



Best Practices to Reduce Stereotype Threat in the Classroom

Stereotype threat involves hidden or overt biases that can cause added stress on members of diverse groups (i.e., groups with negative stereotypes) which, over time, undermine the performance, motivation and health of the students. In keeping with Wayne State University's Urban mission of preparing a diverse body of students to excel in an increasingly complex global society, retention of minority students is key, and a presentation given on Wayne State's campus by Dr. Valerie Purdie-Vaughns discussed how stereotype threat presents itself, and how instructors can structure courses to circumvent the threat (Purdie-Vaughns, 2014). Various stimuli can trigger the stereotype threat in at risk students, such as low number of minority enrollment, difficulty in subjects with stereotypically poor minority performance, etc...; however, instructors can design the three interventions below (taken from Dr. Purdie-Vaughns presentation) into their courses, to help alleviate stereotype threat in their classrooms.

This document discusses the interventions mentioned during Dr. Purdie-Vaughns' presentation, as well as other interventions from published resources. The interventions can be implemented by individual faculty members in their courses, or to facilitate a discussion on a department/institutional level.

Interventions from Dr. Purdie-Vaughns Presentation

I. **Wise-Feedback Intervention:**

A wise-feedback intervention involves being critical of a student's behavior and performance, without undermining the motivation and self-confidence the student needs for improvement.

To provide wise-feedback interventions, instructors should:

1. Provide unambiguous and clear feedback on assignments (i.e., state the specific statements that were incorrect in an essay, states specific problem with solution process for a math problem, etc...).
2. Communicate high expectations, while assuring students they can meet these expectations
 - Moreover, assure students that their race/sexual orientation/religion will not hinder their performance in the course.



The following are examples of “Unwise” and “Wise” feedback/criticism on essays written by minority college students, and presented in Dr. Purdie-Vaughn’s lecture at Wayne State . Differences between the two criticisms are discussed.

“Unwise” criticism: “Overall, nice job. Your enthusiasm for your teacher really shows through,... You have some interesting ideas in your letter and make some good points. ... I’ve suggested several areas that could be improved.”

- Instructor doesn’t mention a high standard.
- “enthusiasm for your instructor shows through...” this feedback will not help the student become a better writer.

“Wise” criticism: “I have judged your paper by the high standard that counts: whether or not your paper would be publishable in a premier journal in our field, and I have serious reservations. The comments I provided regarding your work are critical, but I hope helpful. Remember, I wouldn’t go to the trouble of giving you this feedback if I didn’t think, based on what I’ve read in your paper, that you are capable of meeting the higher standard I mentioned.”

- Instructor states that the paper was judged to a high standard
- “I wouldn’t go to the trouble of giving you this feedback if I didn’t think... that you are capable of meeting the higher standard I mentioned.” This feedback is critical, but also lets the student know that the professor thinks the student is able to meet the high standard.

II. **Values Affirmation Intervention:**

Values affirmation reduces stereotype threat by affirming a student’s core sense of self (i.e., the student’s inherent competence and ability to control their outcomes in the course by reviewing the material). This differs from bolstering a student’s self-esteem, in that the values affirmation assures the student that he/she has the ability **to apply** him/herself towards learning the material and performing favorably. A few recommendations for course design are given below:

From *dictionary.com*:

self-es·teem:

1. A realistic respect for or favorable impression of oneself; self-respect.
2. An inordinately or exaggeratedly favorable impression of oneself.

af·fir·ma·tion:

1. A statement or proposition that is declared to be true.
2. Confirmation or ratification of the truth or validity of a prior judgement, decision, etc.



1. Instructors can promote the effects of values affirmation in their students by focusing on a student's inherent competency to learn the material. For example, instructors could tell struggling students that they aren't spending enough time studying the material, and that the students **are** intelligent enough to learn the required information (instead of telling the students that they aren't "cut-out" for their desired program).
 2. When designing exams or other assessment tools, instructors should provide some statement in the instructions, such as *"this exam is meant to test your ability to recall information/solve problems in [given subject]; it does not reflect differences in race or gender."* Such a statement has demonstrated the ability to reassure students that their identity doesn't affect the assessment, reducing the stereotype threat.
- III. **Symbolic Role Model Intervention**
- Symbolic role model intervention reduces stereotype threat by highlighting successful minorities to at risk students. As an example, studies have shown that when African Americans (a group with negative intellectual stereotypes) reflected about the accomplishments of Barrack Obama, their scholastic achievements improved.

Instructors can help at risk students achieve their full potential by:

1. Discussing minority role models in a given field with at risk students, to help students realize their race/gender/sexual orientation is not a factor holding them back.
2. Specifically reminding students before assessments of minorities in their field of study. For example, if the instructor has a day to review content prior to an exam, discuss a positive current event featuring a successful minority in the field.

