

Two sides of the same coin: reaching non-traditional students

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Interview with Barbara Bonham

Berg: *Because we are looking at non-traditional students, I am wondering if you would tell me how you define non-traditional student?*

Bonham: I think that non-traditional is a broad category. I would say that non-traditional is more of an umbrella title and that there are categories underneath it or characteristics that may make a person more or less non-traditional.

Berg: *Is there such a thing as a traditional student?*

Bonham: From my training, we looked at a traditional student as being an 18- to 24-year-old, full time, on-campus student. A traditional student at a comprehensive four-year college might be different from a student at a community college or a two-year college.

Berg: *One difference is that many community colleges have no on-campus students.*

Bonham: Exactly, and yet you could still have a full time student at a community college.

Berg: *I don't know if you had an opportunity to read Rebecca Nathan's book My Freshman Year. Dr. Nathan is in her fifties. She took*

her sabbatical year to enroll as an undergraduate in the university where she teaches. She found that most students—even those living in the dorms—worked a significant number of hours.

Bonham: Exactly, I do see that at the university where I work. That is why I think there is not a precise way for me to describe non-traditional. I'm saying it is a matter of a continuum.

Berg: *I like your idea of the continuum.*

Bonham: I think that you move on a continuum and get students who are more or less traditional on a variety of characteristics that we use to define non-traditional.

Berg: *In the category of non-traditional students, who do you work with mostly and what different approaches do you use?*

Bonham: A type of non-traditional student will be those academically under-prepared when they enter college whether it is a two-year or four-year college.

Berg: *Many of our readers deal with those students daily. Since some of your background has been in instructional design, what kind of issues might faculty need to be aware of in dealing with under-prepared students?*

Bonham: More importantly, students need to have access to those courses that would serve as bridges to the preparatory courses. In those courses, I think teachers need to understand that these students have failed or been unsuccessful in these particular areas. To try to teach them again the same way they were taught is not necessarily going to help their self-esteem or help them to be academically successful. Faculty need to understand these students; they need to work with non-cognitive as well as cognitive factors in helping them to be successful. I think that's probably the area where I do most of my consulting. I probably turn down more jobs than I take because I can't do it all.

Berg: *Right.*

Bonham: Particularly, I focus on working with faculty and helping faculty understand how to work with the non-traditional student that is under-prepared in Math and English.

Berg: *I joke that last semester I got to suffer through a math course because I live with one of those under-prepared students. What might you tell a math faculty member to consider in regard to learning styles or the design of their courses?*

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- Bonham: In designing a course, it's important that faculty help students feel safe in the classroom. Actually, I've drawn on William Glasser's work. It's his theory that people have four basic psychological needs and one of those is a need for belonging. Teachers should create—for all our students—a sense of safety. The first day they come to class faculty need to help students understand what they have in common with each other and to help create a learning community of sorts.
- Berg: *I talk to students about wanting the class to become a community of scholars.*
- Bonham: Yes.
- Berg: *But let's say that I have never thought about that concept and I don't really know what to do. What could you suggest to me?*
- Bonham: I actually do a workshop in which I give faculty a list of about five or six types of warm-up activities they could use to help students get to know each other. I don't know if you're familiar with those activities. For example, I have students use their first name and with each letter of their first name they think of a characteristic or some favorite sport or hobby or something about themselves that they could use in an introduction.
- Berg: Yes.
- Bonham: In the first class, I might just have them think about that particular activity and have them come back and do it. Another thing I sometimes do is pair them up to learn something about each other, giving them four things that I want them to talk about. Then, I have them introduce someone in the class, rather than introducing themselves. They have made someone in the class a partner or friend.
- Berg: *I could see somebody thinking, "I've done that kind of exercise in a professional development seminar and it was stupid."*
- Bonham: "And it is dumb." I get that all the time. I was a math teacher so I am sort of immune to any kind of criticism (laughs) that they can give.
- Berg: Yes.
- Bonham: I can draw on research that shows how very important these types of things are for students. They influence students' belief in their ability to do well in the class. You might say it is talking about who I am or networking with people. We know the importance of the non-cognitive factors from the research.
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I sound researchy now, but that's how I do it.

