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Removing Barriers for Contemporary Student Success

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Abstract

This paper examines the contemporary student in higher education and how to position this student for success. Through analysis of Leviticus 19:14, which states “You shall not curse the deaf, and you shall not place a stumbling block before the blind,” the authors examine how to remove barriers often placed in front of the contemporary post-secondary student. Utilizing the analogy of the contemporary student and the institution of higher education being “blind” and/or “deaf” as in the biblical verse, the authors propose institutional responses and institutional repercussions that can remove barriers and thereby allow the contemporary student to succeed in the complex arena of higher education.

Introduction

Leviticus 19:14 states “You shall not curse the deaf, and you shall not place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God; I am the Lord.” These *mitzvot*, or commandments, are two of 613 precepts in the Jewish Bible, or Torah, and from Jewish sages that relate to the moral conduct of the Jewish people. The significance of these *mitzvot* is equal in stature to the other commandments that are widely known such as honoring one’s parents and prohibitions against blasphemy, theft, and murder. Leviticus 19:14 has been discussed and applied in many different circumstances, from the obvious connection with disability services to analogies with business, parenting and beyond. There has, however, been little discussion in the literature regarding the application of these commandments in the world of higher education. The authors, both of whom work in a Jesuit Catholic university, believe that these commandments can be utilized in the realm of higher education and in particular, to guide our work with contemporary students.

D’rash (Interpretation of text)

One relevant and commonplace use of Leviticus 19:14 is in the world of disability services. Indeed, Leviticus 19:14 is cited regularly in legal writings. For instance, the Touro Law Center published a response entitled “Thou Shalt Not Put a Stumbling Block Before the Blind: The Americans with Disabilities Act and Public Transit for the Disabled.”¹ Yet, Jewish sages argue that the words “blind” and “deaf” can be interpreted much deeper than their literal meaning and therefore should be considered for application beyond individuals with disabilities. Rabbi Elchanan Samet notes, “blind” here means anyone, even without handicap, who does not see the stumbling block in the path. Stumbling block refers to a physical trap lying innocuously in one’s path, but can also be interpreted to mean anything that can cause a person to metaphorically trip causing embarrassment or injury.² Friedman, a professor of business at Brooklyn College adds, the word “blind” is interpreted to represent any person or group that is unaware, unsuspecting, ignorant or morally blind.³ In essence, this *mitzvah* can and should be more broadly applied to anyone who

might not understand a situation, or perhaps cannot “see” clearly what is before them.

The second *mitzvah* involves a person who is not likely to be immediately physically injured: the deaf person. The deaf individual cannot hear unkind words or gossip spoken about them. In this case, the commentators tell us that the commandment is for the benefit of both the “deaf” person as well as anyone who might gossip. This protects an individual or community and guards us from expressing anger through heated words. Another viewpoint suggests that when we curse a person, we think less of them. We, in fact, demonize them. When we curse or speak ill of a person, we give voice to a belief in our superiority and hierarchical importance. Regardless of the ability of a person to hear our words, our actions communicate our attitude and beliefs. What starts with a curse that someone cannot hear can end with destroying the receiver’s reputation and self-worth. Just as importantly, we can become immune and accustomed to judging people, gossiping about people, and forgetting the commandment against “*lashon hara*,” the evil tongue. We are told in Leviticus 19:16, “Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people.”

Ultimately, curses and stumbling blocks damage the whole of a community, the blind and deaf, the sighted and hearing, the supervisor and supervisee, the children and the elders. This typical Talmudic interpretation of the text engenders the Jewish view of a community built of ethical and principled individuals. In fact, one can easily argue that all of Jewish scriptures focus on the answers to building and living in community. Each of us has had the experience of being blind to danger or feeling blindsided by a work or personal situation. For example, many of us feel blind when we start a new job, move to a new city, or enter a new relationship. Perhaps we feel deaf when we are trying to learn something new, but are critiqued for not yet knowing how to accomplish a related task. Many of us have had the experience of being at a gathering and not understanding an inside joke or a reference to an acronym being used in the room. We are deaf to the meaning of the discussion and often embarrassed. We can be “deaf” when we are given instructions that only make sense to someone who knows the

terminology or has a certain skill base. These deeper explications of the commandments draw us to a conversation of how the commandment relates to the context of higher education and in particular the contemporary student in higher education.

