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# I Didn't Come to College to Compete with My Mother for Grades!

## *Unintended Consequences of Mixing the Generations in Class*

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*(Editor's Note: This is a condensed version of a paper delivered at the 1994 American Educational Research Association conference. For full text and citations, please contact Michael Reiner).*

In the past decade, one of the most dramatic trends in higher education has been the change in the composition of the student body. Traditional age college students are no longer the norm on many campuses due to the dramatic increase in the number of adult learners pursuing undergraduate degrees. To test the impact of this changing student mix, a study was conducted to examine generational impact.

### The Study

A sixteen item attitude questionnaire was developed based on the instrument originally employed by Mishler (1984). Half of the statements were positive and half were negative. There was a Likert-type agreement scale for each item ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Students were also asked to write comments. During the summer, participants were mailed coded questionnaires to ensure anonymity and stamped return envelopes.

### Results and Conclusions

An ANOVA was conducted with Age (Traditional vs. Non-Traditional), Year in School (Sophomore, Senior, Alumnae), and Course Mix (a self report as to whether less than 50%, more

than 50%, or almost all of a student's classes were noticeably mixed-age) as between-subjects factors.

Generally, traditional-age students had a more negative attitude than adult learners. There was also a significant Age X Course Mix interaction, indicating that the magnitude of the difference in attitude between the age groups increased the greater the reported number of mixed-age classes experienced by students. Thus, greater integration of the age groups, rather than reducing hostility, may have exacerbated the problem.

An item analysis of questionnaire responses indicated more negative attitudes by traditional-age students on the following statements: "Both groups are treated equally well by the faculty," "I'm more attentive when other students talk in a mixed-age class," "I learn more in mixed age classes," "I prefer mixed-age classes," "Tension frequently exists between the age groups," and, "There are difficulties between the age groups centering around academic issues."

A content analysis of the written comments supported the above findings. Overall, 45% of traditional-age students and 38% of adult learners wrote comments.

A chi-square analysis was

conducted on the frequency of positive or negative comments as a function of traditional- or non-traditional student age. The results indicated that traditional-age students often expressed resentment toward adult students, citing the belief that adults received more help, attention, special favors, and extensions on assignments from faculty, as well as the view that too many academic awards were given to the adults.

In contrast, adults frequently commented that both groups benefitted from the diverse input in class provided by students of different ages, although many noted the "chilly climate" younger students created in class.

### Educational Implications

The trend to include adult learners on campus is likely to increase in years to come. Demographic changes in the student body may hinder our efforts to make the classroom a place that facilitates learning and development for all students. While the initial increase of adult learners on campus may be viewed as benign, age discrimination may surface when the proportion of adult students is perceived to be relatively large, thereby encroaching upon territory originally dominated by traditional age students.

Competition between individuals from different cohorts and inequities in the distribution of limited resources may lead to negative perceptions, stereotyping, and prejudice. Recruiting adults to campus may be similar to other cases of minority integration in college, such as blacks or Asians, with subsequent negative effects on campus climate and the development of stereotypes and prejudice between social groups.

Therefore, institutions trying to increase student diversity must be aware that such change may come at a price. Attitudes of the extant student population cannot be ignored while pursuing the goal of greater inclusiveness of under represented groups on campus without risking the development of animosity and bigotry between social groups. Unfortunately, the rise in hostilities and intolerance on American campuses toward ethnic and racial minorities,

homosexuals, women, as well as adult learners, may be a symptom that administrators and faculty have forgotten lessons in social psychology that should have been learned years ago. Greater care must be taken if we are to make the college classroom and campus an environment that nurtures the growth and development of students of all ages.



*“What I did with my summer stipend”*

## Capturing the Teaching Philosophy of Juan Jose Arevalo

Alan LeBaron, Assistant Professor of History

Last summer I spent a month in Guatemala researching the teaching philosophy of Dr. Juan Jose Arevalo. Dr. Arevalo was one of Guatemala’s greatest presidents this century (1945-1951), but he also was one of Guatemala’s greatest educators.

Before and after his term as president, Dr. Arevalo wrote books and taught university courses in the field of education theory. He was a forceful, effective and popular teacher.

There were three highlights to my trip. First, I interviewed Dr. Raul Oseveda, who was Dr. Arevalo’s Minister of Education for several years. He supplied some inside information of significance.

Second, I was lucky to find all of Dr. Arevalo’s books on education, long out of print, at several used-book stores. This treasure hunt took me to three towns and left me with a dusty cough, but I found books I thought lost.

Third, I visited a local school in Guatemala City that had been designed by Dr. Arevalo and embodies the physical form of his teaching philosophy. I met and made friends with the director and several of the teachers,

and talked with groups of the students.

I plan to offer a workshop sometime in the spring on Dr. Arevalo’s teaching methods, and I am preparing a conference paper and article on the same topic.

### Tips for Service Learning

*As more and more faculty incorporate service learning into their curricula, there are several points to consider to make the experience more academically enriching for students.*

•**Make it real.** Although hypothetical situations may be controllable (you get to pick the problems), they fail to challenge students with the vagaries of real situations.

•**Use our resources.** VKSC (Volunteer Kennesaw State) is in constant contact with non-profit agencies throughout the metro area. VKSC is more than willing to help locate agencies suitable to the needs of your service-learning exercise. You can even specify the type of problems you are looking for and VKSC will track down agencies willing to have students work with them.

•**Make it optional.** Forcing students to work for non-profit agencies might engender resentment in some students. Make sure you offer other alternatives (a hypothetical situation or for-profit organizations).

•**Make it count.** If you don’t make the service-learning project part of the course-assessment structure, students will not give it the attention it deserves.

--Richard Welch

*For more information about the service-learning initiative on campus, call Sybil Meyers at Ext. 6443.*