

". . .They're Different. . ."

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In her publication, "They're Not Dumb, They're Different: Stalking the Second Tier," Shelia Tobias contrasts her "second-tier students from first-tier learners by saying they are not teacher-proof, curriculum-proof, and classroom-culture proof. Simply they cannot learn irrespective of how the course is taught. Tobias continues to say that second-tier students must not only do well, they must also feel good about their courses. They require more attention, more support.

Based upon the staggering dropout rates--one student drops out of an American school every eight seconds (Children Defense Fund)--American educators are joining authors like Tobias in search of the *sine qua non* of teaching. How then can America restructure her schools so that academic failure, discouragement, lack of motivation, high absenteeism, family and/or social problems merge toward the development of dropout-proof, at-risk programs where all learners, second-tier as well as first-tier, can flourish? One setting where this restructuring is occurring is Seminole Community College, Sanford, Florida.

Like nine of its sister community colleges, Seminole Community College's Central Adult High School, which started in 1970, has a long history of experience in teaching the at-risk learner. Through its years, the program has evolved by refining admissions' procedures; drafting mandatory reading requirements for students deficient in literacy; adding tutorial services in its writing and mathematic laboratories; and recently, embracing advanced technology as a part of the college's retention strategies.

In spite of the progression and sophistication, this one rudimentary essential for effective teaching at the program stems from that beginning teacher-student bonding. How is that immediate connection made possible? If ignored, what student damage can be done? In their roles as instructors in the at-risk program, the faculty values the importance of knowing each student by name. Such a practice differs significantly from the large university or college classroom where all too often the student feels ignored and like a nameless face in the crowd. "After all," says Susan Weinman, one of the lead instructors, "everyone enjoys hearing his own name spoken by the professor. All of us did when we were in school, didn't we?"

To assure initial bonding, Weinman's opening classroom activities include an exercise where students introduce themselves to the rest of the class. Listening intently, students are challenged to re-name all students once the opening activity has ended. The immediate familiarity of students with each other diminishes an aloofness often found in the regular, formal setting. The bond is complete: the instructor knows the students; the students know each other. This commonsense practice, found in Weinman's speech class, exemplifies the well-known rule: "One does best when one feels good about oneself."

"I always have said that anyone can teach the willing; to take the unmotivated, the disenchanting, the sometimes-abused learner and captivate his interest is a special art," says the program's director. "I have called us the New York Harbor with our great Statue of Liberty beckoning our students: 'Give me your tired...your restless masses yearning....'"

Restructuring education...SCC saw the vision a long time ago. Now as the year 2000 approaches with community colleges in the midst of workplace literacy, economic development, and service to diverse populations, Seminole Community College continues to recognize the challenges of what "different" means. For SCC, it is often something as simple as remembering a name.

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Reference

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