“College: A Finishing School for Some, Glass Ceiling for Others”
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Equity in Education Research Guide:  http://libguides.shastacollege.edu/equity

Ensuring Class Isn’t Invisible in Your Classroom: Practical Strategies

1. Identify Class-Related Assumptions Underlying Class Policies and Practices

When we say “You need to be here for every class on time. No exceptions, no late or makeup work,” or “You must participate in class discussions,” what assumptions do we make? Do any of your syllabus policies or classroom practices make some of these assumptions?

1. Students have access to reliable transportation.
2. They have reliable internet access, a computer, and a printer at home.
3. If they are parents, they have access to reliable childcare.
4. If they are working, they are working less than 30 hours/week.
5. They are in control of their work schedule.
6. They are in control of scheduling their role as a primary mediator or crisis resolution person in family situations.
7. They are in control of scheduling caretaking responsibilities for family members.
8. They are getting enough to eat.
9. They have access to adequate housing.
10. They can pay for any textbooks, fees, or additional materials associated with your course.
11. They feel comfortable sharing their responses in class.
12. They are aware of and will contact campus resources as necessary.
13. The key element of their failure is their own lack of effort.

What ideas do you have regarding "student success" that may be based on class-specific assumptions? How might you alter your practices to be more inclusive of students' varying class experiences, rather than teaching toward an assumed middle-class background?

2. Identify and Discuss Class Background and Privilege

Use one of the following exercises as the basis of discussion for your own (and your students’) class background, biases, and privileges. These two exercises have been adapted from the APA Report from the Task Force on Resources for the Inclusion of Social Class in Psychology Curricula (2008).

**Exercise 1:**
This exercise is designed to make people more aware of power and privilege in our society. Since many privileges are implicit and invisible, this exercise aims to raise participants' consciousness about socioeconomic and class privilege. The exercise works best with 8 to 35 or so participants.

**Equipment Needed**
- List of privileges — Make as many copies of the Privilege List as there are participants. Then cut the privileges out so that they are all separated.
- A room large enough for the participants to sit around an open space and later to sit in a circle.
Time Needed
- At least an hour.

Instructions
1. Tell participants that you will read a privilege, and that they are to consider whether it applies to them. After reading the first privilege, put all of the written slips of paper for that privilege in the middle of the group. Give participants a moment to reflect and then to pick up a privilege if it applies to them. After they have finished, collect the privileges that participants have not taken and put aside or discard.
2. Tell participants that they are never obligated to pick up or not pick up a privilege slip, but what's important is to be aware of their thoughts, feelings and reactions as they make these decisions.
3. Then read the second privilege, and proceed as above.
4. When you have read all privileges and participants have selected the ones that pertain to them, ask them to count the number of privileges they are holding.
5. Then ask them to sit in a circle according to the number of privileges. To do this, they must share with each other their total number. On one side of the Instructor should be the participant with the least number of privileges. On the other side of the Instructor should be the participant with the most privileges.
6. Once the group is seated in order, ask the participants to talk about what it felt like to engage in this exercise. What were the feelings, which emerged when hearing privileges? Deciding whether or not to pick one up? Counting them? Sharing the number with others? Lining up based on number of privileges? Was there discomfort? Hesitancy? Shame? Pride? What do they think is behind those feelings?
7. Then ask the group to discuss what they notice in the line-up: Are there patterns, with regards to ethnicity and race, in terms of who has more privileges and who has less privileges? Are there other patterns?
8. Help the group to process what this exercise means to them, what they're surprised by and what they learned from it.

