

ADVICE

The Case for Inclusive Teaching



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By Kevin Gannon | FEBRUARY 27, 2018

A quick glance at enrollment trends across American higher education doesn't offer nearly as much fuel for optimism as it might have a decade ago. Those of us at nonprofit four-year colleges and universities may have (at least quietly) welcomed the precipitous enrollment drop in the for-profit sector, but lately we find

ourselves trending in the same direction.

Although the downturn is not as pronounced, enrollments across the nonprofit sector (including at two-year colleges) have been gradually declining in recent years, and there's little to suggest that trend will reverse itself anytime soon. Put simply, everyone's fighting for a piece of the same shrinking pie.

At the other end of the admissions funnel are worrisome signs as well. The data look decent, at least superficially: Six-year completion rates across higher ed are up for the first time since the 2008 recession, and there's been a significant increase in that rate for students at both private and public four-year institutions, in particular. Break down those data into cohorts, however, and the picture is decidedly mixed.

The most troubling aspect is the racial disparity in persistence and completion rates for African-American and Hispanic students. As the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center's recent report on college completion tells us:

"When examined by race and ethnicity, Asian and white students had much higher completion rates (68.9 percent and 66.1 percent, respectively) than Hispanic and black students (48.6 percent and 39.5 percent, respectively). Black students represent the only group that is more likely to stop out or discontinue enrollment than to complete a credential within six years ... Among students who started in four-year public institutions, black students had the lowest six-year completion rate (46.0 percent). The completion rate of Hispanic students was almost 10 percentage points higher (55.7 percent). Over two-thirds of white students (71.7 percent) and three-quarters of Asian students (75.8 percent) completed a degree within the same period."

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Clearly, the gaps for black and Hispanic students, in the face of a general upward trend, show that significant numbers are unable to access the benefits that we continually proclaim will result from higher education. They are also — in light of what we know about declining enrollments — evidence that our institutions are missing key opportunities to sustain ourselves for the long term.

It's not as if higher education hasn't noticed these problems. If you work at a small, tuition-dependent institution like I do, you most likely are aware of every bump and dip in your enrollment forecasts. You also probably know, at least in an anecdotal or general sense, that certain student cohorts graduate in significantly lower numbers than others.

Both students of color and our own colleges and universities, then, are ill-served by the status quo. But what are we doing about it? Persistence and completion rates are tied to enrollments, and working on the former offers a promising way forward in maintaining the latter. In short, if you can't recruit additional students, you need to make every effort to keep more of the ones you already have.

Chances are, no matter your institutional setting, efforts are already underway to minimize the disparities that affect graduation rates of some minority-student groups. There is no shortage of proposed solutions: partnerships with local secondary schools, summer bridge programs, First-Year Experience programs, new student seminars built around a college success curriculum, expansion of developmental coursework, a stronger focus on diversity in student services and campus life — the list is an impressive one.

Yet when I survey the range of initiatives, I'm struck by what I don't see: Where is the institutional emphasis on inclusive teaching? I'm not opposed to any of the measures I've listed above. I've participated in varieties of all of them and found them useful, rewarding, and occasionally quite powerful. But when it comes to closing the shameful gaps in college student success, we need to place pedagogy at the center of our efforts.

Even with the expansion of campus activities and amenities, and the proliferation of student services, the fact remains: What happens with and between professors and students in the classroom — physical or online — remains the heart of our enterprise. It's the critical element of year-to-year persistence and degree completion.

Obvious, I know. But that very obviousness has allowed most institutions to create an entire network of multicultural or diversity programs while assuming that the teaching part will take care of itself. And judging by the data, it hasn't.

So here's a thought: How about we make a genuine commitment to inclusive pedagogy? Some institutions, including the University of Michigan, are already moving in that direction. Their commitment rests on three imperatives:

- That we treat all of our students equitably (which is related to, yet distinct from, "equally").
- That all of our students have full access to learning, and the tools they need to do so successfully and meaningfully.
- That all of our students feel welcomed, supported, and valued as they learn.

No doubt there are some readers who see that list and start rolling their eyes: *Are we supposed to put out the red carpet for little Johnny and Susie and give them trophies for doing what they're supposed to do?*

Inclusive teaching is not condescending or fake. Rather, it's a realization that traditional pedagogical methods — traditionally applied — have not served all of our students well. It's a commitment to put actual substance behind our cheerful declarations that all students deserve access to higher education. Mumbling about "snowflakes" accomplishes nothing but further entrenching ineffective and unskillful practices. The beauty of inclusive pedagogy is that, rather than making special accommodations that would decrease equity, it actually benefits *all* students, not just those at whose needs it was originally aimed.