Berg: *Research is important.*

Bonham: You know the research by Bloom shows that 25-30% of student's success in a course is influenced by non-cognitive factors—their attitudes towards the class as well as their learning style, as well as their belief in their ability to do well in the class. These are factors we have control over. We don't have control over what Bloom says is 50% of the factors, which is their entry level ability. I can't control what a student's entry level ability is, but I can control the 25-30% of the affective factors. I can also control the instructional design: the text size I select, the kind of instructional strategies that I use, how active I keep students in the classroom, what type of assessment strategies I use, and how I vary these things to deal with the different learning styles.

Berg: *It does make sense to me. I know one of the things that I personally struggle with is how to make my course inviting so that students feel safe and comfortable in the classroom.*

Bonham: When you talk about ice breakers or warm up activities, I think, faculty do reflect on all that touchy-feely stuff or wonder where that fits. Yet as you go down the path with class after class of students, you know, working together or having students meet with some immediate success or, even having the faculty members self disclose information about something they've had difficulty with and showing an analogy to the difficulty students might be having works well. All of these help to create a class environment that any observer can walk in and notice.

When it's developmental math, there's a significant difference as far as whether those students are really trying, whether they're coming to class, whether they believe that they can be successful or not. Unfortunately, I think—this is off the record—some teachers are less likely to feel comfortable using some of the non-cognitive or affective strategies than cognitive ones.

Berg: *If you talk about self-disclosing, many teachers might say, "That's not my role," or "This is such a foreign concept."*

Bonham: I'm here to teach math, or I'm here to teach English and I'm not here to be a counselor...

Berg: *How would you respond to that person who says, "This isn't my job"?*

Bonham: I think we don't understand what our job is when we sign on to be an educator. Many of us originally perceived that our job is to be a content specialist who helps the students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills related to that particular course. Maybe four-year research university professors still have that role as their primary role, but it certainly isn't the case at our community colleges. We have a diverse group of students who bring to us very diverse needs, and part of our responsibility as a community college educator is to understand those learners as adults and to develop or design classes that will help those students to be successful. That sometimes means reflecting on strategies and techniques that we are not so comfortable with or do not learn best with. I think that's probably where the rubber hits the road because many of us are comfortable learning in a particular way and we want to teach in that particular way.

Berg: *I used to be that way and it wasn't necessarily that I didn't want to reach my students. But I didn't know how to. When I did some post graduate work and looked at learning styles, I was able to start the process of accommodating students, but before that I only knew one way to teach.*

Bonham: I was a math teacher and I had math courses. When I graduated, I didn't have any courses on how to teach, and I think therein is what is missing in many programs. Many faculty who have taken their master's program in a particular discipline such as English or math or history or psychology may not have come through programs that have had two or three courses in adult learner or instructional design. Newer programs are changing to include at least two or three such courses. I think more personnel committees are looking for people who have had all kinds of course work along with the content specialty.

Berg: *For those of us who did not have those classes as part of our graduate programs, what do we do?*

Bonham: A number of ways that we're seeing are available. One has to do with workshops offered at conferences. There are institutes available where one can go from one to four weeks to learn more about teaching and learning at the community college level. I know the League for Innovation has some excellent resources in printed form and online. Many local colleges are doing something called Certificate Programs. People who already have a master's degree or higher can take certificate courses in community college teaching which are twelve to

fifteen hours of credits. But I think the single most effective way community colleges are helping faculty is by conducting faculty development workshops. They're bringing in people to offer workshops. That's happening during the summer and during the fall when faculty starts up a new semester or term. It's happening in January. Are you familiar with Terry O'Banion's work on the learning college?

Berg: Yes.

Bonham: I think that's probably sweeping across the country and influencing many colleges. A lot of what that movement is bringing with it is on-campus committees and groups of people coming together for the purpose of helping each other understand more about how we become learner centered and what that means. It brings math professors together with history professors, with perhaps even the developmental educators who many of them already know, and use these strategies in their classrooms.

Berg: *So, if I'm really interested in reaching non-traditional students—which is where we started—I need to look at my own skills and development. I need to start by improving my skills if I'm going to be effective working with non-traditional students.*

Before we finish the conversation, do you have any advice for people who either are teaching online or considering doing an online course?

Bonham: Again, are we talking about online for non-traditional, older, under-prepared?

