

Who's on First? Who's on Second? Getting Our Students to Home Today

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Abstract

Just as baseball teams are made up of diverse players with unique skills, our classrooms are filled with students who bring different strengths and challenges to the field. First-in-family students, who make up more than half of the enrolled population in American higher-education institutions, often face unique hurdles—academic struggles, financial pressures, and social isolation—that can impact their success. Yet, with the right coaching and playbook, these students can become all-stars in their academic journey. This workshop will focus on strategies to differentiate instruction and support first-in-family students, helping them build cultural capital and a sense of belonging. Readers will learn how to identify individual student needs and create a game plan that fosters academic and social growth, ensuring every student has the chance to hit a home run in their college experience.

Keywords: First-in-Family Students, Differentiation, Differentiated Instruction, Cultural Capital, College

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Introduction

Many skills are required to create a winning team--diverse skills, strategy, and flexibility to name a few. Similarly, teaching requires some of the same skills. Each student arrives in a classroom with a set of knowledge and skills while also having gaps in understanding. Regardless of the content, some students are more prepared than others, but all students need and deserve instruction at their level. Unmet needs tend to lead to disengagement, frustration, and other academic struggles. Each student needs different coaching based on where they are at--dugout to third base. This baseball analogy will help to identify the students in the classroom and how professors can support them.

Dugout

In baseball, the players in the dugout are the ones who are in uniform but might be surprised they are on the roster. They do not necessarily have their cleats, gloves, bats, or other necessary equipment for success--they simply remember to show up. In the classroom, these tend to be the students who write their essays on their phones and are unprepared with supplies like a pencil and paper but have the trendiest attire. The foundation of content needs to be built.

English Class

Some students in this stage may face academic challenges that hinder their reading and writing performance, often falling below the class average (Kuh et al., 2006). Their lack of writing experience may be the most prominent reason that challenges this group of students. Resembling a stream-of-consciousness style that can confuse and distract readers is often how these students tend to write. They may have difficulty formulating a clear thesis statement or developing their ideas in a logical progression. Further complicating this group's writing experience is their limited understanding of the conventions of grammar and punctuation, which further complicates their success. Because this group struggles to access basic academic supplies, such as notebooks and digital devices, they may rely on non-traditional tools, such as smartphones, to write assignments. In essence, these students may experience a disconnect between their writing abilities and the educational environment.

Math Class

In a college-level math class, these students tend to count on their fingers, as they lack math proficiency and procedural fluency. They also lack confidence in themselves and their knowledge. These students tend to either keep quiet and not ask questions or draw attention to another part of themselves (e.g., making jokes to emphasize that they are funny). They may fail assignments, not bring a calculator to class, and not ask for any help.

On Deck

When a baseball player has made it on the roster, they have their uniform and other equipment, and they have some skills, they end up in the line-up and get ready to bat. These are the players who are on deck. They understand the game and are ready to play. In the classroom, this is the student who has some experience and a decent grasp of the content. They have the foundation but often will sit on the perimeter of the classroom. They are not the students who will ask questions, they are easily crushed when they get something wrong

or a poor grade, and they cannot handle any exceptions to the rules. These students not only lack confidence, but more importantly lack self-efficacy. Often these are first-in-family students who not only are struggling academically but also have little cultural capital or sense of belonging. They are questioning everything they are doing and even why they are trying this college thing.

English Class

The writings of this group typically meet assignment requirements but lack depth and critical analysis. While their writing may address key points, the work often feels superficial because they include concepts without connecting them to broader themes or real-world applications. Encouraging more detailed explanations and contextual connections is essential for improving their writing (Fernstein & Reda, 2009). Although students in this group show basic comprehension, they often struggle with depth and critical analysis that could enhance their work.

Math Class

These students tend to desire to excel or at least do well; however, they may have been convinced that they do not have a “math brain” so they cannot do well. Despite research from Van De Walle and colleagues (2023), students and teachers still tend to believe that the ability to learn and comprehend mathematics successfully is hereditary—which is a false assumption. Math professors are responsible for meeting these students where they are and providing the support they need. These students tend to follow steps exactly as they are given and cannot handle any variations to the examples given to them. This is often why they might be able to do well on homework or classwork that is exactly like the notes but freeze when the test has a different variation of the same type of problem.

Up to Bat

It is now the player’s turn to bat. They have a bit more skill, they are coachable, and they have had some practice applying their skills. In the classroom, they are willing to answer some questions and realize they have knowledge gaps but might not be able to articulate them. These students will say that they are not the “strongest student” and need the biggest champion due to being belittled and crushed many times by themselves. These students may have had an extended relative attend college who can give them some input, but they still tend to be unsure of themselves.

