

# Students Respond to Mixed-Aged Classes

contributed by Dr. Michael Reiner

An opinion survey was conducted over the summer to determine the attitude of traditional and non-traditional students to the "mixed-age classroom." This effort was part of the College's ongoing study to improve the educational environment created by the influx of persons over twenty-three years of age to the student body. Surveys were mailed to traditional-aged rising sophomores and seniors and to non-traditional-aged students in the Adult Degree Program (ADP) and Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA). As an indication of student interest in issues surrounding the mixed-age classroom, the response rate was approximately 64%, which is very high for a mailed survey.

The questionnaire had sixteen statements, half of which expressed positive attitude toward some aspect of mixed-age classes, while half expressed a negative attitude. To each positive or negative statement, students could respond "strongly agree," "agree," "uncertain," "disagree," or "strongly disagree." Overall, the results revealed that attitudes toward the mixed-age class were very positive on the part of non-traditional students, while traditional-aged students felt less so. Specifically, of the non-traditional students, approximately 69% on the average agreed or strongly agreed with the positive statements (please note - because there was a neutral "uncertain" response, the above result does not imply that the remaining 31% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed). Furthermore, only approximately 17% on the average agreed or strongly agreed with negative statements. Therefore, non-traditional students generally felt pretty positive about the situation. In contrast, only 38% of the traditional students on the average agreed or strongly agreed with the positive statements, while an average of 41% agreed or strongly

agreed with negative statements. Clearly, the overall attitude of traditional-aged students was less positive than that expressed by the non-traditional-aged students.

Areas of particular concern for traditional-aged students were evident by examining the responses to specific statements. Only about 25% expressed a favorable attitude to the following positive statements: "Both groups of students are treated equally well by the faculty," "I am more attentive when other students talk in a mixed-age class," "I learn more in a mixed-age class," and "I prefer mixed-age classes." In addition, a majority of traditional-aged students expressed a negative attitude by agreeing or strongly agreeing with the following items: "Tension exists between the mixed-age groups," "Both groups stick to themselves in class," and "Difficulties between the groups centers around academic issues."

However, the negative attitudes mentioned above were tempered by positive attitudes to other aspects of mixed-age classes. For instance, a majority of traditional students responded favorably to such positive statements as: "Mixed-age classes are more interesting," "Mixed-age study groups would be comfortable," "My education benefits from mixed-age classes," and "Professors respond well to the concerns of both traditional and non-traditional students." In addition, a majority disagreed or strongly disagreed with the following negative statements: "I find it difficult to interact with different age groups," "I'm less involved in a mixed-age class," "Mixed-age classes are a hindrance to my academic success." Clearly, traditional-aged students perceive both benefits and problems with mixed-age classes, suggesting an attitude that can best be described as ambivalent.

These results contrast sharply with the attitudes expressed by the non-traditional students. In their case, approximately 50% or more agreed or

strongly agreed with each of the positive statements, with one exception ("I am more attentive when other students talk in a mixed-age class.") Similarly, a majority disagreed or strongly disagreed with negative statements, with one exception ("Both groups stick to themselves in class.") Therefore, non-traditional students generally had a favorable attitude toward the mixed-age class.

Comments written by students help to clarify some of the attitudes expressed in the questionnaire. Some traditional students were upset because they felt that professors provided more help and attention to the non-traditional students. Furthermore, they felt that instructors were more flexible and provided more extension in fulfilling course requirements with the non-traditional student. Concern about competition for academic awards and discussion being hindered in the mixed-age class also were noted by traditional students. Nevertheless, some traditional students had a positive reaction to the non-traditional students, noting that the experience and knowledge of the non-traditional student contributed to greater learning and more interesting classes. The comments of the non-traditional students generally were appreciative of the traditional students. They said that both groups benefited from the

interaction in the mixed-age class and that non-traditional students often enjoyed being with traditional students. Some non-traditional students, however, were distressed that traditional students were unfriendly and ignored them. In addition, they were concerned about the level of academic motivation displayed by some traditional students and the implications of this for class discussions and learning.

The results of the student opinion survey provided information as to the prevalence and intensity of student attitudes toward the mixed age class. Although generalizations gloss over the complexity inherent in the data, it can be said that non-traditional students generally have a positive opinion toward the mixed-age class, while traditional students are more ambivalent. A faculty committee, with Dr. Gary Ljungquist as the chairman, is examining ways to improve the quality of education in the mixed-age class. In addition, the Salem Student Coalition, a group composed of both traditional and non-traditional students, will be looking at ways to improve the quality of campus life. Patricia Earnhardt and Bonita Lee are members of the Coalition and would welcome your comments and suggestions to help make Salem an ideal environment for educating women of all ages.

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