

“Purposeful ‘Handholding’ May Be Necessary”

Analysis of available college student data clearly shows a continuous increase in the number of adult student enrollments. The majority of these “non-traditional” students are women. Many are minorities, have dependent children, and enroll in college as the result of a life-changing event. Published socioeconomic research proves these students typically have low incomes¹ and rely on external financial and social assistance to support their collegiate period. Clearly, these students face a plethora of challenges, not only to enrollment and attendance, but to persist until completion of their programs of study.

These were – and are – my students. Even though I am not currently working in formal adult higher education, I remain in close contact with a few dozen former students and continue to provide them with academic, career, and personal support. Further, my mother is an adjunct faculty member at a for-profit career college filled with the students described above, and I provide her with clerical and curriculum support. These students are in my heart, and I can’t abandon them.

I was raised in the waxing shadow of President Johnson’s Great Society. I believed then, as I do now, LBJ’s vision was extraordinary:

“The ‘Great Society’ rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning. . . . The ‘Great Society’ is a place where every child [or adult] can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents” (Johnson, 1964).

As LBJ told us, his vision is not a destination, but a recursive cycle. Perhaps it won’t happen “in our time,” but the dream is far from dead.

In a short, but powerful article addressed to her peers, Christine Johnson (2005) describes the exceptional program she oversees as President of the Community College of Denver. Ms. Johnson writes, “Access to higher education for low-income students is one American value that we must restore” (p. 30). As I read this article, I found the page turning blue from highlighter ink because, to me, it is a sermon designed to remind Americans, especially educators, administrators, and support personnel in higher education, that we are forty years late in fulfilling LBJ’s vision. Ms. Johnson (2005) reminds readers, “We have a moral mandate to uphold,” declaring

¹ Demographically, the majority of my students have met state and federal guidelines for extreme poverty classification.

“People must have an education beyond high school to fully participate in society. ...

Providing access to education for low-income and nontraditional students is the core mission for community colleges. ... However, providing open access to education is only the first step. Helping these students succeed is the second, more complicated step. ... Adult students need to find career paths and classes *that feed their souls and free them with knowledge*” (p. 30; emphasis added).

What does Ms. Johnson’s (2005) discourse mean for college student services? She places responsibility for supporting students’ success squarely on the shoulders of college faculty and staff. Ms. Johnson calls her prescription “the five P’s – passion, potential, patience, principles, and persistence” (p. 30). Faculty must exemplify a passion for teaching. Faculty and staff alike must show patience with non-traditional students because “they are pulled in 100 different directions – most leading away from college” (p. 30). Likewise, faculty and staff “must demonstrate each day the principles and values students need to fully participate in society” (p. 30) and “help students develop attitudes and strategies to face [numerous common] barriers” (p. 31). Specifically, Ms. Johnson notes challenges that generally fall under the purview of student services: balancing life demands (work, family, social life), paying for higher education, sufficient on-campus advising/counseling, and assistance with identity and intellectual development.

Ms. Johnson (2005) writes of her students, “Their efforts are nothing less than heroic” (p. 30), and this description applies equally to every non-traditional student I have had the pleasure and challenge of meeting. As Ms. Johnson so clearly reminds higher education faculty and staff personnel, it is more than our responsibility – it is our generational imperative – to “provide whatever support” non-traditional students require on their quest for college success, including “purposeful[ly]” “holding their hands” (pp. 30-31).

Resources

Johnson, C. (2005). Serving low-income adult students: What must colleges do? *The Presidency* 8(1), 30-32.

Johnson, L. B. The great society. Speech delivered at The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, on May 22, 1964. [Text and audio available on-line at <http://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/lbjthegreatsociety.htm>]