English Class

This group demonstrates basic writing mechanics and recognizes their need for support. Low-stakes writing assignments enhance their skills and confidence. Gradual challenges and scaffolded assignments further boost their confidence. Specific feedback helps them meet assignment requirements, acknowledge strengths, and improve their writing (Eckstein & Bell, 2023). With consistent guidance and encouragement, these students can celebrate continuous improvements, which is crucial for their development.

Math Class

These students need every step outlined for them and can be heard saying, “but my other teacher showed me this way.” Once they understand one method or practice, they do not have the confidence to veer from it. This group of students needs someone to come alongside them to highlight their strengths instead of their deficiencies (Van de Walle et al., 2023). They are already aware they have shortcomings and remind themselves of them often. These students need the biggest cheerleader as they apply what they have learned to help combat their negative self-talk.

First Base

First base is the first place a baseball player gets to after they hit the ball. These athletes tend to practice regularly and listen to their coaches. They analyze what is being presented to them, and they have proven themselves while still lacking self-confidence. In the classroom, these students have some success with content but still need approval and reassurance. They rely on guidance from the instructor, and you may hear them say, “I think I know what I am doing.” These students check first, then complete.

English Class

This group of students has a solid grasp of writing fundamentals but requires ongoing support. They can follow guidelines and understand rubrics but lack the confidence to innovate. Their writing is formulaic due to hesitation to experiment. Peer review as an instructional strategy works well with the First Base student group. Implementing peer review draft workshops can help them critique their work and make independent decisions (Baker, 2016). Providing numerous opportunities for them to step outside their comfort zone will boost their confidence and encourage experimentation in their writing.

Math Class

These students tend to rely heavily on a calculator, even if they do not know how to use it. While they tend to have an increased procedural fluency and can recognize different types of problems and methods, they still need confirmation and reassurance that they arrived at the correct answer. Based on the continuum of understanding from instrumental to relational, these students have a conceptual understanding of the mathematics presented, while relational understanding is the goal for all students across all mathematics content (Van de Walle et al., 2023).

Second Base

Second base is the next place to which a baseball player progresses. They take initiative and evaluate the other team. They still need a bit of reassurance but also complain about being talked to as if they are still in the dugout. In the classroom, these students can lack courage to get started and may need motivation. They will complete and then check.

English Class

Writers at this stage have mastered the basics and focus on executing their ideas with precision. Organizing their ideas with clearer purpose and direction, they are intentionally

learning to apply grammar and vocabulary, increasing their writing skills and syntactical awareness. They exhibit strong fundamental skills and can continue to improve their organizational skills. Similar to the First Base students, this group should be encouraged to use the writing center services because of the immediate benefit they gain from working with a peer writing tutor (Zhang & Kim, 2024). Because of their lack of confidence, this student group benefits from consistent guidance and reassurance.

Math Class

These students tend to be aware of the common misconceptions but may still get them mixed up. While the former students need reassurance that they got it right, these students need reassurance they did it right. They have moved further on the continuum of understanding closer to a relational understanding (Van de Walle, 2023). This group can incorporate reasonableness into their analysis as they evaluate a problem and their answer.

Third Base

These students are one step from scoring a run for their team. They only need a bit of coaching, and they take off on their own. They have grit and perseverance, and the “I got this” mentality while creating plays and strategies for their team. In the classroom, these students are often the unofficial peer tutor. They have ingenuity and write prompts and practice problems for their peers. They finish early and accurately and need to be pushed to continue to excel and grow. These students also tend to have cultural capital and a sense of belonging.

English Class

These students are developing a voice and a recognizable writing style, allowing them to express themselves clearly and creatively. Their writing features imagery and thoughtful reflections, engaging readers with authenticity and depth. Encouraging this group to write so that each piece reflects their unique experiences and emotions is the instructor's goal, underscoring the importance of nurturing individuality in the writing process (Soiferman, 2019). This group of students may also ask to personalize the writing task, which is a sign of their growing confidence. By encouraging this personalization, the professor allows Third Base students to discover their distinct literary voices and take ownership of their writing. In this supportive atmosphere, students are empowered to explore their ideas, express their individuality, and add to their writing repertoire.

Math Class

In a math class, this type of student is confident and may see assignments, especially homework with many problems practicing the same concept, as busy work. This tends to lead to their not doing the homework but having success on tests and quizzes. When these students do complete their work, they might follow steps the instructor never showed them or come up with a way that makes sense to them (and works). This increases the need for the instructor to take a step back, consider this new method or process, and, if it works for them and allows them to arrive at the correct answer while understanding the concept, allow it. Conversely, these students may question why they must show their work if they “got the right answer” to a problem. This group of students needs to be encouraged to continue to grow by creating solutions to real-world problems that need a solution, not simply be given more work to

complete. One way to encourage this extended type of thinking is to ask the student to determine a problem that needs to be resolved that would make their lives easier or better. This makes it personal to them and therefore increases motivation to resolve it.