Berg: *Some of the under-prepared students are the older students.*

Bonham: Okay, because there is a difference, you could have a highly prepared returning adult.

Berg: *Right.*

Bonham: For some, an online course is probably just the ticket and they would be very successful. But you could have a returning adult who has very poor time management skills, has no familiarity working with computers, and is also under-prepared in some areas. To put that student in a developmental English class online is probably dooming that student to failure. I think we need to assess our students' needs when they enter. We do a good job in finding out what they know in math, reading, and English with our assessments strategies. But I think we also need to assess their learning strategies as well,

their time management skills, their abilities to be independent learners. Assessments like LASSI (Learning and Study Strategies Inventory) help give us good information. Actually, I now find that there are many good surveys available online that one can use with students to see which ones are most likely to be successful in an online course.

To some students, it looks like they can do their work whenever they want. They don't have to go to class. They don't realize that they have a responsibility to log-on several times a week and be actively involved in the course. They think they can do the work whenever they feel like it—next week or two weeks from now.

I think developmental students, particularly, are less likely to have the learning strategies and study skills necessary to be successful online.

Berg: Do you have any final comments?

Bonham: If there is one thing we found in our national study, as well as our state study here at the Center, it is that collaboration and coordination across the campus is critical. We should have no satellite programs; and, therefore, everyone should be working together. I know frequently we have the developmental math and bridge courses in math or English or in the department, but they should be working with the library and with the learning center and with the advisors and counselors in the testing centers.



Interview with Melanie Chu

Berg: I appreciate your talking to us Melanie. Could you begin by telling us a little bit about your position as an outreach/multicultural librarian?

Chu: My responsibilities include instruction and outreach to targeted groups on campus: international students, first generation students, children of migrant agricultural workers in this area, disabled students.

My community outreach focuses on groups like Upward Bound and "I'm Going to College," where 4th graders throughout the surrounding districts come to visit campus. Part of their day on campus is spending a session with a librarian, and that gives them exposure to a university library at a very young age. Then they can say, "Hey, I've been to the college library; I can go to college there!"

Berg: Someone might ask, "Why do you have to do special outreach to these groups. Isn't using the library, using the library?"

Chu: Other campuses are just now realizing that targeted groups are special populations that may not be reached through traditional instruction. Or, if they are being reached, they may need a little extra boost. The programs on campus working with special groups such as the international students, the children of migrant workers, or the first generation often coincide with low income and minority students. Research shows that the librarian as part of the process enhances student learning, and increasing library outreach early in their college careers increases their ability to do well.

Berg: But why would you need to do something more than just go to the international student meeting and say, "Be sure to get to the library"?

Chu: The great thing about my position is that I have an ongoing, often very collaborative, relationship with the programs like the American Language & Culture Institute's international students, or the disabled students registered through Disabled Student Services, or the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). I meet with students throughout the course of the semester, so there is a feeling of support that they have their own librarian. On our campus, librarian positions are divided by subject area; that's common. The outreach position ensures that those targeted groups are being reached.

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- Berg: *So you are saying that it might be easier for a student to go visit that nice woman Melanie whom the student has met than it is to talk to a scary librarian.*
- Chu: In the three years that I have been here, at the graduation ceremonies students acknowledge me and say that "I couldn't have done this without you." They have come for research help for a variety of classes, so I'm outside of the subject area; yet I'm the person they feel comfortable with. I'm similar to an academic advisor or someone who will be a steady contact throughout their college career, not just for one course.
- Berg: *A couple of days ago during a research methods class, one of our librarians passed by my classroom. I pulled him into the classroom and he gave about a 15 minute, spur of the moment presentation. So what are you saying is that because he did that, the students are probably more likely to go to the library than if I had just said "Go talk to a librarian."*
- Chu: Oh, definitely, there is a familiar face. On orientations with these groups, I show them where my office is. It's kind of hidden away just like some of the other faculty offices. But, they have a personal invitation, that direct contact.
- We have a learning community model on our campus, where in many different areas cohorts take classes together. Students who take classes together have an advisor and also have a librarian attached to the group/learning community. Students in learning communities actually have much higher retention than the rest of the campus.
- Berg: *What are some of the differences between needs of traditional and non-traditional students?*
- Chu: Non-traditional students like the students that I work with are non-traditional in a certain context—the higher education environment. For someone who is a senior citizen or someone who speaks English as a second language, a recent immigrant or an international student, their own experience can contextually disadvantage them within the traditional education environment.
- Berg: *I'm not sure what you mean by "contextually disadvantage."*
- Chu: It all depends on the context. For higher education there is a change of minority to majority. In the past there may not have been many students who are ESL or the first generation in their family to go to college. Now, more and more of those types of students are going to college. I hope that higher
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education becomes more accessible for groups that didn't seek degrees in the past. The non-traditional students are becoming more traditional, more typical. However, there still is a concern to address their needs.