List of Privileges
- As a child, I never shared a bedroom.
- I've lived in a home with four or more bathrooms.
- As a child growing up, I never lived in a rented apartment.
- My family owns a summer home or second home.
- I've never worked at a fast food restaurant.
- I expect to get an inheritance from my family.
- No one in my immediate family has ever been on welfare.
- Neither of my parents ever collected unemployment benefits.
- I don't have to work in order to survive as a student.
- As a student, during the academic year, I never worked more than 10 hours a week.
- As a student, I was not eligible for need-based financial aid.
- I've never had to work a paid job on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.
- No one in my immediate family has ever been in jail.
- I've never bought anything using a layaway plan.
- I've always had health insurance.
- My family took vacations outside of our home state most summers.
- I've traveled to a country outside the United States where I have no relatives.
- I have a trust fund or stocks or bonds in my name.
- I have purchased and worn a pair of shoes that cost more than $100.
- As a student, I had a credit card that my parents paid for.
- My parents paid for part or all of the costs of college.
- I've never shopped with food stamps.
- I've never worked a paid job that involved an evening or night shift.
- I've never lived in a neighborhood that I considered unsafe.
- My parents bought my first car.
- At some time in my life, I've owned a brand new car.

**Exercise 2:**

Students are instructed as follows: Growing up in a class society, we've all learned attitudes about others and ourselves that help perpetuate the class system. These questions will aid you in becoming aware of the oppressions and/or privileges you've experienced because of your background and how they affect your life now.

Students respond to the following questions, then discuss any patterns in their responses in small or large group. Alternately, they might write a short narrative response.

**Money and Work**
- Who earned money in your family? How much? Did the income change?
- What were the attitudes about spending? saving? loaning/borrowing? accepting welfare?
- Did you feel you had enough? more or less than your friends?
- What kind of job did the money earners in the family have? How much control did they have at work?
- Who owned the work place?
- What were your family's/friends'/society's view of the status of that work?

**Home**
- What kind of neighborhood did you live in?
- Did you own your home?
- Did you move a lot? If so, why?
- Who lived at home? grandparents? older/married children?
- Who cleaned your home?
- How were feelings, especially anger, expressed?

**Education**
- How much "formal" education did your parents have?
- What were the expectations for your education?
- Are you the first generation in your family to attend college?
- What do you believe is the most important reason for a college education?

**Health**
- Did you get regular physical checkups?
- When you were ill, were you taken to a doctor? a hospital? a clinic?
- Did you go for regular dental exams and cleaning? Were your teeth filled?
- Did you have braces?
- How was smoking treated in your family?
- How was alcohol use treated?
- Was regular exercise considered important?
- What about participation in sports?
- What were the attitudes about food, eating in your family? What types of meals, snacks, drinks, desserts were common?

**Now**
- How would you describe your class background and current class status?
- How do you feel about your class background and status? (angry, ashamed, guilty...)
- Did your parents tell you that you were from a specific class?
- How do your attitudes about your work and money compare with those of your parents?
- Do you see yourself as upwardly or downwardly mobile?
- In groups, how do you see your power? How do you feel about, react to the power of others?
• How do you relate to people in school or at work who are in a different class?
• If you get in a financial jam, can your parents help you out financially?
• What are some examples of oppressions and/or privileges you experience now that relate to your class background?

If such exercises feel too close for comfort, show your students brief stories from the lives of other students:

The First Generation Digital Storytelling Project is a partnership between Jane Van Galen at the University of Washington Bothell and Class Action.

https://firstinourfamilies.org/

“Most importantly, we should never, under any circumstances, make an assumption about a student . . . about their values or culture or mindset—based on a single dimension of their identity . . . . The truth is, the ‘culture of poverty’ is a culture of classism, a culture most devastating to our most underserved students. And this is a culture worth changing” (Paul Gorski, “The Question of Class,” Teaching Tolerance, April 1, 2007).

3. Incorporate Course Materials that Address Class

You don’t have to teach psychology or sociology to address class in your classroom. What materials might you adopt to acknowledge class in your courses?

• Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Nickle and Dimed* in a composition course
• Issues of environmental equity in a natural resources course or course covering public policy
• Class mobility in a sociology course
• Meritocracy in an education course
• Income inequality in an economics course

4. Create Assignments and Assessments that Are Class- and Culturally Sensitive.

Create assignments and assessments that acknowledge students’ diverse backgrounds, knowledge, and experience:

• Use models and rubrics so expectations for assignments are clear and consistent
• Provide alternatives to traditional, high-stakes summative assessments (like multiple choice exams) when possible
• Provide frequent, ungraded or low-stake assessments to build students' confidence in their abilities and avoid surprises or anxiety on high-stakes summative assessments
• Devise assignments and corresponding summative assessments that encourage creative expression, collaboration, and the integration of students' lived experience with the course material:
  o *invented dialogues*—students synthesize their knowledge of issues, personalities, and historical periods into a carefully structured dialog
  o *annotated portfolios*—students reflect and comment on a body of their own work from the course.
  o *journals*
  o *concept maps*—drawings or diagrams showing the connections students make between a key concept and other concepts (or prior knowledge)
  o *group poster presentations*
  o *multimedia presentations*
  o *group-created websites*—opportunities for creative collaboration and drawing in personal experiences and backgrounds.
• Use **formative assessment** throughout the semester so that you understand your students' prior knowledge and so that they have a voice in how the course is progressing:
  o **focused autobiography**—students write a 1-2 pg. autobiographical sketch focused on a single successful learning experience in their past—an experience relevant to learning in your particular course.
  o **“muddiest point”**—students write down the "muddiest point" from the class period. Instructor can clarify at the next class.
  o **one-minute papers**—In the last 2-3 minutes of class, ask students to write down "What was the most important thing you learned during this class?" and "What important questions remain unanswered?" Collect and discuss at beginning of next class period.
  o **ticket out the door**—Students write down 3 things they learned, 2 questions they still have, and 1 quick response or comment to today's class.
  o **online class polls or brief surveys** that focus on specific aspects of the material, pace of the course, modes of delivery, etc.

5. **Reinforce Students’ Sense of Belonging and Community.**

Each of the following types of interventions has been demonstrated to improve students' performance and persistence.

• **Social-belonging interventions** reinforce students' sense of belonging early in their college experience by reassuring them that almost all students worry about belonging and that such worries generally fade with time.
  o Discuss situational attributes with students—assure them that concerns about succeeding at college are transitory and not diagnostic of their ability
  o Administer a brief writing assignment that asks students to reflect on how their feelings of belonging changed over time (late in their first term). This assignment reinforces students' awareness of their growing confidence in being able to navigate college.

• **Values affirmation interventions** "give students opportunities to reflect on personal values that bring them a sense of belonging and identity, such as relationships with friends and family, religion, or artistic pursuits" (Yeager, Walton, and Cohen 63).
  o This intervention reminds students of other values and abilities they have beyond the classroom, which consequently strengthens their confidence and performance
  o Structured writings that ask students to reflect on their personal values are timed to coincide with stressors during the year (large exams, etc.). Students' test scores rise accordingly.

6. **Connect Students with Resources**

Students are inundated with information during orientation and sometimes don't have questions until they hit our classrooms. Ensure that your students connect to important resources on campus—why not hand out a list of resources and contact information along with your syllabus? Resources on your campus may vary, but consider adding the following to your list to give to students:

• Childcare resources
• Resources for single parents
• Resources for first-generation college students
• Resources for low-cost/used textbooks
• Scholarships or programs that help students buy textbooks
• Resources for minority students
• Resources for veterans
• Resources for students with disabilities
- Campus counseling and health services
- Food and housing assistance
- Transportation assistance
- Phi Theta Kappa and Honors Program opportunities

**Ensuring Class Isn’t Invisible at the Institutional Level:**

- **New student orientations** that address possible differences in preparation for college based on social class and that provide strategies for accessing relevant resources (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014)
- **Funded access to technology and course material** (loans and scholarships for textbooks and course materials, move toward Open Educational Resource adaptation campus-wide, laptop check-out through the library)
- **Pathway programs** with support for first-gen students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Reading List**


