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When Everything Hangs on a Second Chance

“I WANTED TO tell you something,” the student said. “I’ve been in prison, and ...” I held up my hand for him to stop and then replied, “I don’t want to know why you’ve been there. Let’s move forward with a fresh start.”

It’s not uncommon for students in my developmental college English courses to have been in jail or in prison. However, I’ve discovered that I prefer not to know the reasons behind these legal problems. I just want to help these students improve their lives through education, and this is why I teach.

Developmental courses are filled

with students of various ages, from 18 year olds to senior citizens. They usually have one thing in common—scoring below college level on entrance exams. The challenges for first-year, developmental students are overwhelming. They are often insecure about attending college. Some have language barriers and many lack study skills.

Others tell stories of being single parents or caregivers for spouses and parents. There are students who are mentally and physically disabled as well as military veterans. There are also fresh-out-of-high school teenagers who feel

they don’t belong in developmental courses because they are recent graduates. It’s a motley crew of apprehensive students who need to bond to make it through the hectic semester.

In developmental classrooms, it’s normal to see adults with 3rd- or 4th-grade skills sitting next to 12th grade-level students. Many people cannot understand how these adults passed their high school exit exams and received diplomas when they clearly cannot read or write properly. Yet developmental classes are full of them. What is important is that none of them are pre-judged as illiterate or unteachable. By extending an extra lifeline, developmental teachers offer these students second, third or fourth chances in their lives and careers.

I suppose having “walked a mile in



SHARE YOUR STORY

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“In developmental classrooms, it’s normal to see adults with 3rd- or 4th-grade skills sitting next to 12th grade-level students.”

their footsteps” helps when it comes to overlooking the backgrounds of developmental students. I, too, was an older adult student at the age of 30 when I returned to community college. My past was littered with mistakes—two failed marriages, child custody and support troubles, and numerous low-paying jobs. With a household full of children, my minimum wage job was not enough to sustain us. Yet I was scared to return to college for another try.

When I finally stepped back into the college classroom, no one questioned me about my past. As I juggled the roles of mother, wife, student and worker, I made it through the first semester by spending countless hours with tutors. Then, I finished a second semester. Suddenly, education was a golden opportunity to start over; it meant a new future.

I made excellent grades. My life changed. Education gave me the confidence to apply for scholarships, and it led to invitations from honor societies. This encouraged me to do better each semester and to set new goals. As I moved forward, I discovered friends with similar interests. Not once did they ask me about my past. They judged me solely on my accomplishments. Education gave me a new life.

After I graduated from a four-year university and got my first teaching job, I decided to pursue a master’s degree. I wanted to teach at a community college and give students with backgrounds similar to mine opportunities to better themselves. Every semester, I encounter people whose lives are in turmoil, and I tell them “education will change your goals and dreams.”

Many of these students contact me or return to visit 5 or 10 years later to tell me how education did make a difference. I don’t want to know why it took them so long to enroll in college. I just want to make sure they have all the chances they need to build a better future.

— Beth Hammett

Inspiration Knows No Gender

When the Dallas public school district decided to show its 5th graders *Red Tails*, an action-adventure film based on the Tuskegee, Ala., pilots who formed the country’s first black aerial combat unit, it was a tremendous idea. The district felt students would be inspired by the story of these men who fought segregation, integrated the Army and were trained as combat pilots for the United States during World War II.

But when district officials learned that the theater was too small to accommodate all the 5th graders, they made a dreadful decision to allow only boys to benefit from the inspiration the Tuskegee Airmen offer. The incident became an example of what holds us all back.

Inspiration comes in a variety of forms and speaks to us all in different ways. Making determinations along gender lines does not honor our unique interests and abilities; it only makes flawed assumptions. ...



... and readers replied:

“It’s infuriating how many forces seem to be trying to turn the clock backward for women: legislation to ban access to birth control; Arizona, banning Chicano studies, which of course, includes both genders. When it comes to civil rights, I guess we can never rest or consider a battle won.”

“Thank you for sharing this. The stories of the women who flew the big bombers across the United States and around the world during WWII is amazing as well ... The women not only flew aircraft to deliver them to the men, but flew them dragging targets across the skies for artillery target practice. In this day and age when women are serving in the military, making a decision like this for girls is truly backward—and does a huge disservice to our country as well.”

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tolerance.org/blog/inspiration-knows-no-gender

DID YOU KNOW?

250,000 U.S. children are prosecuted, sentenced or incarcerated as adults each year in the United States. About 10,000 children are held in adult jails and prisons on any given night, two thirds of them while they are awaiting trial, despite high risk for sexual abuse and other harms.

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