct

Adjunct instructors, particularly those teaching in technical education, are a diverse lot. While most hold a degree in their career field, few have any background in education. In the situation exclusive to technical programs, adjunct faculty may not have a degree. Their expertise in the subject and willingness to teach are sufficient to do the job. As an example, technical engineering course content differs from that of traditional baccalaureate engineering in that it is based on practical application of knowledge in the workplace, rather than on engineering theory. Experience in the day-to-day application of the subject is the adjunct's greatest strength. The lessons passed on to the students through disaster stories are often the most

useful.

Lacking a formal background in education, the adjunct often overcompensates by obsessive preparation. The experienced student always spots the first-time instructor by the baggage: textbook stuck full of Post-Its® (indicating the entire text has been read), a quarter-inch thick sheaf of notes (for the first lecture), and the green grade book prominently displayed on the desk: "I really am a college instructor."

Put together in a classroom, nontraditional students and new adjunct instructors make for an interesting, enlightening, and often fractious mix. Each has certain expectations of the educational process and outcome, and each is eager to structure the class according to his or her own agenda. As an adjunct instructor in the quality assurance technical certificate program at Wright State University—Lake, I want to prove myself competent but must also keep in mind the needs of the students. This is a challenge for me, as I am currently a nontraditional student in the organizational leadership baccalaureate program at the same institution. While I have taught quality practices subjects in an industrial setting and at another college, this is my first experience with being both instructor and student at the same place and at the same time. It is, to say the least, interesting.

Being on both sides of the lectern, simultaneously the consumer and provider of education, can be confusing at times. It is also fascinating and allows me to frame the concerns of each in reference to the other. Faculty want to impart the course work in an orderly and complete manner and assess the work objectively. Students want to learn material applications within the constraints of self-doubt, family responsibilities, and full-time jobs. The two objectives are not mutually exclusive but do require flexibility on both sides.

Specific issues examined on the faculty side are text selection, test content and frequency, course content and structure, applications, and control of the classroom environment. Concerns on the nontraditional student side are: study habits, assessment negotiation, experienced-based knowledge, content expectations, and training the instructor. Honesty in discussing these issues improves the quality of education and leads to creative and useful presentation of the material. While at times the experience can be trying, both parties can benefit from finding common ground.

What makes a successful adjunct instructor? First, love of the subject

and a desire to share practical knowledge with students who truly want to learn. Nothing is more frustrating than a classroom full of youngsters who see neither the value nor the applicability of the instructor's knowledge. A class with just a few non-trads is infinitely more interesting to part- and full-time faculty alike; their participation (or mouthiness) brings the subject to life and keeps the instructor on his or her toes. Second, the willingness to consider as valid the students' self-evaluations of the form and scope of assessments needed to confirm absorption of the course content helps the instructor deliver meaningful content. Substituting short, frequent quizzes for midterm exams, replacing tests with papers or projects, and trusting the student's assessment of the abilities of the instructor produce a more effective learning environment for all.

Wish List

Adjunct faculty handbooks provide a great deal of guidance in setting up and teaching college courses, but they are lacking some of the most practical information about the job. Here is a wish list from the non-trad point of view:

1. If you are picking out texts, look for big print. While 6 point type might be readable by young eyes, it is absolute murder on those of us . . . well, of a certain age and stage of denial.
2. Non-trads learn by doing and talking, not by memorizing lists of factoids and fad terms. Most of us have been in the workplace long enough to recognize the difference between buzzwords and real knowledge.
3. Use the textbook or lose it. Students with mortgages, car payments, and kids' orthodontist bills resent paying ninety dollars for a text that is barely used; buying the book impacts the economy of their family profoundly.
4. Trust your students. Non-trads have been in the world long enough to know that cheaters usually don't get caught, but they won't cheat; they really want to learn and use the knowledge they are purchasing.
5. There is a limited amount of information that can be presented and digested in a single course. Accept this fact and plan your syllabus

accordingly.

6. You don't know everything. College instructors hold a position of high respect in this society; don't let it go to your head. A class is successful when the instructor learns something new. If you don't, you are not engaging the students in the learning process.

On a purely personal level, having a foot in both camps has sharpened my skills in discretion, diplomacy, politics, group dynamics, and maintaining confidentiality and trust. On one occasion, I had the opportunity to critique the teaching and assessment methods of the instructor of a class in which I was currently enrolled. What could have been a walk to the gallows for me, grade-wise, turned into a frank discussion with a respected colleague; my fellow students supported my efforts without reserve. Being a fence sitter may not allow me to have a fully exclusive student or instructor experience, but the view of the synergy between both camps is fascinating.

Work Cited

Kerka, Sandra. "Adult Students and the College Experience." *ERIC Review on The Path to College*. (Fall 1997). Online. Retrieved September 27, 2000, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.accesseric.org/resources/ericreview/vol5no3/adultexp.html>.

Biography

Debra L. Lauth has tripped lightly on the nontraditional path for five years since losing her job due to a manufacturing plant shutdown. After twenty-five years in production and quality assurance, she took the plunge into the academic world at Wright State University—Lake and earned her AAS in Mechanical Engineering Technology. She will attain the Holy Grail of a BS degree in Organizational Leadership in spring of 2001 at the same fine institution. She now serves as a custom training consultant, curriculum designer, and instructor for the Business and Industrial Development project at WSU—Lake, specializing in quality assurance and job skills development. In her free time (!), Lauth researches workplace sociology and human information processing styles, gardens, cooks with fire, and wanders aimlessly in the woods. She may be reached by e-mail at debra.lauth@wright.edu.