Higher Education and the Contemporary Student

How does the previous conversation relate to higher education and, in particular, the contemporary student? First, we must understand the demographic we are discussing. Two authors have redefined the post/non-traditional, adult student as the contemporary student.⁴ These students share at least one element of the adult student population. They may have children, be the first in their family history to attend college (known as first generation), work while in college, or have other adult responsibilities. Remarkably, at least 75% of today’s student population fall into this demographic.⁵ Often contemporary students do not know how a university operates, do not understand the computer registration systems, the hierarchies, or the policies and procedures that engender an institution of higher education. Academics live in a world of syllabi, rubrics, academic integrity policies, and learning outcomes. Our students may not know what these are, why they are important, and how to effectively navigate all the rules, regulations, policies and procedures.

If some students arrive at our universities blind, it is incumbent upon us, as experts in academia, to help those students see. Metaphorically, if a person is blind we have a responsibility to help them navigate. Additionally, we are obliged to remove blocks to facilitate sight. There are, unfortunately, many common examples of the analogy between the blind as the contemporary student and our role in the academy as faculty, staff, administration, which we equate to the sighted.

Similarly, it is all too easy to treat a student as if they are deaf when we assess and evaluate them. It is all too easy to complain about a student’s lack of writing skills, forgetting that few students write well before they are college seniors. It is equally easy for a professor to curse the number of papers

they have to grade, which in some ways will impact how the papers are received and graded. In each of these cases we have placed ourselves hierarchically above the individuals we have committed to support and teach, and instead created an environment of judgment and tale-bearing.

There are many examples of both treating a student as blind and acting as if they are deaf:

- A faculty member may complain that a student cannot write and proceed to grade them against a rubric that supports that assumption, but teaches the student little. We are measuring something that students are blind to.
- A staff member may be upset when a student does not understand how to register or how to use the learning management system. We forget that the student did not come to college to learn how to register. We forget that we did not know how to use the learning management system when we joined the university. We forget that is our job to help the blind to see and the deaf to hear.
- A student may struggle in a foundational course, such as Algebra or English Composition. We may judge these students as developmental and criticize them for not being at college level.
- This nomenclature is merely bookkeeping. There is no actual grade level of performance, just an expectation we have of people at certain levels so that we can efficiently sort students.
- A student may have more than enough credits to graduate, but not the correct credits. We blame the student for not seeing an advisor, for changing majors, or for taking so long that the program changed. Alternatively, we laugh that we all graduated with a few extra credits, and wonder why the student is concerned about the extra time and money.

In each of these cases we have created a stumbling block and allowed ourselves to feel superior, violating both of the *mitzvo*t under examination.

Institutional Repercussions

When our students trip over a block they often feel disrespected, blaming those in positions of power for being unhelpful. In this case, the authors have chosen to examine four possible reactions within the framework of the Jewish faith from where Leviticus 19:14 stems. The reactions can be equated with the Four Children who attend the Jewish Passover Seder, a story in every Passover Haggadah. As the biblical story goes, the Torah refers to four sons. One is simple, one is wicked, one is wise and one is silent. Each ponders the Seder in a different way and thus experiences a unique Passover. Using this analogy, what if these four children were students in our universities? The simple student may be embarrassed and wonder if he is college material and consider leaving the institution. This student might assess his ability to navigate unfamiliar situations as proof that he cannot deal with college. It is not unusual for this student to stop trying or to compound the problem as he becomes frustrated with unfamiliar, complicated rules.

The wicked student feels angry and may create a crisis situation for administration. This student may send a nasty note to their professor, an angry email to their dean or a threatening notification to the president stating that she has been treated unfairly. This student will demand some form of rectification, and still in the end, might transfer to another institution, all the while expressing her displeasure on social media sites.

The wise student will understand that there is a gap in knowledge that needs to be filled in order to be successful. This student will seek out guidance, support and resources on his own accord in an attempt to understand (to see and hear) the anatomy of success in higher education. Unfortunately, retention data suggests the wise student is in the minority.

