

**NURTURING THE SPECIAL STUDENT:
UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH CHALLENGES**

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ABSTRACT

Students with various backgrounds and conditions can benefit from special nurturing and support. Discussed are the cases of international students, students on the autistic spectrum, first generation college students, and students with learning disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

A large number of very promising students face conditions or backgrounds that make the college experience especially challenging. This session considers constructive means to encourage, advise, motivate, communicate with, and stimulate students facing cultural, personality, or learning style challenges in reaching their potential within the college environment. Challenges within the context of marketing and other business courses are emphasized.

High rates of immigration and impressive rates of college attendance among many immigrant groups have resulted in a large number of students who struggle with the English language and with cultural expectations in a new country. Beginning in college, this group is likely, at the same time, to experience a considerable increase in reading and writing assignments as well as a novel social environment (Li 2003). Likewise, first generation college students face significant challenges in the college environment.

Students with various learning disabilities similarly face problems in the college environment (Hitchings et al. 2001; Troiano 2003). These students may or may not have a diagnosed condition and may or may not receive special accommodations through disabled student services. Students who have various learning disabilities often have tremendous potential, but face problems when required tasks involve specific areas of challenge (Troiano 2003). Hitchings et al. (2001) found that many students with learning disabilities had difficulty describing their challenges. Thus, it is helpful for instructors to be familiar with the challenges typically faced by specific groups of students.

It is sometimes difficult to "draw the line" as to what accommodations may be reasonable (Vogel et al. 1999). For example, students with some learning challenges may find group projects intensely frustrating, yet exempting a student from a major course component may fundamentally alter the required experience. It is therefore important to understand how the need and/or desire for accommodation arises and how concerns can be most equitably addressed.

STUDENTS ON THE AUTISTIC SPECTRUM

Lars Perner discusses students with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) or other autistic spectrum conditions. These students often excel in certain areas but have

challenges in others (e.g., strong quantitative but poor verbal skills or vice versa). In addition, students with AS often have difficulty understanding certain abstract ideas, organizing tasks, expressing themselves orally or in writing, and understanding subtle, non-verbal communication (Perner 2002). AS is quite common, with an incidence as high as one percent among males, but appears to be greatly under diagnosed. Because many college students with AS are "high functioning" enough to have coped quite well in a high school environment, an instructor familiar with AS may recognize these traits in a student who has not been formally diagnosed, and this insight may help identify suitable pedagogy.

A common characteristic of autistic spectrum conditions is intense preoccupation with certain favored subjects. Thus, a number of students on the spectrum may actually thrive in the college environment. In fact, it is suspected that high functioning autism is quite common in academia. However, performance across disciplines may be highly uneven, with the student showing strong skills in one area (such as verbal ability) and very poor skills in another (e.g., mathematics).

Students on the autistic spectrum will often experience problems working in unstructured environment. This is why group work can be even more frustrating than it will be to ordinary students. Surprises—such as the rescheduling of an exam or a change in project requirements—can cause considerable discomfort. These students may also be highly vulnerable to sensory over-stimulation. Additional information may be found at <http://www.ProfessorsAdvice.com>.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

David Ackerman discusses the issues involved with teaching marketing to international students. International students have traditionally been more attracted to the accounting and finance fields, which are perceived as more quantitative. Recently, however, more have taken up marketing. There are three broad areas of concern that distinguish international students from domestic students (Collingridge 2000). The first is communication. English is often not the primary language of international students. The second is culture, which influences expectations regarding student-instructor interaction. Lastly, the career and legal outlook is different for international students, something that can affect the nature of mentoring relationships.

FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Barbara Gross discusses the challenges faced by first-generation college students. As higher percentages of the population seek education beyond high school (U.S. Census Bureau 2004), first-generation college students make up a growing, and typically less prepared, proportion of our classrooms. As compared with the children of college-educated parents, students who are the first in their families to attend college have typically overcome more obstacles to get there, and often must work harder to stay there (Henry 2000; Steel 1997).

Many parents who have attended college communicate both implicitly and overtly to their children the value of higher education. They also frequently take directive action in support of their children's educations, such as in recommending college preparatory classes, in encouraging the development of time-management and study skills, and even in providing educational opportunities to compensate for real or perceived weaknesses in high school programs.

Parents who have had their own college experiences help their children form realistic expectations and can forewarn them of potential pitfalls. Students whose parents have succeeded in college typically have confidence in their own abilities to do the same, and can rely on a ready source of support and advice when encountering difficulties.

These and other advantages are less commonly afforded first-generation students, simply because their parents lack the benefit of first-hand experience. The special session discusses the challenges faced by first-generation college students, their implications, and how we as educators can facilitate the success of this growing population.

STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Deborah Heisley is active in the special needs community. Her son has special needs and she serves on the board of two outstanding institutions that serve children with special needs; The Frostig Center in Pasadena California and The CHIME Institute, affiliated with CSUN. She will present some findings based on 20 years of research conducted by the Frostig Center that defines six success attributes of children with learning disabilities. By understanding how students with learning disabilities can be successful, faculty are better prepared to contribute to their success.

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