

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING PACIFIC ISLANDER STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Research conducted through an Asian American & Native American Pacific Islander Institution (AANAPISI) grant at the University of Hawaii at Hilo identified the following concepts, cultural values and findings as key elements in understanding the backgrounds of Pacific Islander students and supporting their success. Based on information from research/evaluation focus groups, surveys and institutional data sets as well as other community resources, the findings are the most commonly cited, observed or discussed as challenges to the academic success of Pacific Islander students. Misinterpretations of behaviors based on cultural values among those with limited knowledge and understanding of Pacific Islander cultures often contribute to unintended negative responses that may impact a student's educational experience. This TIP Sheet offers educators strategies to support Pacific Islander students without compromising academic rigor or expectations within an educational setting. The purpose is NOT for faculty to alter their syllabi or schedules or provide special treatment. Several of the suggestions may also benefit the whole class. It is hoped that this information will assist educators with better understanding the backgrounds of Pacific Islander students and that the strategies provided will enable them to better facilitate student success.

CONCEPT, CULTURAL VALUE OR RESEARCH FINDING

FINDING	MAY BE MANIFESTED AS	MAY BE (MIS) INTERPRETED AS	SUGGESTIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS
HUMILITY OR HUMBLENESS AND RESPECT FOR OTHERS, PARTICULARLY ELDERS	Quiet demeanor or deference to others. Listening and not questioning/speaking up in class; avoiding eye contact; responding in a consistently positive manner (e.g., nodding head in agreement; raising eyebrows for yes).	Socially self-conscious; timid/shy/meek; lack of interest in participating; having an introverted personality; being rebellious (e.g. avoiding eye contact, sitting in back of the class); agreement or understanding.	Provide opportunities for students to meet with you individually or with peers; allow submission of written questions (as opposed to expecting questions to be asked verbally); support work in pairs where students can discuss or converse without feeling singled out. Reinforce the understanding that asking questions and speaking in class is not disrespectful in a western educational setting. Allow practice and modeling for encouraging students to speak up and questioning authority.
IMPORTANCE OF/RELIANCE ON FAMILY SUPPORT SYSTEMS (AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS)	Absenteeism, tardiness, late assignments or no assignments submitted; lethargy. Family priorities (& other social relationships) such as babysitting, transportation, housing or earning income (or spending time with friends) often take precedence over other responsibilities such as attending a class or meeting, or completing an assignment. The western notion of independence and personal responsibility tends to be de-emphasized in many traditional Pacific Island settings.	Lack of commitment to education; excuse-making; unconcerned; unable to comprehend class expectations/material/assignments; procrastination; or poor time management. Inability to work independently; lack of individuality; limited personal goals.	Recognize that family must come first. Emphasize your class expectations with an understanding about family obligations. Provide multiple means of accessibility or “approachability” such as encouraging office visits, emailing or texting/calling re. medical emergencies. Be somewhat flexible with assignments and deadlines, especially when there are extended family medical emergencies such as death or other family obligations. Flexibility refers to communicating an understanding about unexpected crisis and extenuating circumstances which would allow for exceptions to “No Make-up” policies. Encourage the use of university resources and campus support systems. Pair students with a buddy or mentor who can provide positive modeling and encouragement.

