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# *Working with the Resistant College Student*

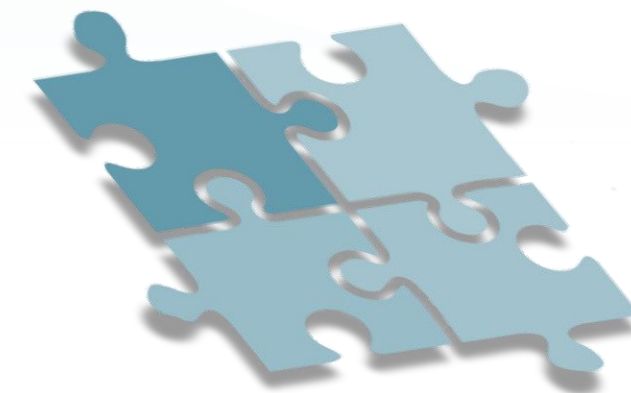


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A guide to working with college students resistant to learning and/or change in  
Higher Education curricula and Students Affairs programs

By Mario Adkins – EDH 686 Issue Critique

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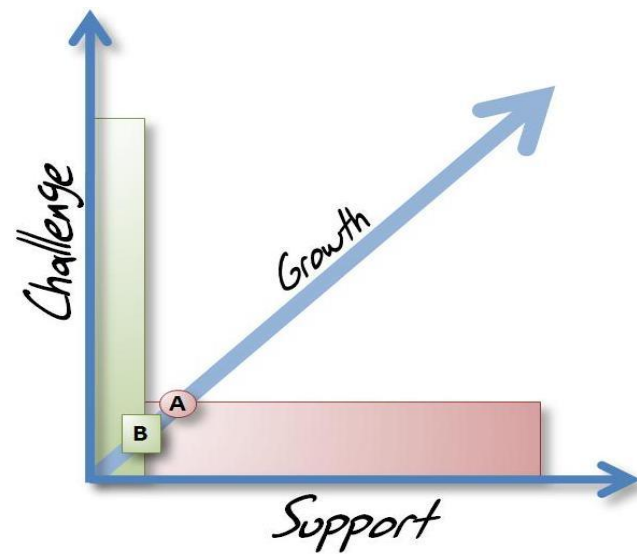
# Working with the Resistant College Student

When working with students in a teaching capacity, rather a faculty member is teaching a course or a student affairs administrator is facilitating a program, a number of possible issues can arise during lessons. One of the most noteworthy is dealing with a student resistant to learning (Dembo & Seli, 2004). Having a student resistant to learning can happen due to a number of reasons (see right column) and have the potential to restructure the learning session, especially within group settings such as a classroom or campus program. These situations also test the facilitator or faculty in how knowledgeable they are in their subject (Boyle, 2013). Resolving a resistant student, especially one who challenges and questions multiple ideals, can make or break the climate and credibility of the topic being taught (2013). Politics, religion, diversity, sex/gender, history, and judicial hearings are common situations that can be emotionally charged and/or be aligned with strong values students might hold. While resolving resistance among students can require extra energy and effort, it can be an immense learning experience for them.



## Instances where students might become resistant:

- In a setting when values are challenged
- Not understanding new ideas or concepts
- Confusion or lack of confidence in topic
- Lack of attention due to low interest and boredom
- Having opposing views to a particular topic
- Allowing preconceived notions to prevent learning
- Perception of a hostile or unwelcoming environment



(Sanford, 1966)

## Questions to Consider

- ❖ Is it best to resolve student resistance issues in a group setting or individually?
- ❖ When should educators/programmers settle on the “agree to disagree” stance?
- ❖ Is the challenge and support theory (Sanford, 1966) applicable here?

## Establish Respect

Even among disagreements, establishing respect is necessary. Affirm answers and opinions from students and encourage them to understand even among contrasting views, mutual respect is important in the academic and professional world.

## Promote Empathy

Is there a way verbally or visually you could put your students in the place, perspective or role you are addressing? When you convey a topic can affect students, you can potentially further convey the effect (Eaton, 2014).

## Answer the “Why”

Why does this topic relate to your students? If students have no investment in your subject, they may “check out” simply because they perceive the subject does not relate to them (Van de Kleut, & White, 2010). Help in building that connecting bridge.

## Environment Regulation

Promote an open environment where students feel comfortable sharing ideas. If the setting feels hostile or one-sided, students may perceive their opinions matter little (Hains & Smith, 2010). Validate, then regulate.

## NOTES

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## Methods for Addressing Resistance

Just as there are numerous reasons for resistance, there are several possible tactics to address it. The following methods can prevent or reduce resistance from the start and throughout the class:

1. **Build relationships and environments that allow risk taking.** This may involve talking with individuals beforehand (especially if you expect resistance) or making an effort to get to know students who show signs of resistance. Build a safe, supportive classroom climate (have guidelines, do group-building activities) and provide clear structure and expectations. Self-disclose appropriately about who you are, your process of “unlearning oppression,” and mistakes you’ve made—make yourself human, and demonstrate that unlearning oppression is an ongoing experience for all of us.
2. **Affirm, validate, and convey respect for students.** People are more likely to care about others when they feel respected. Acknowledge their feelings, experiences, and viewpoints. Acknowledgment does not necessarily mean agreement—it means that you hear and respect what students say and refrain from judging them. Affirm people’s self-esteem (e.g., through activities that highlight cultural pride or times they challenged injustice). Validate and build on current knowledge and let people discover information for themselves. Consider designing classes and sessions that incorporate the issues that most interest students. Discuss common reactions and social identity development. When students are aware of how people typically react while learning about diversity and oppression, they can be reassured that their feelings are normal and can anticipate how to address these feelings as they arise. Provide opportunities for frequent feedback (through various and sometimes anonymous means).
3. **Heighten investment.** Frame diversity issues in terms of shared principles, values, or goals (e.g., fairness, democracy). Explore students’ self-interest in social justice to encourage them to envision greater equity positively. Foster empathy for those in oppressed groups so students can develop personal connections, leading to genuine moral concern.
4. **If resistance does occur, consider these options.** Try not to get hooked—avoid focusing on the resistant individual(s), know your own triggers and what impedes your ability to respond effectively. Assess the reasons for the resistance so you can develop an appropriate response. Invite an exploration of the issue raised—guide the class in discussion about the conflict. Contain the behavior (set a time limit, summarize, and move on). Provide a time-out—let people freewrite, share reactions in pairs, take a break. If the group is resistant, go with the flow—let them air the issue. Finally, if necessary, arrange a private meeting so you can understand the underlying conflict and build rapport with the resistant student or students.

—Diane J. Goodman

*An exceptional summary of dealing with resistant students from Dr. Diane J Goodman*