

# REFLECTIONS ON THE TEACHING OF FRESHMEN

**James E. Sefton**  
**Professor of History**

Teaching Freshmen is one of the most important things we do. And one of the most challenging, because in the freshman classroom, we encounter a number of campus-wide issues. Some of these we do not solve very well, some we think are not ours to solve, and about some we prefer a state of denial. Herewith, a few thoughts.

1. The troublesome phrase “seamless transition” overlays a lot of our policies, procedures, and attitudes. The transition from high school to college should NOT be seamless. It should be a rite of passage, otherwise students get the idea that freshman year isn’t much more difficult than high school was. Our freshmen then become a source of information for the next crop of high school seniors, and the cycle of low expectations continues.
2. While emphasizing the positive but often ill-defined idea of “student success,” we try to shield Freshmen from failure because we are fixated on retention rates. Freshman course selection often focuses on which courses are easiest. Summer orientation is much more about social/cultural topics than about academic responsibility. Our recent campus study of grade inflation showed that grades in remedial courses, especially reading and writing, are 95% credit (thanks to the Chancellor’s XO 665), regardless of whether the students can in fact read/write at proper collegiate freshman level, as in fact they show very quickly.
3. Much of our approach to Freshmen, as indeed to all students, stems from consumerism – the notion that students are our clients or customers, and they have a right to be satisfied. This is one of the unfortunate entitlements they bring with them, and, like the others, they persist because we are too timid about dealing with them. Even the language and syntax of memos and policy statements reflects the influence of merchandising, the transformation of CSUN into CSUK, as in K-Mart. Because we are unwilling to be ‘directive’ in the sense of telling high schools the qualities we want their students to have when they get here – that was “directive,” not “selective” – we are stuck thinking that all we can do is tolerate them as they come to us. If we persist in this thinking, we will never be able to engage in any level of academic upgrade or reform.
4. We focus a great deal on educational technology, in part because students are running rampant with techtoys and we think we have to keep up with them or else be irrelevant. We don’t. But we DO have to continually make the point that technology is no replacement for hard intellectual work. As we move to include

more “Information Competence” elements in our courses, we have to remember the other IC: Intellectual Competence. Knowing how to find, manipulate, and submit information electronically is not much help if you can only apply weak intellectual skills to it when you find it.

5. Much of the talk about teaching Freshmen focuses on making students feel good – because we assume that students who feel good will learn better. Probably so. But there is still an important variable: what ARE we expecting them to learn? If all we do is ask them to regurgitate things on a multiple choice exam that we have said are important, that’s not learning very much. That’s the lowest level of intellectual activity there is, lower even than memorizing things the student has concluded are important. Unfortunately, it is often what they did in high school, and it generates the high grades that gave them a false impression of their preparation for a university.
6. We sometimes hear that if our students do not get high grades, then we’re doing something wrong. We should downplay the mea culpa syndrome and emphasize student responsibility first. We should prefer assignments and exams that will diagnose how well they have performed the requirements and how well they understand the material, not ones on which they can do well. If indeed they have done the work and understood it, the grades will reflect that. If not, not.
7. We are very concerned to avoid seeming to be judgmental, because judgment opens up charges of unfairness, discrimination, etc. The key word here is evaluation, and it goes with the professorial territory. It’s not enough to say that the student did everything assigned, and so should have an A or B. How WELL did the student do everything? The qualitative aspect cannot be ignored.
8. In general, we should emphasize academic expectations, and encourage faculty to maintain them. This means, among other things, confronting the constant and varied manifestations of anti-intellectualism that students bring with them to campus, and that we allow to survive a “seamless transition.” We spend a lot of time worrying about the comfort of the environment that students experience in the classroom, and not nearly enough about the comfort of the institutional environment in which faculty are expected to work.
9. All of these points become even more important because we produce the next generation of high school teachers, who in turn send our next generation of Freshmen to us. If we wish to see our Freshmen improve over time, we cannot accomplish that by sending to their high schools new teachers who have not themselves been through a rigorous academic experience here.
10. It is often said that we are training California’s work force for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Far more important, we are preparing the thoughtful, literate, informed, and responsible citizenry that the progress of human civilization requires. For many of our students, we are the highest level of education they will complete. Their

best interests require us to ensure that college is a place where you have to earn your way in, and then you have to earn your way out. The transition begins with Freshman Year. It isn't seamless. But faculty are ready and willing to show the way.