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### Fair and Equal

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## Fair and Equal

Deborah Bracke, PhD • March 17, 2017

“There is nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequal people.” This quote, attributed to Thomas Jefferson, is often used in gifted education to justify the attention, resources, and opportunities provided to those who are more academically talented than others. It’s intended to connote a sense of fairness, a feeling that not every student should have the same classroom experience. Rather, there should be an emphasis on *appropriate* instruction, instruction that is responsive to individual needs, interests, and abilities.

Yet the heat of the college experience often produces an uncomfortable state of tension between what is “equal” and what is “fair.” Many of us wonder whether both can be achieved simultaneously. Certainly, professors can adapt instruction so that a variety of needs can be met. But can teaching be personalized so that all individual differences and learning styles are privileged in every classroom?

Reaching everyone has become more challenging as our students have more varied backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. We have more international students, more students with identified disabilities, and more first-generation students. Our students vary in social class, sexual orientation, age, religious background, family support, and academic preparation. Significant gaps in ability and achievement also exist.

It is more important now than ever to know who our students are, to appreciate how they learn, and to offer suitable ways for them to demonstrate their understanding. It is very easy to lose sight of individual students when classes are large and this diverse. Yet the individual student should be our primary focus. I believe our collective ability to respond to individual learners will ultimately determine the success of our institutions.

Colleges across the country have taken a hard look at these changing demographics and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Many campuses have implemented a variety of academic initiatives, support services, and high-impact educational practices that respond to a “diverse and changing world.” In many respects, our resolve has produced worthwhile reforms in teaching (instruction that is more student centered), curriculum (content that is more skill based), and assessment (evaluation that is more evidence driven). But while these reforms are relevant to all areas of academic study, there is no clear consensus on how we can structure instruction to meet this variety of *individual* needs.

What steps are we willing to take to help those with a “less than perfect” precollege experience? And how can we maintain academic rigor while resolving the conflict between what is equal and what is fair?

I suppose this is where teaching can take on a new look. This is the spot where we, as college professors, could create a set of conditions that enable us to teach with more flexibility, greater responsiveness, and less rigidity. This necessitates an understanding that goes beyond the highly ritualized events of a midterm and final exam. It encompasses an instructional experience that is emergent, dynamic, complex, and contextual. Perhaps a more empathic grasp of the knowledge and skills that constitute varying levels of success is called for. Unlike the days when one standard and style *purportedly* fit all students, in today’s environment, it may be important to diversify our syllabi and provide alternate assignments. Perhaps we should develop a more expanded definition of success—one that supports preferred ways of learning and different ways of knowing. This may include additional contact hours, more student choice, varying response options, modified content, testing accommodations, and second chances. Supplementary outlines, pre-instruction, and other organizational supports may also be in order. Assignments might even have several access points with rubrics/assessments that address distinct learning profiles.

Most certainly, all this does not warrant lower expectations or a charitable *watering down* of the college curriculum. Ensuring that all students have the support they need to be academically successful is fundamental to a broader sense of human relations, social responsibility, and a concern for the good of others.

Maintaining standards and responding to individual students requires that our mindset be intentional and our assumptions well grounded. Yes, it may be less convenient to create instructional materials that meet the needs of a student from a minority culture. Yes, it takes time to adapt a teaching strategy to meet the needs of a student with a lower level of academic preparation. And yes, it may be troublesome to provide individualized outlines so that a student with an undiagnosed learning disability can excel. However, structuring our teaching so that we can anticipate and respond to student needs enriches our role as educators.

I believe we are poised to engage in a new and largely unfamiliar conversation. And although some may call me a hopeless romantic (or foolishly impractical), I believe it is time to reconcile the asymmetry between what is “equal” and what is “fair.” Being a teaching professor is a formidable responsibility, and there are times we must stretch our conventional views of the instructional experience. It will be a different journey for each of us, but with a watchful eye and a few small steps, we can reshape the subtext of teaching so that these two perspectives are compatible. Only by understanding where each of our students is coming from can we create the conditions that get them where they need to go.

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