

Workshop Reflection

I attended the workshop titled “Accommodating Non-Traditional Students in the Classroom” by Erin Robinson on 10-17-07 in the FCTL conference room. There were about 10 attendees present to learn and discuss the specific needs of and strategies for helping “non-traditional” students. A non-traditional student is one classified as having any number of traits, such as being over 25, supporting a family, or having a full-time job and attending school part time. Erin first had us introduce ourselves and then led us through an interesting slide deck highlighting statistics regarding the rise in the number of non-traditional students, specific challenges these students face, needs they have, and strategies for accommodating those needs. After going through the slides, the group generated some observed differences between traditional and non-traditional students in our own classes, and then discussed classroom strategies for appealing to both groups.

My own experience with non-traditional students has been limited and generally not ideal. As I primarily taught an upper-level project-based course in computer science, the social differences between traditional and non-traditional students were often exacerbated as the two groups were forced to work together for a considerable amount of time. Besides a general aversion of the younger students to working with the non-traditional students (a generational phenomenon, I imagine), the most significant difficulty working with non-traditional students in the course was time management and scheduling. Thus, I was very interested to learn that this is a common problem for non-traditional students and to learn some of the reasons behind the problem. Supporting a family, taking care of children, and taking time from work to attend class all contribute to the stress that non-traditional students feel in returning to the classroom. These factors also put a premium on their time. Erin brought this topic up in her slides numerous times, and some of the participants shared stories of parents bringing their children to class, or calling to apologize for not being able to attend because of a family crisis.

While the problem of time management and scheduling is exhibited tenfold in the non-traditional students, traditional students share the problem to some extent but with different reasons. The workshop attendees observed that this common problem, while more pronounced for non-traditional students, could perhaps be addressed partially by strong classroom management techniques. Laying out precise learning objectives and explicitly matching course content and assignments to those objectives will help both traditional and non-traditional students understand that their time spent has a purpose. Making the time requirements, both inside and outside of class, explicitly defined in the syllabus at the beginning of the semester can help non-traditional students determine if a course can fit their schedule. Describing the grade values and expected content of assignments and exams can help the students prioritize their time, if necessary. Also, online learning may provide an avenue to help the non-traditional by allowing them to review course materials whenever time permits.

As Erin discussed in her slides, non-traditional students are a growing part of the college population, and as these students make their way into more classrooms, it is important for all educators to know of their special needs. I have quite a few takeaways from this workshop that I will (hopefully) one day be implementing in my own classroom. Most of the takeaways are described in the previous paragraph, though my general lesson learned has been to pay special attention to course planning and delineating expectations while allowing for flexibility in the nature of the deliverables required of the students. The (ongoing) life experiences of non-traditional students present a special challenge in accommodating them in the classroom, but also provide a valuable resource and perhaps a different view of the course and course material that would be missing otherwise. It is not only in the best interest of the non-traditional students to help them succeed in their education in whatever way possible, but also to the benefit of the class as a whole.