



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Nontraditional Students: The Importance of Getting There

Before I started teaching at Prestonsburg Community College about nine years ago, almost all my experience had been in universities. I had little or no knowledge of community colleges or the people they served. So, my first years at this college were very trying. It seemed I could not reach half the students I taught. Just when I began thinking they understood the material, their test performance would destroy all such preconceived ideas in one fell swoop. It was so demoralizing. The accelerated students would do well, but they comprised the minority.

I soon learned that I was not the only new teacher who had gone through this. It was about a year after joining the college that one of my colleagues, now retired, insisted that if I wanted to "survive" here, I would have to "water down" the course material. He assured me that he and others had done it, ostensibly so the students could get through their courses and graduate. Since I believed the students needed to know *all* the material, I decided not to take his sage advice.

As a result, I continued struggling to find ways to approach each topic in a thorough, yet palatable way during class. Being a proponent of teacher-prepared instructional objectives, I found myself at every semester break reworking and rewording the objectives to try and fit their abilities, while striving to keep intact every concept they needed to understand and apply. To be perfectly honest, there were days, even weeks, at a time when I would ask myself why I was here, why I was doing this. "It's just no use," I would say under my breath. "These people simply do not have the ability to understand."

How wrong I was. At some point, and I cannot say exactly when, I began to realize that it was because I didn't understand the students and where they were coming from that I was having such difficulty. I had no idea of the adversity so many had endured, or how poorly they had been educated. Many had not gone beyond eighth grade, and who knows how much they had learned up to that point, knowing how public schools tend to push slow students through, regardless of learning achievement. And, many of those who had learned well and gotten through high school, or most of it, were not encouraged by high school personnel to go

on to college, because they were too poor. Hence, marriage became the pre- and post-graduation option in the majority of cases, often followed by years of marital abuse.

Gradually, I came to know many of my students on a more personal basis. I learned about some of their problems, anxieties, and fears, which they would openly share with little encouragement. Often, they would bring their small children to class with them, if there was no school in the surrounding counties, because there was no one to care for them at home and not enough money for day care or a sitter. Several students have multiple health and/or emotional problems, which cause them to miss classes sometimes. Others may miss after having been beaten up the night before by an irate spouse, or because of a family illness. (I quickly learned that eastern Kentuckians are extremely family-oriented and would walk 100 miles to care for a sick relative or dear friend!)

In short, I learned of the numerous and amazingly diverse things that put great demands on the average nontraditional student at our college. If they were all "A" students to begin with, I would say they could probably take it. But, as we all know, most are not. So many of them have to struggle simply to get to the academic level at which they should be to *be* in college. One can only guess how they are able to handle the rest of their lives with such a burden. When I began to realize all this, my entire perspective on students changed. I found myself admiring their determination, feeling their myriad problems, and understanding their learning capabilities.

During this "metamorphosis," I also learned that our students need a lot of help in organizing themselves in order to have time for everything—e.g., school, work, private and social life, children, etc. In addition, most need to learn how to take notes in class and how to study effectively. While I could address these last two issues and have, I was at a loss to tackle the first. Only the students could do that.

Hence, an idea for a potential project started to form in my mind. It was the students' continued courage and tenaciousness about getting through college—no matter what—that convinced me to go forward with the idea.



It entailed nontraditional students, from this and other post-secondary schools in the region, voluntarily writing an essay about how they were managing through college, from as many aspects as possible: financing the education, arranging for child care, studying, eating and sleeping, hanging onto a job, and handling personal relationships under such trying conditions.

They followed a general outline which I had prepared as a guide, but were urged to include in their essays whatever they believed might be helpful to others in managing through college. The plan was to put all the best essays together in booklet form and avail copies to new and prospective students. I envisioned this as a great way to help them be more successful during their college career, having this booklet of "handy tips" from their peers. In turn, this might help enrollment a little—a growing concern for colleges in the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS).

As the essays came in, however, it became glaringly apparent that, to the majority of these students, the most important aspect of their college education was not how they were managing through it, although they dwelt on this sufficiently, but rather how they managed to get to college in the first place!

"Oh, no!" I thought. "This isn't going at all as planned! They aren't giving me enough 'handy tips'!"

Sad, tragic, amusing, uplifting stories, one after another, reached my hands, mainly from women, but several from men, until I had about 100. By choosing to focus on their past lives and the events leading up to their decision to enter college, a much more important message was being delivered than the anticipated "handy tips." They hadn't even graduated from the college, at that point; yet, to them, they had already "succeeded." They had overcome sometimes incredible odds to get where they were when they wrote those essays. After everything that some of them had been through, being in college probably seemed like a "piece of cake." Instead of fighting obstacle after obstacle in their lives, they were happily facing challenge after educational challenge. They had become someone they liked and were quite proud of their accomplishments.

Thus, the name and intention of the project was altered. No longer would it be a reference for incoming students when they needed to know what to do in a given logistical, physical, or financial situation. It would be a booklet that a student who was losing heart, or a prospective student who was lacking courage to take that *first step*, could read in order to gain, or regain, strength and determination.

Just as important, the booklet would also be something through which faculty and administrators, newly joining the KCTCS, could acquaint themselves with the unique character of the students whom they would be teaching and guiding. In fact, it was with this purpose in mind that essays were solicited from seasoned faculty and administrative personnel, in the KCTCS, Pikeville College, and Morehead State University, on their personal reflections and experiences with eastern Kentucky nontraditional students. They appear within the pages of the booklet, interspersed between those of the students. Aptly titled, "If I Can Do It, You Can," the booklet is now in press and will be available spring 1999.

So, it is not only achieving an acceptable GPA, or fitting in the job market, or fulfilling their dreams that could spell success for the average nontraditional student in central Appalachia. After all, in reality, what good is an acceptable GPA if you can't get a job, and how many of us really wind up fulfilling our professional or vocational dreams, anyway? Important as they may be, it is the sense of self-respect and worth gained from taking that *first step* into college and sticking it out until they finish that is the true, longest-lasting reward for these students. Throughout all their stories, there is a thread of personal, emotional triumph. And it is this thread which will guide the reader to a greater understanding of the strength and courage of the nontraditional students from this region of Kentucky.

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