Typical students, for example, may have parents who have degrees or who value higher education, themselves, and family members who have attained degrees past the high school level. A typical student now-a-days has grown up around a computer and has that type of technological skill. A non-traditional group, such as the students I work with, did not have access to a computer or to a culture that values higher education. The structure of their backgrounds is such that they need to go to work. They are not going to "waste time" and go to college. The student from that type of non-traditional background where no one in their family has gone to college is not familiar with the library or technology.

Berg: So what are some of the things that a library could do to reach the non-traditional students besides meeting with groups or having an outreach person? Are there other things that libraries could do to be more accessible or helpful?

Chu: First you would identify what kind of population on your campus would have special needs. It depends on the type of students—their learning styles, their familiarity with technology, their expectations and experiences with libraries and research. For example, a Chilean student may come from a background in which a library has closed stacks. I was in Chile this summer as a visiting librarian, and closed stacks are totally normal for those students. To them, our library just seems overwhelming. They are more comfortable asking because they expect to ask to get something.

The Library of Congress classification system is mind boggling for a student with a different language. In an alpha-numeric based system, for a student from an Asian speaking culture, the print is completely different. It comes down to a cultural sensitivity and understanding, an awareness of particular needs. If it can't come in the form of my job, libraries can do other things to meet particular needs.

Berg: What would some of those be?

Chu: For example, having signage or handouts, worksheets, or web guides in a different language. Understanding that there is library jargon that could be confusing to certain students. Design things in a way that would make more sense. It can be

the establishment of a collaboration, a librarian doing outreach to different offices on campus that are reaching particular groups to say, “Hey, there is a librarian that is able to work with you.” My article, “Outreach Initiatives to Nontraditional Students,” offers other practical suggestions.

If you are a librarian doing instruction, with a group that includes international or first generation students, work in a short tour of the building where you give a hands-on explanation of a stack and so forth. Show students instead of just throwing out the terminology in a classroom and expecting them to know what you mean. Such activity is not just for special groups; it’s trying to make the library more accessible for any group.

Berg: In the article, you mentioned forming collaborations with faculty. For the faculty members who may not have a relationship with the library, how can they go about forming that kind of collaboration?

Chu: As a faculty member, you may begin by identifying who your subject librarian is, such as a humanities or science librarian. Once the initial contact is established on both sides, many collaborations simply begin with clear communications regarding a research project or paper. The collaboration includes certain expectations on the part of faculty members and students. It is important to explain expectations—for instance, that the faculty member expects the student to find ten peer-reviewed articles on a particular topic. Collaboration with the librarian can establish different types of appropriate journals or sources.

In the past, students have shown up with a project or assignment in hand; and if we didn’t have contact with the faculty member, we are trying to guess at appropriate sources for that student. Let me give you an example. We have a particular faculty member who’s always been supportive of the library. He sent 70–80 students to the library on a “scavenger hunt” for a variety of atlases and printed maps. He thought that those items were all in one section, but actually some of them were on the other side of the library in “oversize,” and some were in the reference area. Students had a list of the atlases that they were required to look at and compare. Luckily, he contacted me just as a heads-up right before the assignment started, and we did pull the materials together. The primary learning objective was not to have students search all over the building. That would be very frustrating. The students would end up not finding the sources and being confused by

the whole process. The learning objective was to hold an atlas in their hands because they are using geographic information systems and maps that are not printed. They were to compare the older atlases in the print format. Through collaboration, we can prepare for the assignment and have the learning objectives met. The faculty member would love to have them find maps on their own. Next semester we can have a brief session in their class on how to find the maps.

For this semester, I created a web guide specific to this assignment. Students for this particular class can click on it, and I walk them through the steps of finding the atlases or doing research, and I recommend sources for their topics.