So what is inclusive pedagogy? It is a mind-set, a teaching-and-learning worldview, more than a discrete set of techniques. But that mind-set does value specific practices which, research suggests, are effective for a mix of students. More specifically:

It values course design. Inclusive teaching asks us to critically examine not just the way we teach on a day-to-day basis, but the prep work and organization we do before the course begins. Does our course design — including assigned readings, assessments, and daily activities — reflect a diverse array of identities and perspectives? Am I having my students read a bunch of monographs, all authored by white males, for example? And if I am, what am I telling students about how knowledge is produced in my field, and more important, about who is producing it?

Even such quotidian practices as in-class videos or case studies ought to be examined. What types of people do my students see when they watch a video featuring an expert in my discipline? Do the experts look like my students? In my teaching, am I mostly relying on one pedagogical method, where I might be able to connect with a wider array of students by differentiating the types of instruction I use? What assumptions am I making about my students' prior experiences and educational opportunities when I ask questions in class or design my exams?

It values discernment. As faculty members, we must regularly ask ourselves: What biases am I carrying, and how do I counteract their effects? Biases that both we and our students carry with

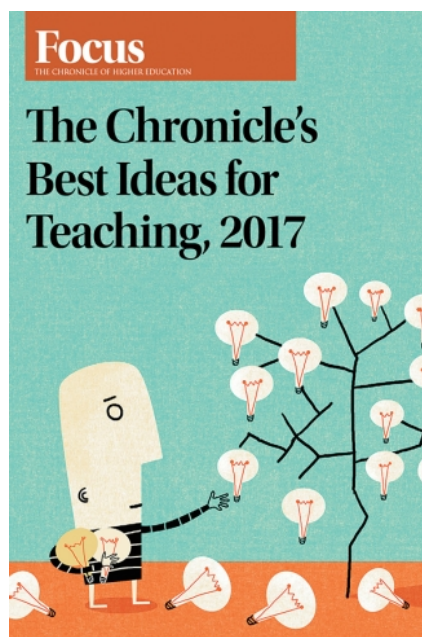
us, for example, can influence class discussion in powerful ways. Inclusive pedagogy involves being aware of such tendencies and intervening to mitigate their effects.

That's true not just within the classroom environment, but in the web of interactions students experience. A campus-climate survey might reveal, for example, vastly different experiences for white students and students of color in such key locations as the bursar's or financial-aid offices. As more and more institutions expand their developmental course offerings, particularly in composition and math, how are students identified as candidates for remedial education? Are instructors in those courses familiar with the research on stereotype threat? If not, there is a very real chance of exacerbating the already-significant problems that make developmental courses a persistent obstacle to student success.

Those are no small concerns for institutions that want to eliminate the pronounced racial disparities in their persistence and completion rates. Inclusive pedagogy requires us to consistently practice this type of discernment, and to realize that all of us are embedded in a larger cultural context where inequities and power imbalances exist.

It values a sense of belonging. How do we erode those old inequities and power imbalances in the classroom? By intentionally using teaching strategies that promote a sense of belonging, a critical element of student learning, and thus, of student success writ large. Active-learning techniques — like sharing the responsibility for leading discussions or framing classroom expectations with our students — show them they indeed belong in this "scholarly space" and give them the confidence to engage with the course and one another. A well-organized class that invites regular student participation is a critical element in fostering a sense of belonging.

And belonging matters. We know that students learn better — and can engage with more complex material — when they feel socially connected to one another and the class. We know classroom climate matters, and that negative emotional connotations disrupt the learning process, sometimes seriously.



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The 10 articles in this collection describe innovative teaching strategies — not just high-tech ones, like webcast introductory courses, but low-tech ones, like peer instruction, learning communities, and reconsiderations of the canon.

We can design all the summer-bridge and first-year programs we want, but if we neglect pedagogy, then we're building a really nice house only to furnish it with stuff we found on the curb. Likewise, if the student-life and the academic-affairs folks aren't talking about how they can complement each other's efforts, then how can the institution hope for comprehensive improvement? Piecemeal planning produces piecemeal outcomes.

But student success — especially for African-American and Latino/a students — is a systemic question that demands systemic efforts to answer. It's never been more important for us to make that effort. If we mean what we say about the intrinsic value of higher education, then we must ensure not just access, but success. Inclusive teaching promotes the effective and meaningful learning that's the vital foundation for student success

Beyond even that benefit, though, by focusing on inclusive teaching, we benefit our own institutions by keeping more students on our campuses and enabling them to graduate. Given the climate in which most of us are operating, there's simply too much to lose by not committing to inclusive teaching. Conversely, we have everything to gain.

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