

Teaching College Freshmen

Summary of Chapter 1: From High School to College

Bette LaSere Erickson and Diane Weltner Strommer's *Teaching College Freshmen*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991, pp. 3-23.

As Erickson and Weltner state in the opening of Part One of their book, "Effective teaching of undergraduates begins with freshmen, and we think it begins with understanding them" (1). They then devote three chapters to describing the world which the students come from, the adjustments they have to make upon entering college, and their learning styles and current state of intellectual development. Even though I taught freshmen for over thirty years, I found many new insights in all of these chapters and became eager to discuss them with colleagues and to apply them to my teaching of first-year college students. Consequently, I would like to share some of the highlights of the first chapter in this essay. Several copies are available in the Teaching Resources Center, Walker Hall (LB2331, E76).

Noting that faculty have always complained about the preparation and dedication of students, the authors claim, however, that there is a clear shift in kind and degree of differences between former students and the present ones: "the sense that most faculty share that today's freshmen are different from their predecessors, more disengaged, and more difficult to reach and teach, is probably accurate, even at highly selective institutions" (4). It is important to remember that the authors do not describe these differences in order to condemn the students or to give teachers an excuse for failing to teach the current students. Their goal is to give teachers the information to enable them to reach these students and to integrate them into the learning community.

Although there are exceptions, the evidence supports teachers' suspicions that students are less prepared and less committed to academic pursuits than they were twenty years ago. However, "Students are not responsible for their culture" (5); they are victims of it, just as are the high schools from which they graduate.

Several factors indicate that students are entering college with reduced academic training: (1) graduation requirements often allow students to enter their senior year with few remaining required courses; (2) students are often allowed to replace more rigorous academic courses with electives and personal service courses; and (3) sometimes the academic courses themselves are not standardized or adequate for college preparation. Moreover, several factors combine to make students enter college freshmen courses with a decided lack of commitment: negative experiences with these courses in high school, a similarity of titles in the high school and college courses that leads students to think they already know this material, and the idea that in college one should be able to pursue courses related to one's career goals.

Teaching practices, both in high school and college, frequently help create disengaged students. High school teachers often rely too heavily on memorization and require little rigorous academic

discipline all the while developing a personal relationship with the students. College freshmen expect that same supportive personal relationship with the college professor. The supportive relationship in high school between the student and the teacher is probably especially strong with the better students; thus, the better students may be especially vulnerable in the shift to the university with larger classes and less personal attention from the professor. In addition, in high school material is usually covered in class, requiring little outside reading, and testing is more frequent and lacking in demands for critical thinking. Consequently, students enter college with little understanding of what is needed, even though they think they will have to study harder when they are in college: they end up trying to do more of what they did in high school. They have not developed the reading (generally being able to learn material from class presentation rather than reading the text) and analytic skills that are demanded of them in the university.

Erickson and Strommer note that although college teachers cannot blame students for these situations, they can refuse to perpetuate them-in spite of the evidence that such a process has been occurring whereby college instructors often strike the same bargain with students as had the high school teachers: assembling readers since students are not likely to go to the library, relying on secondary rather than original sources, covering assignments in class since students are not likely to have read them in advance, relying more on quizzes and less on research papers or fieldwork, avoiding group assignments that require students to meet on their own time.

Two factors in the high school student's experience lead to problems of time management while in college. The fixed schedule of high school classes with little demand for home work does not train students to develop skills for managing their own schedule and for taking responsibility for their learning. Perhaps more distracting is the rapid growth of student entrance into the work force. By the senior year many students are able to leave the school early for part-time jobs, or they work long hours after school. This work pattern also interferes with the student's commitment to educational pursuits.

Another dramatic shift in the nature of entering freshmen reflects changes in the makeup of college classes. The authors list 14 of the changes that affect the type of student that instructors may encounter, including a higher proportion of high school students entering college, more students beyond the age of 25, more students working while attending classes, more students who need remedial classes as well as more who have taken college courses while in high school, more part-time students. Besides these educational differences there are more students from minority or immigrant backgrounds, more from single-parent or step-parent homes, more with English as a second language, more with learning or physical disabilities. In addition, the students are largely the product of a television society. All of these factors combined mean that faculty are facing a classroom filled with students much different from those characteristic of the instructors' own generation.

Again, the authors remind the reader that such changes do not need to lead to reduced academic expectations, quoting from a report of the National Governors' Association of 1986: "Access without quality is a cruel deception, while quality without access is betrayal of the cherished American ideal of equal education opportunity and the belief that it is important to educate all children" (18).

The last section of the chapter deals with "Attitudes, Values, and Goals." Even allowing for wide individual differences and differences in campuses, the overwhelming goal of current college freshmen is preparation for a successful career (for confirming and more recent information in this area see Mary Geragjty, "Students: Finances Are Becoming More Crucial in Students' College Choice, Survey Finds," Chronicle of Higher Education, 17 Jan. 1997: A41). Along with the increased emphasis on financial success as a goal for entering freshmen has come a dramatic drop in the interest of developing a meaningful philosophy of life. Statistics support the idea that this shift in expectations for higher education for freshmen mirrors a similar shift in the culture at large. Some of this reaction is a realistic response to diminishing job prospects along with increasing numbers of students graduating from colleges. Also, even though former college graduates say they value a liberal education, they do not tend to favor these areas when hiring.

While entering college freshmen still have broader hopes to create happy, productive lives, they are less confident of their possibilities of achieving the American dream and of making a significant contribution to social improvements. In fact, they may enter college with too many goals, personal and professional, to be achieved in four years. For teachers to work effectively with these students, they need to understand the high school and cultural world from which they have just emerged and at the same time maintain high expectations, being "equally sensitive to their potential to meet our highest standards" (23).

The next chapter "The First Year: Coping with Challenges and Changes" gives a very clear picture of the pressures that current college freshmen face in their transition to the university environment and suggestions for how understanding these pressures can assist faculty in helping students adjust to and succeed in the new environment.

Getting Additional Help

If you have any questions or suggestions, please contact our office in Russell 212, phone (540) 831-6510, or lstewart@runet.edu.

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