Berg: What you're saying is that, as a faculty member, I can't be like one of my frightened students; I need to talk to you.

Chu: It would be best for the faculty and the students to establish the context for an assignment. That would help the students complete the research project, and the result would be more information-literate students, and papers of much higher quality, and an experience more satisfying to the students and the faculty.

Berg: So, what happened by accident when the librarian gave the 15 minutes of impromptu guidance in my class probably ensured that they would be more successful than my other class simply because they had a chance to meet him.

Chu: I think that's the case. The information literacy standards for higher education come from our professional organization, the Association of College & Research Libraries. We have information literacy standards, and they align with many disciplinary standards that faculty refer to. Do students know what they're looking for, what they need? Can they find that information? Can they evaluate it? Just because it is on the web should they be using it as source material? Can they synthesize that source, cite it properly, and use it in their own words? Do they have an understanding of ethical issues behind using information so they won't commit plagiarism? Since core information literacy standards align with what faculty members want from their students, a collaboration with a librarian can make that happen. The result will be more information literate students who feel more comfortable finding information they need to turn in a higher quality paper or project.

Berg: When I was doing research for this interview, I started to question

whether we have any traditional students now. Could you respond to that?

Chu: When you think of college, you think of 18-20 year-old age ranges. More and more in a public institution such as ours, this is not the case. I think that it is a very positive thing. Higher education is becoming more accessible, more attainable, to a variety of different types of groups, so the non-traditional students—the ones not like the typical students—bring additional needs to campus. The traditional students are turning into a minority. For our campus, as an example, 48% of our students are the first in their family to attend college and soon that 48% will be the majority. A lot of them come from low-income families and minority households. A quarter of our undergraduates are 26 years or older, so the average age on campus is now older. That can lead to a variety of different issues.

Berg: *Yesterday a so-called traditional student in my office—probably 18, maybe 19 years old—mentioned being in boot-camp. I didn't ask for details, but students who have been in boot-camp have different experiences from someone who we generally think of as traditional.*

Chu: That's exciting. Students are bringing that kind of experience to the classroom, to class discussion. More traditional students, still living with their parents or maybe right out of high school are going to benefit from the variety of different experiences among their classmates. It is so important to have that mix on campus.

Berg: *There is one other group that gets mentioned with non-traditional students. I would like to ask you about online students.*

Chu: That is another area of academia which is exciting because it is making higher education even more attainable. My sister, who has young children, wouldn't be able to take a class unless she could do it at her computer at night when the kids are asleep. As more classes move to that electronic venue, it is still important for librarians to collaborate with faculty.

Berg: *What other insights do you have about online learning?*

Chu: I think online learning environments need to be on the cutting edge of technology and ADA compliancy. We see from a librarian perspective a variety of materials out there not compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act; for example, not all in appropriate font size or not all pictures or labels

with text. Consider a student who is visually impaired. There are technical issues that could—as much as they make education more accessible—alter or hamper the learning experience. Some students may not have the technological abilities to be able to respond to class discussions and homework.

Berg: *In other words, when I send my students to a web site, I need to make sure that the material on the website is accessible to them, even if they are blind or have some other disability.*

Chu: There is a lot of software out there. I think on our campus Disabled Student Services does a wonderful job of providing software if the students are using a computer on campus or at home. Not all of the databases are up to ADA compliance yet. You may have a great article in a research database, but the format can't actually be read by a student with a certain disability. I think that most faculty need the training and the tech support to facilitate the online environment as much as the traditional classroom setting.

Berg: *In a traditional classroom setting, if I have a student, for example, who is blind, I know how to deal with that appropriately. Yet, probably I don't do a good enough job of checking to make sure that the website I take my students to is ADA compliant. I might be in effect saying to the non-traditional student, "You can't be successful here, because I'm not going to provide ADA compliant materials."*

Chu: I think part of that comes from the institutional commitment to disabled students, to providing the training and technology support necessary for ADA accommodations.

Berg: *Do you have any final comments?*

Chu: Whatever the students' background, a label doesn't matter. It won't always be non-traditional, or they won't always be a minority or perhaps have a special need. The label just speaks to the pedagogy and the processes of learning. The issue is our understanding of who our students are in the library and in the classroom.

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