**Teaching Newsletter: A Conversation at Harvard, 9/28/2017**

September 28, 2017

**Inclusion at the Elites**

Elite colleges are enrolling more first-generation and low-income students, and from a greater diversity of ethnic and racial backgrounds, than in the past. But many of these students come from high schools that didn’t necessarily prepare them for the academic rigors ahead. They’re also entering campuses where wealth, privilege, and expectations of success surround many of their peers, making them wonder if they truly belong. How do you help these students fill in the gaps and pursue their ambitions?

That was the big question behind a [summit](https://www.bokcentersummit.info/) on academic inclusion last week at Harvard University, which drew leaders from the Ivy League and other elite colleges. The questions they’re wrestling with are relevant to many colleges, not just those that can demand perfect SAT scores or hold multimillion-dollar endowments. Here are a couple of highlights:

Students from underresourced high schools may never have written long research papers, worked in study groups, or taken higher-level math. Yet these are all strong indicators of college success, noted Rakesh Khurana, dean of Harvard College. Moreover, many underprepared students, who might have been valedictorians of their senior class, don’t recognize these deficits until they set foot on campus and are shocked to discover how far behind they are. That can lead some to pull back rather than ask for help.

To counter these challenges, many colleges have created programs to provide early academic supports and introduce incoming students to concepts like peer mentoring, intensive writing, and building relationships with professors. A big benefit for students in such programs is an increased level of involvement and satisfaction. And that correlates strongly with persistence.

Students from underrepresented groups often feel torn between worlds: They’re presented with countless opportunities while the communities they came from face enormous challenges. How can colleges bridge those worlds and enable students to give back while also pursuing their own ambitions? Joanne Berger-Sweeney, president of Trinity College, in Connecticut, was one of several speakers who suggested colleges create meaningful service projects with community partners.

And, finally, a big question: How much do you ask your students to assimilate, and how much do you ask the college itself to change? That question popped up in countless discussions — about restructuring weed-out courses to build in more academic supports, changing campus culture so that assumptions of privilege are not the norm, and rethinking admissions goals to more accurately reflect national demographics.

That got us wondering: What are some of your successes and challenges in creating academically inclusive campuses? Please share your thoughts with me at [beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com](mailto:beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com).

**Improving Group-Work Assignments**

Employers often say that one of the first things they look for in graduates is the ability to work well in teams. And so it’s no wonder that group work is a frequent teaching tool. The problem, as one expert once [told](http://www.chronicle.com/article/In-Assigning-Group-Work-to/231355?cid=tn) *The Chronicle* is this: "Students hate group work. Even faculty hate group work."

How can you make group work better? A few clues can be found in a recent [study](http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0181336), published in *PLOS ONE,* by biologists at the University of Washington and Arizona State and Florida International Universities. The scholars looked at students’ content mastery of biology, as measured by the change in their scores on an eight-question test that they took before a class lesson and again after class. The researchers also gathered data on students’ impressions of in-class group work. The students were randomly assigned to two different group activities: One was loosely structured, in which students worked together in a group for the entire class period. The other was a “jigsaw” activity, in which students, at first, work alone on a specific aspect of the lesson and then form groups to teach one another the material they’ve just learned.

Students' growth in content mastery tended to be lower if they said that someone dominated their group, and it was higher if they reported feeling comfortable. And if they were in the group that did the jigsaw activity, they were far less likely than those who did the loosely structured activity to think that someone dominated their group.

The researchers weren't sure why the jigsaw activity seemed to discourage students from dominating groups.  But they noted that jigsaws tend to cultivate interdependence and collaboration. The jigsaws that were assigned to students in their study also included explicit prompts that guided them through the activity. "Perhaps it was these prompts, which promoted turn-taking," the authors wrote, that encouraged students to facilitate learning instead of lecturing and "aided group equity."

**The Virtues of Feedback**

Many traditional-age students showing up on campuses today arrive expecting to work in groups, as Jillian Maxey, a Ph.D. candidate in comparative theology at Boston College, observed in this [reflection](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Reflections-From-a-Millennial/241164?cid=tn) in *The Chronicle*. As a millennial teaching other millennials, Ms. Maxey knows that her generation expects other things, too. "We’re used to working in groups, have a positive self-image, and crave feedback," she wrote.

She feeds her students’ craving for feedback by commenting extensively on their  assignments. It has become her favorite part of teaching. "This is where," she writes, "I have gotten to know them individually — how they think, what their assumptions are."

The faculty at Andrews University came to a similar realization about the value of feedback, as described in a recent [publication](http://nsse.indiana.edu/pdf/LFF_4.pdf) from the National Survey of Student Engagement, which is known as Nessie. The insights came from two survey items in particular — on the extent to which students said they received feedback on a draft or work-in-progress, and how prompt and detailed the feedback was on tests or assignments. Andrews's institutional researchers saw that their scores on these items were lower than they were at comparison institutions.

Professors were skeptical of these results at first. But a follow-up questionnaire yielded insights. Professors, as it turned out, thought of feedback chiefly as “grades” and believed that a week was a reasonable time to provide them. Students, however, valued multiple forms of feedback — not just the grade. And they often wanted to receive it by the next class. Beckie wrote about this dynamic not long ago, in this [article](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Could-Grades-Be/240902?cid=tn) that talked about the value of descriptive comments on student work.

We often hear laments about how students care only about grades. Have you ever tried to emphasize descriptive feedback that, as this anecdote and case study suggest, students might sometimes prefer to grades? What was your experience? Please email me at [dan.berrett@chronicle.com,](mailto:dan.berrett@chronicle.com) and I may share it in a future newsletter.

As always, please feel free to share any thoughts or suggestions with us ([dan.berrett@chronicle.com](mailto:dan.berrett@chronicle.com) and [beckie.supiano@chronicle.com](mailto:beckie.supiano@chronicle.com)). If you’ve been forwarded this email and would like to sign up to receive it, please do so [here.](http://www.chronicle.com/page/Get-the-Teaching-Newsletter/709/)

-- Beth, Dan, and Beckie

*Correction (9/28/2017 at 5:00 p.m.):* This article initially referred to Jillian Maxey's last name incorrectly on the second reference.