



AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

FEATURE

Diversity at community colleges

How psychology professors and schools can help immigrants, single parents, veterans and other nontraditional students.

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September 2012, Vol 43, No. 8

Print version: page 38

Finding a good place to study is a concern for many students. But for one young community college student, the concerns went far beyond the usual problem of too many distractions: She was worried about freezing to death.

Thrown out of the house after her family discovered she was pregnant, the woman was living in her car in a Walmart parking lot. "She would always park by a light post so that she would have that light to study by," says a psychology professor who taught the student. "Once the school counselor and I talked her into going to a homeless shelter, her performance improved because she at least had a place to sleep."

While this case is unusually extreme, many students in community college face big challenges that can affect their classroom performance. Like the student above, they may be facing very difficult economic circumstances. They may be immigrants (</topics/immigration/index.aspx>) contending with linguistic and cultural differences, histories of trauma or fears related to their immigration status. They may be veterans (</topics/military/index.aspx>) struggling with traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder or the transition to civilian life. Or they may be single parents (</topics/parenting/index.aspx>) juggling school and family obligations.

"This is a sector of higher education with a unique mission," says Robin Hailstorks, PhD, who chaired the psychology department at Maryland's Prince George's Community College before becoming director of pre-college and undergraduate programs in APA's Education Directorate (</ed/index.aspx>). "Community colleges really see themselves as open access institutions for people from the local community."

Fortunately, says Hailstorks, psychology classes by their very nature offer information students can use to overcome challenges. And community college psychology instructors have developed strategies for fostering their students' resilience and helping them fulfill their potential.

"Students from certain kinds of backgrounds are more likely to see their needs being met at a community college," says Hailstorks.

Challenges and strengths

According to the American Association of Community Colleges

(<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Pages/default.aspx>), 42 percent of the nation's community college students are the first in their families to attend college. Thirteen percent are single parents, 12 percent have disabilities, 6 percent are non-U.S. citizens and 3 percent are veterans. Most community college students receive financial aid, which usually requires them to carry a full course load and maintain a certain grade point average — stipulations that can add to the pressures. (Similar data for four-year college students are not available, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.)

Community colleges typically offer remedial courses in reading, writing and other subjects. But students may still have linguistic challenges by the time they make it into a psychology class, says Linda L. Petroff, PhD, a social science and psychology instructor at Central Community College who teaches some Somali students drawn to Grand Island, Neb., for its job opportunities in local meatpacking plants.

Psychology's specialized vocabulary can add to the challenges, says Julie A. Penley, PhD, dean of instructional programs at El Paso Community College in Texas. "The vocabulary of psychology is really like a foreign language," she says, citing neuroanatomy and statistical terms as examples.

While the words may be difficult, many students identify with the concepts, says Petroff. When the class discusses Maslow's hierarchy, for example, students have pointed out their position in the hierarchy — in search of safety and food.

Immigrants (</topics/immigration/index.aspx>) may have histories of trauma, too. "They're often coming out of really horrific circumstances, especially if they're coming out of situations that involve war, conflict or time spent in refugee camps," says psychology professor Ruth Frickle of Highline Community College in Des Moines, Wash., whose students have included immigrants from Africa, Latin America and Asia. Students may also be facing immigration challenges, such as undocumented status and families split apart.

For single parents, says Petroff, the biggest challenge is often time management.

"They may have two or three part-time jobs as well as going to school full time," she says, explaining that work or family obligations often cause them to skip classes. "I stress that it's really important to attend [class] and talk about how school needs to be a priority versus just one more thing on their list."

The community college atmosphere can be especially difficult for veterans — even if they don't have physical or cognitive impairments — because they are so accustomed to a certain structure, communication style and respect for the chain of command, says Penley.

"When they come to community college, they don't see that, either with how classmates treat faculty members or even how faculty members treat students," she says.

Classroom strategies

But challenges can also be strengths.

"[These students are] bringing a world of experience into the classroom, which contributes to a unique classroom atmosphere," says Frickle. "They also bring with them some amazing kinds of skills because English is usually not their second language but their fourth or fifth."

Psychology professors are nurturing those strengths and promoting resilience among their students by:

- **Emphasizing attendance.** Petroff doesn't put course materials online because she wants her students to show up in the classroom. She urges single parents to have reliable babysitters plus a "Plan B" for when the usual arrangement falls through. That's good for their grades — and for their future role as employees, she says.
- **Repeating key points.** Don't just explain things once, says Petroff. Do it several ways, and provide outlines of each lecture for note-taking. Offer thorough reviews before exams. And allow plenty of time for questions in each class session. Frickle's students spend a few minutes at the end of each class writing down what they learned, what they want to learn more about and what they find confusing; she then clarifies "the muddiest point students have in common." She also gives her students the option of handing in second drafts.
- **Helping students save money.** When students are struggling to buy food or bus fare, class textbooks may seem like a luxury, says Frickle. Be aware of and compassionate about those challenges when assigning materials that come with a price tag, she says. Amazon.com, Half.com and the class's former students may offer texts at cheaper prices than the campus bookstore.
- **Encouraging students to seek help.** Most community colleges have on-campus tutoring services, writing centers and offices devoted to specific populations of students, such as veterans or those with physical or learning disabilities. But students are often reluctant to use these services or even ask their professors for assistance, says Frickle. "Students are often so used to coping all by themselves that they don't come and seek help," she says. Frickle uses a friendly tone on her syllabuses — which outline the purpose of assignments and the expected learning outcomes — so that students feel comfortable approaching her. Another strategy for countering students' reluctance to seek help is to require those who get less than 80 percent on a test to come in during office hours. Petroff encourages her students to pair up with "study buddies," who can provide copies of lecture outlines and notes if they have to miss class. And Penley uses examples from her own life, news stories and materials from APA's website both to illustrate subject matter and to show students that everyone faces challenges. "It lets students know that lots of people are going through things and what they report works," she says.
- **Referring students to counseling when needed.** "There's a fine line between teaching and counseling," says Petroff. She is willing to talk to students as their teacher but can't provide personal counseling. To maintain that boundary, she refers students to the campus counseling center. Frickle goes a step further: When a student shows signs of distress in the classroom or in writing assignments, she walks with them to the counseling center. "Culturally, there's often resistance to that," she says. "There are certain folks from different racial or ethnic backgrounds who have very good reason to be suspicious or cautious about psychological help."
- **Expecting success.** "One of the things you can do as a faculty member to support student success, regardless of what may be impacting their ability to succeed, is to constantly have clear expectations of success and communicate that consistently," says Frickle.

Most important, says Petroff, professors should simply encourage their students. Petroff goes out of her way to tell students that they wrote an essay really well or to congratulate them for understanding a difficult concept.

"Some come into school feeling like a failure before they even start," she says. "That colors their perception and their attitude toward learning."

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<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/09/diversity.aspx>