The Baseball Playbook: Differentiation Strategies

According to Carbaugh and colleagues (2016), differentiation includes four pillars: knowledge-centered, assessment-centered, learning-centered, and community-centered. Knowledge-centered differentiation suggests that the teacher helps students set high-achieving goals and then either provides support or challenges for students to reach their goals (Carbaugh et al., 2016). Assessment-centered differentiation involves providing frequent, timely feedback to students. The feedback then directs the instructor's teaching and students' practice (Carbaugh et al., 2016). A learner-centered classroom is unlikely without the teacher knowing the learners and their interests and building relationships with their students. Relating content to the learners' interest is one way to enhance teaching and learning. When professors build relationships with their students, the opportunity for their classroom to feel community-centered can begin (Caster, 2022). The discussion of pertinent topics along with content is one way to establish the ideal classroom environment and provide opportunities for students to build cultural capital. Another way to promote a community-centered classroom is to celebrate differences and allow students to take risks and make mistakes (Caster, 2022). This can facilitate enhanced teaching and learning (Carbaugh et al., 2016).

Education researchers Finnan and Kombe (2011) believed in nontraditional interventions to help facilitate remediation. They discussed a program in which students were taught two academic years of mathematics in one school year. The focus was not only on content but also on the students' identity, increasing their confidence, and providing a "safe and nurturing environment" (Finnan & Kombe, 2011, p. 2). While this study focused on adolescent students, this is the case for all students, especially those who struggle.

Wu (2016) compared a group of students in the United States to those in Shanghai, China, regarding math self-efficacy and investigated the effects of math professors' support of students, positive teacher-student relationships, and support provided to professors. The study showed that when math teacher support increased, student self-efficacy also increased (Wu, 2016). The students in Shanghai had much higher self-efficacy and higher math achievement (Wu, 2016). Wu (2016) also discussed how students perceived math teacher support as positively associated with student math self-efficacy in both groups of students.

Practically, differentiation could look different based on the content, student needs, physical classroom setup, and even the instructor's personality. Tiered assignments, flexible grouping, and targeted support are three ways to approach differentiation.

Tiered Assignments

The purpose of tiered assignments is to provide modified tasks based on students' readiness and skill level. As students become more proficient, the expectations increase. This requires instructors to know their students, understand each student's knowledge gaps, and use strategies to scaffold content along the way.

Flexible Grouping

Grouping students based on their various skills and abilities can allow instructors to provide focused instruction to various groups of students. For example, in a math class, if one group of students struggles with solving multi-step linear equations while another group struggles with finding roots of quadratic equations, each group can receive the instruction they need. In the next class, if someone from the first group has moved on to another topic, they can join a different group. The idea is structured flexibility with grouping based on student needs.

Targeted Support

Using data to identify students who are at risk, on target, and excelling requires instructors to make data-driven decisions. In an English course, this could look like a writer's workshop towards the beginning of the semester, where some students clearly need additional support with their outline. Targeted support allows the instructor to identify those students and offer specific office hours to address this topic or, if the university has a writing center or other academic support and resources, guide students to those resources. This is not the instructor simply telling the students to go to the writing center or get tutoring; rather, this is the professor holding specific conversations with those students, ideally in a one-on-one setting.

Game Plan

Some common obstacles for first-in-family students include financial pressures, academic preparedness (or lack of it), and cultural barriers. Some strategies our university has used to address the unique needs of first-in-family students include staff members, Student Success Specialists, who are assigned to first-year students with specific majors (e.g., Humanities majors have one Student Success Specialist, Education and Behavioral Sciences majors have a different Student Success Specialist, etc.). Additionally, all first-year students are part of the First Year Seminar (FYS) program. They are grouped by the same or similar majors, with many of the sections being taught by professors who teach within their major and have an upper-level peer mentor who is also in their major. This gives students a significant sense of belonging as they navigate their first year at the university. Within the FYS course are assignments with the specific outlined purpose of building cultural capital. For example, as a group project, students must identify a faculty or staff member to interview about growth mindset. Many groups select a professor they hope to take later in their program. Then, the group must reflect on their growth and fixed mindsets, create a presentation, and present it to the class.

Conclusion

Just like baseball coaching, effective teaching requires flexibility, understanding different players' needs, and targeting strategies. The progression from the dugout to home plate parallels the journey of first-generation students as they acquire confidence, strengthen skills, and garner cultural capital throughout their college experience. When professors recognize each student's progress, ranging from the Dugout to the Third Base, they can provide the appropriate support and challenges. By using intentional differentiation strategies, such as tiered assignments, flexible groupings, and targeted support, professors can cater to students' varying needs and provide specific guidance. Programs such as First Year Seminar and Student Success Specialists play a crucial role as supportive team members, assisting students in navigating each stage of the academic journey.

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