Finally, the silent student might decide that the institution is more invested in collecting tuition dollars than in supporting student success. She

may think that success has been defined by unfamiliar expectations by administrators who work within the system, and hence no longer recognize the many blocks that she faces. The silent student will choose to leave, likely without seeking any guidance or support and potentially without notifying anyone at the institution, and take her tuition dollars elsewhere looking for an understanding and supportive environment that guides the student towards sight and hearing.

Institutional Response

Student retention is a vital element of any institution's strategic plan. Students who do not feel supported are less likely to be retained, as are students who experience the institution as judgmental. There are several ways that an institution can adapt to meet the needs and dynamics of individual students without increasing costs. Adopting these or countless other supports and resources can serve as our answer to the commandment (Leviticus 19:14) and upholds our responsibility to sight the students who come to us blind.

There is considerable research demonstrating that streamlining processes and creating student-focused operations increases the retention of contemporary students.⁶ Streamlined processes create a flow and efficiency that allows students to spend their time learning and studying content rather than dealing with bureaucratic minutia. For instance, everyone benefits from a single login that allows students to access their learning management system, their financial aid portfolio, their degree plan, etc. from one webpage in contrast to multiple websites with different usernames and passwords that create confusion and inefficiencies. Institutions should streamline archaic and outdated processes that do not serve either the institution or students. These archaic remnants were often created to work with old technology, or simply adapted old processes without truly re-engineering them resulting in redundancies. For example, many of us have been frustrated by the need to complete a job application that asks for all the information on our resume when also asked to attach our resume. Our students feel the same frustration when our internal systems do not talk to each other and they

must fill out forms with the same information over and over again.

There are a variety of policies and practices that better serve the contemporary student, and at the same time benefit the institution. This robust category could include a variety of tactics. One example, rather than placing one copy of required material on reserve at the library for students to access, consider the adult student who may not visit the library regularly and instead provide open resource material that can be accessed virtually. Another opportunity would include consideration of an online orientation that can accommodate all students including the contemporary student in contrast to the traditional face-to-face student orientation where vital information and resources are often shared.

Another reflection of the past is the difficulty students have registering for courses that meet their academic and personal schedule needs. Many institutions build schedules based on the desires of the faculty or the needs of the more traditional students who engage in afternoon sports and other campus activities, in which contemporary students do not participate in as heavily. Successful institutions have learned to sequence and schedule courses in ways that serve contemporary students and eliminate additional barriers.

Contemporary students want to save time and money in college and are less concerned with having numerous options. We can facilitate this by creating clear pathways rather than a large number of courses, with a direct line to completion. Contemporary students may not be attending college to obtain a breadth of knowledge or a transformational experience. While they might feel transformed and obtain a broad reach of knowledge, more choices in coursework and direction is only confusing.

The same is true of many of our institutional policies and procedures. While it is true that these are published on our websites and syllabi, they are numerous and often difficult to interpret. Institutions can avoid penalizing students for policies and procedures that live in an academic vacuum by limiting the number of policies often enacted based on one potentially outlying student

issue or an assumption about student behavior. For example, a great deal of energy is often invested in preventing student cheating in online classes based on the assumption that all students cheat. In actuality, research has demonstrated that students are much more likely to cheat in traditional classrooms than in online classes.⁷

We also need to modernize our courses since contemporary students of all ages expect courses that are engaging, interactive, and provide applicable skills or information. The authors have named these types of courses “Fireball” based on the numerous ways they are designed to address the contemporary student’s need to learn through diverse means. For example, speech, writing and math courses are easily taught through art infusion, which supports the students who have often struggled due to a “math blindness.” Further, we can cease from penalizing students by requiring additional course work that is not transferable or applicable to their degree, including college success courses. One of the authors worked with a student who had over a 3.0 GPA from a community college, but had failed the college success class and could not graduate. As a response, the authors led the creation and implementation of a transferable psychology course entitled “Transforming the Journey,” that embeds college skills within the content, thereby allowing a credit and content-bearing course to serve multiple purposes.

We treat students as if they are blind and deaf when we use bait and switch courses, such as an additional writing course students are required to take if they are deemed to not write well enough, even though they may have already taken transferable English courses. Another example of treating students as if they were deaf, and ourselves as superior, occurs when institutions require that students re-take calculus or drawing if the courses were taken elsewhere. This results in students paying for more credits than they need, which is yet another block to success.