Interventions from Published Resources

- **Social Belonging Intervention I** (Walton & Cohen, 2007)

Individuals (such as college students) who feel like they don't belong socially in a certain setting experience stereotype threat. Concerning feelings of social belonging, stereotype threat presents itself as a hypothesis that is proven correct with negative reinforcement: for example, poor performance in an academic setting will confirm a student's perception that they don't belong, if the student already feels out of place as they come into the program. To combat such feelings of non-belonging, Walton and Cohen developed an intervention aimed to provide minority students with an



alternative hypothesis to interpret their academic hardship. Students in Walton and Cohen's study were directed to attribute doubt about belonging to struggles faced by ALL first year college students, regardless of race or ethnicity. Walton and Cohen had students read the results of a survey of upper-class students of mixed race, demonstrating that all students enroll in their first year of college with doubts about social belonging, regardless of their race. As a result of the intervention, African American students were sufficiently buffered from stereotype threat of social belonging, and their performance improved compared to a control group with no intervention.

Instructors and administrators can use the results of this study to mitigate stereotype threat from student perceptions of social belonging by:

1. Alerting students to the greatest extent possible that every student, regardless of race, enters college with questions of whether or not they belong, and this is natural.
 2. Incentivizing at risk students (minority students, etc...) to join a campus student group as early as possible, and preferably before the beginning of term to establish social connections prior to entering the classroom.
- **Social Belonging Intervention II** (Walton & Cohen, 2011)

With a similar rationale as the Social Belonging Intervention I listed above, Walton and Cohen sought to improve upon their first intervention, this time focusing improving the internalization of the "all first year students have doubts about social belonging" message. Walton and Cohen had first year students complete daily surveys for the first week of college, aimed to gauge their feelings of social belonging on campus. Soon after the first week, Walton and Cohen had the students write narratives that frame social adversity as shared (regardless of race), and short lived in college. Essentially, the students were told to attribute any deficits regarding social status to common and transient aspects of student life, and not to fixed character defects unique to the student or their race. To further internalize the idea of the ubiquity and short-life of such feelings of social belonging, Walton and Cohen utilized the "saying is believing" effect: students wrote a speech describing how their social experiences matched experiences shared by the upperclassmen from the survey mentioned in "Social Belonging Intervention I," and were asked to record the speech on a video camera. Furthermore, the students were told that the administration will show the recorded speech to incoming freshmen the year after, to ease their transition into college life: this potentiates the intervention by allowing the students to see themselves as benefactors, rather than beneficiaries.

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1. Incentivizing at risk students (minority students, etc...) to join a campus student group as early as possible, and preferably before the beginning of term to establish social connections prior to entering the classroom.
 2. Requiring incoming students at risk for stereotype threat to review interviews/surveys of upperclassmen discussing the ubiquity and short life of feelings of not being included in college social life.
 3. Part-way through the semester, have students reflect on their initial feelings of not being included in university social settings, and how their feelings have improved.
- **Values Affirmation Writing Exercise** (Harackiewicz et al., 2014)

First generation (FG) college students are exceptionally at risk to experience stereotype threat, due to perceptions of not belonging in an academic environment. FG students may face a cultural mismatch between the independent norms of the university system, and their own interdependent motives for attending a university. The cultural mismatch causes many FG students to perceive college as unfamiliar, uncomfortable and difficult, leading to a reduced sense of belonging. A Values Affirmation (VA) intervention asking students to identify their key values, and record their responses with detailed written explanations, has proven to significantly improve the performance of FG students in a large lecture (798 participants) biology course. The VA intervention used in this study involved two phases:

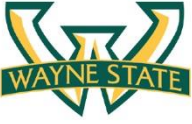
Phase I: Administer a VA writing packet early in the semester (week 3).

Phase II: Administer a (slightly different) VA writing packet before the second exam (week 8).

The VA writing packet included three pages. The first pages listed a set of values, and students were instructed to circle the two or three values most important to them. The second page instructed the students to describe in a few sentences why the selected values were important, and the final page asked the students to list reasons why the top two/three values (collectively) were important to them. The results of Phase I were used as a baseline to compare improvements from Phase II. Results from the study by Harackiewicz et al demonstrated that a VA writing exercise can help FG students improve their academic performance (relative to a non-VA writing exercise control group), and could be used as a strategy to bolster the overall performance of any groups at risk for stereotype threat.

Instructors and administrators can use the results of this study to mitigate stereotype threat from at risk student groups by:

1. Requiring students to complete a VA writing exercise similar to the exercise employed by Harackiewicz et al.
2. Discussing student values immediately prior to taking an exam.



References

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