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Keep Calm and Teach: Best Practices for Teaching Cohorts

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The influx of nontraditional adult students in higher education has resulted in unprecedented institutional competition. Colleges and universities, vying for attention and increased enrollments, seek creative solutions to attract and retain students. Many degrees have been designed or modified to follow the cohort model, creating temporary cultures of students who participate in programs following an accelerated lockstep sequence. Cohorts start and finish programs as collective groups and share instructors and experiences along the way. Productive learning environments and the temporary culture of a group encourage student productivity and enhance the overall academic experience.

That’s the upside. Conversely, cohorts can also evolve into dysfunctional cadres intent on undermining authority and destroying the very learning environment established to support them. Due to its close-knit nature, a cohort has a strong potential to become a learning community whose members acquire, use, and share their collective knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 2000) in both positive and negative ways.

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Due to the cohort model’s reputation of encouraging collective group personalities that may be intimidating, some faculty may prefer to avoid teaching in such settings. The reality, though, is that in order to address enrollment issues and remain current themselves, faculty must adapt to new degree offerings and structures designed creatively to serve these student populations.

Teaching in cohorts is radically different from teaching open enrollment sections of the same course. Faculty may find themselves teaching several “core” courses throughout a program and serving the same group of students multiple times as they participate. Faculty who previously specialized in one particular area of content may find themselves acting as “generalists” and teaching cohort classes covering topics in which they have limited expertise. The idea of having to teach the same group over and over in courses with unfamiliar content may be daunting or even discouraging. Further, faculty who are underprepared to engage repeatedly with the same cohort groups over time find themselves at risk for student disrespect and incivility, negative course evaluations, and subsequent stress associated with feelings of inadequacy.

To encourage a positive experience for all parties, faculty tasked with teaching cohorts should consider adopting new paradigms and teaching behaviors. Here are a few best practices, derived from my own 15 years of cohort leadership experience and collaboration:

* Develop a set of explicit expectations for learners and communicate them consistently within every course and experience comprising the cohort. This common dispositional framework can evolve into a Code of Conduct enabling students to self-monitor their own and peer behavior. “All learners are responsible for the growth of every member of the community; helping one person helps the group to succeed” (Engstrom, Santo and Yost, p. 152, 2008).
* Be present throughout the cohort cycle. Even if you aren’t teaching a particular class that the cohort is taking, be “visible” to students by connecting with the other instructor(s) and knowing what students are doing and studying in their other courses. Connect concepts to the content in your own classes. Create enduring understandings for student participants through those connections.
* Stay organized. Mindfully design lectures and activities with intention and focus on specific learning targets. Students appreciate well-organized and purposeful learning experiences, and they respect the instructors who design and deliver such experiences.
* Cultivate a cohesive and supportive community. Talk to students and get to know who they are outside of the campus setting. Design initial ice-breaker activities and ongoing academic sharing experiences in such a way that they allow students to exhibit their own personalities throughout their time in the cohort.
* Use a variety of relevant and meaningful student-centered learning activities. Facilitate the learning process in the classroom rather than relying only upon lecture. Take interesting and relevant field trips into the community.
* Let students know you care about their experience and want to make it better. Ask for informal feedback intermittently throughout the cohort cycle. Prepare discussion posts that invite responses, questions, discussions, and reflections. Use digital survey tools (e.g., Survey Monkey) to gather more specific summative feedback and actually make changes to your classes or program based on the results.
* Understand and encourage the use of technology in your courses. Embrace blended learning by allowing students to complete certain parts of your course online. Incorporate student response clickers to encourage active participation during lectures.
* Plan a relevant, meaningful, and memorable capstone experience for the cohort, such as a formal and credit-bearing internship, a service-learning activity, or simply an event to celebrate the group’s achievements. It’s important to recognize everyone’s contributions and to have fun while doing so.

As competition for full-time student enrollment increases, more creative degree delivery systems such as cohort models emerge. Creating a supportive and productive environment for cohort students will result in overall student satisfaction and retention. A student’s own perceptions of his/her social and academic integration are perhaps the most predominant influences on whether they stay or leave higher education institutions (Rhodes 2004). Designing and delivering rigorous and relevant programs while providing genuine care and support for participants will ensure successful learning experiences for both faculty and students.

References
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