**CONCEPT, CULTURAL
VALUE OR RESEARCH**

FINDING	MAY BE MANIFESTED AS	MAY BE (MIS) INTERPRETED AS	SUGGESTIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS
INADEQUATE PRE-COLLEGE PREPAREDNESS AND ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES	Late or incomplete assignments that may lack rigor and depth; low assessment scores; and/or slow progress.	Inadequate comprehension; unconcerned; not intelligent; slow learner; lack of effort or motivation.	Understand/acknowledge students' range of preparedness, depth of previous educational experiences, and their potential limited exposure to western sources of historical, cultural and political information that are seemingly every-day to Americans. Consider providing pre-requisite or background materials for students to gain foundational information that can be applied to assignments or allow them to use knowledge from their own cultural contexts as a place to start from and build upon. Be explicit about expectations and give positive feedback when appropriate.
WRITING AS DEMONSTRATION OF ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE	Low SAT Writing and UH Hilo entrance exam scores; difficulty in writing papers for class assignments; lack of depth or detail in essays; or little class participation.	Inadequate comprehension; unconcerned; not intelligent; slow learner; laziness; lack of effort or motivation.	Provide specific skill building exercises relevant to the discipline or subject area. For example, distinguish expectations of writing assignments such as expository techniques of argument or persuasion; comparing and contrasting; presenting differing viewpoints; or interpreting research/information and fact-finding. Clarify and explain paraphrasing as opposed to potential unintended plagiarism. Support expression or articulation of ideas and concepts, not perfect English grammar unless it is an English course.
ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER CONSTRUCT AND MINORITY STATUS	Apprehension in making friends outside one's ethnic or language heritage; concern about perceived stereotyping or harassment; or appearing inferior to the class; sitting in the back of the room lest they be called on.	In need of special attention; timid/shy/meek; socially awkward; lacking English speaking skills; unfriendly.	During lectures English is often spoken quickly and explanations of terminology may be difficult to understand, compounding students' concern to correctly pronounce content/academic words in front of the class. Slow down lecture pace, repeat key vocabulary and terminology, and allow for response wait time. Let students practice their oral speaking skills in pairs and small groups. Consider using short answer and essay tests rather than multiple choice exams which may disadvantage non-native English speakers. Provide opportunities for students to share their background. Use simpler jargon. Don't assume full understanding from facial expressions.
AVOIDANCE OF SHAME OR EMBARRASSMENT (MAINTAINING A POSITIVE REPUTATION)	Hesitant to respond in large class/group settings as not to draw attention to oneself. Reticence in asking questions for clarification in an effort to avoid mispronouncing words or being perceived as "stupid."	Lack of English speaking/comprehension skills; lack of knowledge about the subject; unintelligent; not engaged or inattentive; withdrawal if singled out. By the same token, if a student appears silent but attentive one may perceive the student as comprehending the subject, intelligent or passively engaged.	Demonstrate patience, allow pauses, and allocate time for a response as the student may be formulating a response to articulate in English. Encourage students to continue their line of inquiry; demonstrate how to formulate content-related questions [whole class]; and ensure that equitable opportunities for discussion and conversation are deliberate. Place students in pairs and small groups to provide more comfortable opportunities for expression. With newly arrived students, do not immediately and unexpectedly single them out. This can lead to withdrawal and can be counterproductive.

CONCEPT, CULTURAL VALUE OR RESEARCH

FINDING	MAY BE MANIFESTED AS	MAY BE (MIS) INTERPRETED AS	SUGGESTIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS
CULTURAL IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION	Behaviors that range from clear visual representation of cultural pride (e.g. embroidered skirts, lava lavas) to dissonance or denial of cultural affiliations that may impact school experiences. Feeling high levels of pressure to represent their home cultures, family, and community in a positive manner and not disappoint peers and the social expectations of one’s culture. Likewise, some students may falsely claim belonging to another ethnic group or avoid identifying with a particular ethnic group.	Unaccepting of American, Hawaiian and/or local values; challenging the local norms of “acceptable” attire; lack of focus on academics.	Gain basic knowledge of the Pacific region to reinforce students’ identity and create connections on a personal level. Acknowledge cultural expectations that reinforce/remind students about academic priorities related to degree completion and academic goals. Recognize their individuality, capabilities and where they are from in the Pacific. Strive for correct pronunciation of their names and their place names. Do not offer or impose a nickname on a student as an alternative to learning how to pronounce his/her given name.
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC SELF EFFICACY AND GRADE POINT AVERAGE	Hesitancy in responding to and asking questions; explaining a concept to another student; participating in class discussions or leading a study group.	Deficient communication skills; social awkwardness; lack of interest in class participation; inadequate public speaking skills; poor study habits; or unmotivated.	Repeat key concepts and terminology during lecture. Provide positive reinforcement when appropriate. Consider making lecture notes available. Use a range of examples to clarify concepts and to make concepts relevant to Pacific Islander experiences. Periodically check in with students when appropriate but not enable dependency.
IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL IDENTITY (INDIVIDUALISM VS. COLLECTIVISM)	Socializing with only peers from their own ethnic group; congregating in areas familiar to one’s own ethnic group; working within only one’s ethnic group for a class project; adhering to one’s social group’s traditional values.	Inability to work independently; lack of personhood; limited personal goals; lack of flexibility; disliking those outside their ethnic group; cliquish; unaccepting of change.	Recognize that students are interdependent members of a larger group and negotiating the tensions that may exist between one’s culture and a western-oriented educational context often results in dissonance. Academic success by way of operating within the western construct of “individualistic” values promoted by mainstream American culture is often at the expense of “collectivistic” values characteristic of other cultures. Support students in balancing the two constructs by providing opportunities to work in small heterogeneous groups that include individual activities that contribute to group success. Take time to get to know the ethnic/cultural backgrounds of students and encourage intercultural understandings within project groups. Offer participation protocols so that all group members feel welcomed and have an opportunity to contribute equitably.

NOTES: Denise Uehara, PhD., AANAPISI Researcher, University of Hawaii at Hilo, duehara@hawaii.edu, Pacific Islander Student Center: www.hilo.hawaii.edu/pisc phone: 808-932-7718
Contributors: Vidalino Raatior, Desha Staley Raatior, Jim Mellon, Dr. Craig Severance, 2012-2014 Pacific Islander Student Focus Groups and Survey Participants, Jonathan Chugen, Axel Defngin, Elaine Chugen, Cheryl Lighor, Dr. Mary Hattori