Perhaps there is no greater example of curing the deaf than our use of language. The way we talk to and refer to our students can help or hinder them. When we use the language of judgement, we are telling students that they cannot succeed and we are placing a block before them. When we discuss

students in terms of their weaknesses or inability, rather than using the language of ongoing regard, we then alter our expectations based on our assumptions, and are in essence gossiping about them.⁸

There is considerable research demonstrating that our internal language regarding students as well as our assumptions play out in the classroom.⁹ Students live up or down to our internal expectations. The language we use to speak to ourselves or our students makes our assumptions concrete and we can inadvertently place stumbling blocks before our students if we use language in a negative fashion. Our negative language creates an environment of false and inappropriate judgement that decreases our ability to actually serve and support students.

One effective method to prevent this is through mentoring. Rather than creating more policies and gates, or requiring student meetings with advisors, successful institutions have learned that contemporary students would rather speak with a peer mentor of their own age who has recently faced similar challenges. By pairing new contemporary students with veteran contemporary students, the newer student can candidly speak with a peer about questions, confusions, and concerns. This creates a non-threatening environment where like-minded students can comfortably seek guidance without fear of how they might be perceived. In addition, this model allows new students to tangibly witness how their efforts can shape their success as they have with a peer mentor while simultaneously incentivizing veteran students to enhance their qualifications through serving as a mentor. Mentors provide ongoing support, listen, and serve as guides by helping new students learn the academic culture, language and rhythm, and helping students to feel safe and to prepare to be successful.¹⁰

We can further address these issues through Universal Design of Learning (UDL), which takes into consideration individual differences, as well as ways to level the playing field.¹¹ Founded on neurological research that identifies the three neurological networks that impact learning and must be used simultaneously to enhance learning, UDL’s primary principles are:

- Multiple means of representation—give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge.
- Multiple means of expression—provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know.
- Multiple means of engagement—tap into learners' interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation.¹²

Contemporary learners often discover that implementation of even a single principle of UDL encourages learning and combats challenges processing or organizing information, which are common when the contemporary student enters higher education. Some may be blind to their own learning issue. Students with disabilities often do not self-identify and may not register with their university's disability services office when they enter college. UDL addresses this issue without requiring a student to go to disability services for testing or to openly admit they have a challenge. Students enter the classroom with a variety of different learning styles, strengths, weaknesses, and fears. The more instructors can do to support their learning by embedding UDL strategies within the learning environment, the more successful all students can be.

One final suggestion mirrors the current trend of flipped classrooms in the realm of service learning. Contemporary students come to institutions with complex lives. Often they are involved in various service or volunteer organizations. They might be involved in their children's school or live in a safe house, or feed an elderly next-door neighbor. And yet we often require that these same students add a volunteer component attached to a course so they can participate in service learning, often required for graduation. By doing so, we are creating a block by not acknowledging the reality of our students' lives. We are placing a block before them through our commitment to our own style of teaching. We in essence are cursing them for not being able to participate in the manner we wish.

Why not instead permit the service learning already embedded in the student's life to become part of their university service work by tasking the

student with applying classroom information in the volunteer and service opportunities they already participate in? For example, rather than an accounting student going to a low-income support organization to help individuals with taxes, why not acknowledge the student who helps his/her neighbors with taxes? Rather than asking a student to visit a nursing home to use skills in a psychology course, why not have that student report on using those skills with an aging parent?

These examples are, in many ways, simply best practices for retaining contemporary students in higher education. However, viewing them through an overlay of Leviticus 19 reveals a deeper and more vital aspect. In many ways, putting blocks before the blind and gossiping about the deaf hinders our own personal and spiritual development. It is said that character is what we reveal by how we behave when no one is looking. The blind cannot see us place the block, nor can the deaf hear our gossip. However, when we offer a drink to a recovering alcoholic (who is blind through vulnerability), or gossip about a perceived underachiever or struggling student, we abandon our own moral and ethical standards and create an environment that is neither safe nor honorable. We create an institution that cannot live up to a vision and mission of supporting students.

