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The Benefits of Having Nontraditional Age Students in Your Classes

If asked the traditional age of a college student, most people would answer

between 18-22 years old. While for many colleges this is accurate, at our college we have some students that are above the age of 22, and designated nontraditional age students (Nontrads). These students are enrolling at an older age for several reasons. Some have had other careers, and finally mustered up the courage to start fulfilling their dream of getting a college degree. These students could also be the first in their family to go to college, and are designated First Generation students. Others started college at the traditional age, and then stopped attending (stopped out). The reasons for stopping out vary, and could be for academic reasons, financial instability, or family obligations. Some are transfer students that work full time, have been taking one or two courses at a community college, and are now moving on to a four year college. A fourth group are military veterans. These students served in the military for several years and are now just beginning their college careers. A final group are students who earned a Bachelor's degree at a traditional age, had a career, and are now back to take prerequisites for graduate or professional school.

The course where I see the greatest mix of all these students is in Principles of Biology I & II. These are the required courses for first year science majors on our campus. In a room full of students, the Nontrads can sometimes make up 20% of the class enrollment. This provides a unique environment that I really enjoy. While some of the Traditional age students might be intimidated at first to have an older student sit next to them, as the professor standing in the front of the room I have a different perspective. What I see when I look at the Nontrads is typically someone who is engaged from the first day of class, and ready to get to work. These students have had life experiences, and they know without a doubt that the college classroom is where they want to be at this point in their lives. They are focused and want to get the most out of this experience. Usually a Nontrad is the first to answer my questions, or raise their hands on the very first day of class. For me that first day experience is very important for all the students and getting them past the barrier of participating in class is important. Having a Nontrad start off right away by participating is a joy and the beginning of forming a community that is open to discussions. I encourage their engagement and this leads to more positive interactions. These interactions benefit the Nontrad as they may be a bit uncertain about starting college at an older age and getting the reassurance from the professor early helps ease their minds while building their confidence. It is no surprise that the Nontrads are the students whose names I learn first and then call on them by name (Student A). One pitfall is that they will start answering every question I ask, and to gently discourage this I will say to the entire class "Now Student A cannot answer all the questions, come on folks who wants to answer this question?" This allows me to get different students involved in the class without discouraging others.



Another unique quality found in the Nontrad student population is that they are not concerned about the test. Everyone knows what I mean by this, students that only want to understand and perhaps memorize information that they will be tested on in a few weeks. The Nontrads want to understand what they are learning at a deeper level and they find connections to the material that most of the Traditional students would not initially make. They bring their life experiences into the classroom and it benefits everyone. Some of our students want to go on to careers in health care (PA, MD, OD), and I often have Nontrads in the class who are currently working part time (or full time) as paramedics, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), or they were a medic in the military. They bring in real life examples of some of the principles that we are going over in class. I love to hear these stories as they bring the concepts to life for the entire class. These stories benefit all of us as they capture the attention of the students, engage them, and also provide me with yet another example of the concept we are discussing.

For the Traditional age student, the Nontrads are often active mentors to them in the classroom. During a break in class I will see the Nontrad explaining concepts to the Traditional age student sitting next to them. If the Traditional age student is receptive to this mentoring it will continue to occur throughout the semester. Being mentored by a Nontrad benefits the Traditional age student as they will then understand the material at a deeper level and any misconceptions can be addressed during class time. Mentoring benefits the Nontrad as they gain confidence in their knowledge. Because of this positive experience some of the Nontrads will become tutors in our tutoring center the following year.

I enjoy sharing stories about the Nontrads who have had interesting lives before they came to our college and will share a few favorites with you. One was a diamond broker, and then a massage therapist, before majoring in science. She will earn her Ph.D. in Biochemistry next year. Our commencement speaker last year was a plumber, who became a member of Phi Beta Kappa and won the Beta Chapter award for the highest GPA at our university. He is now in an MD-Ph.D. program. Our biology program award winner for the previous year was a diesel engine mechanic, who had attended every community college in the state before switching his focus to science. He is now in his first semester of a Ph.D. program in microbiology. The final example I will share is of our convocation speaker a few years ago. He told family and friends he did not need college, as he was going to be a rock star. After getting married, having two children, and realizing he did need college, he came to us after getting an Associate's degree at a community college. He earned his Bachelor's degree with a 4.0 GPA and is now in his second year of dental school. Having Nontrad students in the classroom benefits them, their classmates, and their professors. I am continually grateful they have decided to attend our college and look forward to having them in my classes in the future.



Patricia A. Halpin is an Assistant Professor in the Life Sciences Department at the University of New Hampshire at Manchester (UNHM). Patricia received her MS and Ph.D. in Physiology at the University of Connecticut. She completed a postdoctoral fellowship at Dartmouth Medical School. After completion of her postdoc she started a family and taught as an adjunct at several NH colleges. She then became a Lecturer at UNHM before becoming an Assistant Professor. She teaches Principles of Biology, Endocrinology, Cell Biology, Animal Physiology, Global Science Explorations and Senior Seminar to undergraduates. She has been a member of APS since 1994 and is currently on the APS Education committee and is active in the Teaching Section. She has participated in Physiology Understanding (PhUn) week at the elementary school level in the US and Australia. She has presented her work on PhUn week, Using Twitter for Science Discussions, and Embedding Professional Skills into Science curriculum at the Experimental Biology meeting and the APS Institute on Teaching and Learning.

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