

# Thriving in Academe

## REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education ([www.podnetwork.org](http://www.podnetwork.org)). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson ([drobert@fiu.edu](mailto:drobert@fiu.edu)) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery ([mflannery@nea.org](mailto:mflannery@nea.org)) at NEA.

## Wanted: Inclusive Teaching Practices

You value diversity, know it enriches your courses, and want to help all of your students learn—but you’re short on inclusive teaching practices. Never fear: A concept called “stereotype threat” abounds with ideas for all disciplines and students.

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If you feel uncomfortable discussing stereotypes and diversity issues, this might be a great sign. Several studies suggest that those of us most committed to changing the status quo feel more uneasy with these discussions than those not overly concerned with matters of equity.

Our anxiety is also warranted. Students are more diverse than ever in practically every way: age, race, ethnicity, social class, parental level of education, country of origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious background, etc. Although we recognize these differences enrich our courses, how many of us can say our graduate studies prepared us to design inclusive learning environments? Sure, some of us took semester-long courses about teaching in our discipline, while others were required to attend “diversity training” sessions—yet it’s fairly evident that none of this was enough. No one-shot intervention will do.

This is why the concept of stereotype threat is such a valuable resource. It doesn’t try to reduce the challenges of teaching diverse students to a workshop or list of best practices. Instead, it offers a comprehensive approach to identifying the stereotypes that may be sabotaging your students’ performance and a selection of verified strategies you can use in courses of all shapes and sizes.



## White Men Can't Jump

Woody Harrelson may have defied the odds in *White Men Can't Jump*, but more than 20 years after that film the stereotype of African Americans' athletic superiority persists—even for miniature golf! When social psychologists asked men to complete a minigolf task described as a test of natural athletic ability, the white men in the study performed poorly compared to black men (Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999).

This was one of many studies about the phenomenon known as “stereotype threat,” a term first coined by UC Berkeley provost

AS HE REVIEWED THE DATA AND SAW THAT BLACK STUDENTS CONSISTENTLY EARNED LOWER GRADES... STEELE REJECTED THE POSSIBILITY THAT THIS REFLECTED THEIR INNATE ABILITY OR INTELLIGENCE

Claude Steele that describes what happens when we risk confirming a negative stereotype about our group. And while messing up on the golf course is innocuous enough, stereotype threat has been shown to affect

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performance on academic tasks and was actually first identified on a college campus.

In the late 80s, Steele was invited to the University of Michigan to help develop an academic support program for minority students. As he reviewed the data and saw that black students—even those with the highest SATs—consistently earned lower grades, Steele rejected the possibility that

## TALES FROM THE FIELD > DON'T ASSUME YOU KNOW IT ALL

**W**hen I first taught writing 11 years ago, I wasn't worried about diversity. I was too busy figuring out how to teach well enough to avoid student complaints! I also equated the term “diversity” with racial and ethnic diversity, oblivious to the fact that my

students were already more varied than previous cohorts in nearly every way. Also, and perhaps most naively, I figured that, as a well-educated Cuban-American woman in a largely Hispanic region, I could instinctively address the needs of my diverse students. Needless to say, being a member of

an underrepresented minority group proved to be insufficient “preparation” for effectively teaching adults; students who had just arrived from China, uneasy about their English-speaking abilities and unaccustomed to the norms of U.S. college classrooms; or students who worked

several jobs to support their families or to keep up with their peers’ privileged lifestyle. Thankfully, I attended workshops on working with second-language writers, enrolled in higher education classes to learn more about contemporary students and how to meet their needs, and

read everything I could get my hands on. So when I interviewed for my current job and was told one of my roles would be to use federal grant money to help faculty teach in more inclusive ways, I knew it wouldn’t be easy but at least I wouldn’t be starting from scratch.

this reflected their innate ability or intelligence. When he talked with students, he heard time and again that black students didn't feel they belonged. This feeling is likely even more widespread today: Many students—notably first-generation college students, and those from underrepresented and low socioeconomic backgrounds—arrive in our institutions with a great deal of anxiety about whether they belong or will be able to succeed.

Steele's intuition morphed into a multi-decade research agenda chronicled beautifully in his text *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Can Affect Us and What We Can Do* (2010), popular on campuses. Faculty are finding that the stereotype threat literature is just what they were looking for: a conceptual framework supported by research that helps them understand a powerful influence on student performance, and one that offers varied, concrete ways to make their teaching more inclusive.

## It's everywhere

Faculty are struck by the stereotype threat literature's breadth, and its compelling data and evidence. Here are a few examples:

In 1995, Steele and NYU professor Joshua Aronson studied African American students answering difficult verbal questions. When researchers said the test measured verbal ability, they scored considerably lower than white peers. Yet when the task was framed as a problem-solving exercise that did not

measure intellectual ability, that gap disappeared (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Women taking the AP Calculus test fared similarly when Educational Testing Service (ETS) asked half of test-takers to report their gender before the test (as is routinely done), and the other half to provide this information after the test. For the lucky latter group, the stereotype of males' mathematical superiority was not primed. In fact, women outperformed men. By some calculations, if the ETS were to implement this change, nearly 4,700 female students would

## BECAUSE THE RESEARCH STUDIES USED SUCH CLEVER AND VARIED INTERVENTIONS, THEY ALSO REPRESENT INVALUABLE PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES

earn AP calculus credit each year (Danaher & Crandall, 2008).

To counter the suspicion that only "weak" groups like underrepresented minorities or women could be affected by stereotype threat (yep: another lingering bias), Aronson conducted a study of students he jokingly describes as the "whitest and brightest," white male engineering Stanford students. You guessed it: Even they cracked. When

told the study was about the supposed mathematical superiority of Asian students, white students' performance dropped significantly (Aronson et al., 1999).