Future Research


The higher education student demographic is rapidly changing, and institutions of higher education are being challenged to adapt to new demands. Some researchers predict the creation of degree progressions with fewer credits, more robust transfer relationships, general education courses completed on the job, and academic credits awarded via electronic badging credentials, as well as other profound shifts.¹³ These changes would respond to the demand for degrees that take less time and do not result in student debt. It is possible that these new pathways will better serve our blind and deaf students.

The next step in researching contemporary student success should focus not only on these innovations, but also on the role of the student's overall emotional well-being. While we know that contemporary students look for degrees that save time and money, do they also prioritize an

institution based on a feeling of safety and support? In other words, does the perception that an institution will not use their blindness and deafness against the student influence student choice and ultimately, success?

Conclusion

For more than 2,000 years, Jewish sages have said that a lack of access is equated to placing a stumbling block before the blind. This holds true for individuals with disabilities, in reference to voting rights, and a plethora of other arenas including education. Jesuit creed echoes this sentiment, with a long history of providing access to education for the masses.¹⁴ As the numbers of contemporary students continue to increase, it is incumbent upon us to conduct continued research that addresses this population of students and enables them for success. Future research has the opportunity to provide quantitative analyses that examine contemporary student success.

The sages further argue that gossip in any form, but especially about a deaf person, is the highest sin. Regardless of the historical or religious roots of these philosophies, there is agreement that when we place a block in front of a blind person, or gossip about a deaf person, we are doing harm to that individual and to ourselves. In the process, we might feel smarter, wiser, and, within the context of education, justified in requesting more qualified students. However, this is much like a hospital choosing to work with only healthy patients, which of course results in data indicating greater institutional success. The sages would state that these actions feed our egos. In contrast, our role as educators, and as human beings, per the *mitzvot*, is quite the opposite. It is incumbent upon us to help the blind to see and the deaf to hear. Leviticus 19:14 provides wisdom that can transform how institutions of higher education relate to and work with students. The lives of our students depend on how we choose to respond. 

Notes

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² Elchanan Samet, "You Shall Not Place a Stumbling Block Before the Blind: Chazal's Metaphoric Approach," *Torah Musings*, April 30, 2015, <http://www.torahmusings.com/2015/04/you-shall-not-place-a-stumbling-block-before-the-blind-chazals-metaphoric-approach/>.

³ Hershey H. Friedman, "Placing a Stumbling Block Before the Blind Person: An In-Depth Analysis," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (April, 2013), doi:10.2139/ssrn.2311478.

⁴ Elisa Robyn and Linda Lujan, "Call Them What They Are: The New Contemporary Student," *The Evollution*, February 3, 2017, https://evollution.com/attracting-students/todays_learner/call-them-what-they-are-the-new-contemporary-student/.

⁵ Susan Choy, "Nontraditional Undergraduates: Findings from the Condition of Education," *U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics*, August 2002, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002012.pdf>.

⁶ Tiffany Dovey Fishman, Allan Ludgate, and Jen Tutak, "Success by Design: Improving Outcomes in American Higher Education," last modified March 16, 2017, <https://www2.deloitte.com/insights/us/en/industry/public-sector/improving-student-success-in-higher-education.html>.

⁷ Donna Stuber-McEwen and Phillip Wiseley, "Point, Click, and Cheat: Frequency and Type of Academic Dishonesty in the Virtual Classroom," *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2009).

⁸ Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2001).

⁹ Claude M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011).

¹⁰ Glen Omatsu, "The Power of Peer Mentoring Resource Booklet," accessed October 15, 2018, https://www.csun.edu/sites/default/files/EOP_Peer_Mentor_Booklet.pdf.

¹¹ Melissa Brydon, "The Continuum of UDL," (lecture, Regis University Workshop on Inclusive Excellence, Denver, CO, August, 2017).

¹² "Three Principles of Universal Design," Kurzweil Education, accessed October 17, 2018, <https://www.kurzweilededu.com/udl-three-principles-p4.html>.

¹³ Elisa Robyn and Linda Lujan, "Reflections on Trends and Disruptions That Can Support Higher Education's Continued Relevance," *The Evollution*, July 27, 2017, <https://evollution.com/revenue->

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¹⁴ John O'Malley, S.J., "How the First Jesuits Became Involved in Education," in *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum: 400th Anniversary Perspectives*, ed. Vincent J. Duminuco, S.J. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 56-74.