

Mitigate Stereotype Threat

Definition: Stereotype threat is the *unconscious* concern that one's performance on a task will confirm negative stereotypes about a group to which one belongs. This unconscious concern distracts students from the task at hand, negatively impacting their performance, thus confirming their unconscious fears. It has been documented extensively (see reference list for a small sampling of examples).

Goal: Avoid activating stereotype threat and help students become more resistant to its effects.

Advantages: Students who are given strategies to deal with stereotype threat perform better on academic tasks and maintain higher GPAs overall.



Strategies

Role models who “look like me”: Seeing and learning about examples of successful people defying common stereotypes can help students imagine themselves succeeding in the same fields.⁵

Level the playing field: Framing social adversity in school as a short-lived experience shared by all students during the first year of college can improve underrepresented students' GPAs over their entire college career.^{6,7} It is critically important to normalize this shared experience in a way that leaves students feeling optimistic and supported.⁷

Pair critical feedback with assurance: Give students authentic, critical feedback, and tell them explicitly that you are doing so because you know that they can meet your high standards.²

Values affirmation: Having students write about what they value (e.g. community service, faith, teamwork, family, ...) has profound and long-lasting effects on their academic performance.^{4,8}

Use validation: Encourage all students to contribute to the classroom conversation. Affirm that the perspective and knowledge they bring is as valuable as what others think and know.

Implementation

- Remove environmental cues that may suggest that your classroom is the domain of a particular group.¹
- Invite non-stereotypical guest speakers to visit your classes. Include pictures and stories of scientists who are women and people of color in presentations.⁵
- Refrain from reminding students about their racial, ethnic, or gender identities, even indirectly, prior to assessments. Alternatively, remind students of an identity-relevant antidote (e.g. the computer programmers in Hidden Figures).^{3,6,8}

References

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