## Turning the tide

Here's the good news: The negative effects of stereotype threat can be reduced, sometimes even eliminated. And because the research studies used such clever and varied interventions, they also represent invaluable pedagogical strategies. The resources below provide more ideas and details, but for now, here are five additions to your inclusive teaching toolbox:

1. Assure students the task is fair. When we don't say anything prior to important tasks (like tests), stereotype threat may negatively impact students' performance. Stating explicitly that the test is gender- or race-fair can alleviate the threat. You could say, "I've used this test for many years now, and I've never noticed a difference in performance for any student group." It also helps to remind students the test is being used to facilitate and evaluate learning; it cannot measure innate ability.
2. Avoid triggering the stereotype. Something as simple as writing one's name on an exam can remind students of their gender, race, and/or ethnicity and corresponding biases, so small procedural modifications can make a big difference. Perhaps use a numerical

## BEST PRACTICES > BRINGING IT HOME

"I have a memory of the first time I realized I was black," Steele (2010) writes. When he was 7 or 8, he found out he could swim in the local pool on Wednesdays only—simply because he's black. What hurt the most was the fact that the restriction was based on something he couldn't control.

Aronson's (2012) examples

are more lighthearted, like the times he would confront the stereotypes that Jewish people are stingy or like to show off their money. He described it as a "stereotype trap!"

The point is that self-reflection is a great first step toward recognizing what many of our students experience every day. Whether you're a woman in a pre-

dominantly male field, look older or younger than your peers, speak English as an additional language, etc., you've probably "been there."

In fact, stereotypes about the professoriate affect us all. Yes, faculty have become increasingly diverse, but the part of the professor continues to be played by a white, gray-haired man in rumpled



clothing—and those of us who don't fit this mold may sometimes feel like imposters. In times like these, try another intervention: self-affirmation. Remind yourself of the skills and characteristics that have gotten you this far. You have a lot to affirm!

code or ask for students' names on the last page of the exam, as one FIU faculty did. At the same time, it can be helpful to trigger a positive in-group characteristic, as in reminding our students that they're college students.

3. Give wise feedback. That is, give critical feedback in a way that makes it clear the criticism and suggestions reflect your high, consistent standards. This is most powerful when we assure students we have faith in their ability to attain the high standards, and reinforce this message through devoting time and effort to helping them succeed (Cohen, Steele, Ross, 1999).
4. Remind students their minds are malleable. Many students enter our classrooms with what Carol Dweck (2008) calls "fixed mindsets," they may think they're good at math, bad writers, etc. When we teach them their minds are like muscles—the more we use them, the better they work—it changes how they react to academic struggles. Instead of interpreting a bad grade as confirmation that they're not "college material," students may reflect on how much or how effectively they studied.
5. Help students feel they belong. Assure them their anxieties about belonging or ability to succeed are common and will subside, and teach them unspoken rules of college success; for instance how to navigate the environment and study effectively.

As Glenn, Taylor and Drennan (2010) remind us, "Unless we challenge our pre-conceived notions—stereotypes—whether positive or negative, and recognize that our students may be adversely affected by stereotype threat, whether or not we harbor the personal prejudices in question, we will fail to create an inclusive environment where all students feel valued and empowered to perform optimally" (p. 3).

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## ISSUES TO CONSIDER

### STEREOTYPE SEARCH

How can I tell which stereotypes might be affecting my students? First, think about the specific topics/competencies you teach, your discipline, department, and institution. For each, think about relevant stereotypes about who typically succeeds, images of exemplars in the field, examples used in textbooks, etc. These may be based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, academic preparation, etc. As the stereotype threat literature has demonstrated, some of the most salient and damaging ones concern women's ability to do math and science, the overall academic ability of black and Hispanic students, particularly if they are athletes, and the intellect of non-native English speakers. So if your STEM classroom is decorated with images of all-male pioneers in the field or the exam features only Western names, these subtle messages may be reminding students of damaging stereotypes.

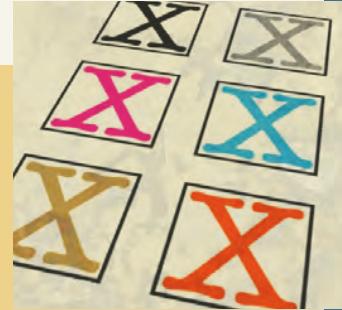
How can I tell if stereotypes are affecting my students?

One approach is to review your students' exam scores or major assignments, trying to identify discrepancies in performance for a subset of students. Also consider how widespread the bias is, as it will only hinder student performance if students are aware of it.

How can I identify my own, often hidden biases?

Start by reminding yourself that your biases are not your making or your fault. We've all been socialized by our families, communities, etc., and it's also true that our biases are often at odds with our conscious beliefs and behaviors.

I, for instance, am an unabashed feminist and working mother, but when I completed the Implicit Association Test (IAT) in the category of Gender-Career, it revealed that I associate females more readily with family, and males more readily with careers. The IAT website includes tests for 14 social categories, so it's a great tool for



self-reflection, as is the accompanying text *Blindspot: The Hidden Biases of Good People*. A similar exercise is to list categories like religion, where you were born/raised, political affiliation, age, race, etc. and for each, consider biases members of your various group express about others.

After identifying my biases, how can I reduce them?

Banaji and Greenwald (2013) challenge us to "outsmart" our biases. For instance, Banaji created a screensaver with images of counter-stereotypes, including a drawing of a construction worker with hard hat on, breast-feeding her baby. Developing and using rubrics could also help tremendously, as it makes our expectations clear to all students, and our grading more objective and consistent.

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