

THE INVISIBLE BAGGAGE

REMEMBERING THE HUMANITY OF OUR STUDENTS

C. Diane Rudebock

A student appeared at my office just before class was to begin. She was disheveled in her appearance, her hair was unkempt, and her clothes were quite wrinkled. I had met her the day before in the first summer session class, but she looked quite different today than yesterday.

My first thought was, "Why are you coming by to talk when we only have a few minutes before class begins?" Then, I quickly moved to my second thought, which was, "What's in the bag?" I did not verbalize my thoughts but was reminded of a story I heard years ago—we should imagine that each person with whom we come in contact is carrying two invisible bags. In one bag are all the current life issues, and in the other bag are the issues of the past. Many times, a person's actions and reactions are indirectly connected to all the other things going on in their life, both past and present.

The girl began her story with tears in her eyes, "I do not have my assignment completed." I paused, looked across my desk at her, and asked, "Are you okay?" I had a glimpse into one of her invisible bags. She continued, "I am living in my car—I went to a friend's house to use her printer, but it was broken. My parents kicked me out last year when I told them I was gay. I moved in with my girlfriend, but then we broke up, and I had nowhere to live. I have a job and get paid Friday." I encouraged her to seek help through the campus counseling center and gave her the local crisis help line number.

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I thanked her for coming by to talk and asked if she needed other assistance.

How does this experience relate to teaching at the college level? I believe it is at the center of everything we do as college faculty—teaching, relating, and maintaining academic standards. We do not have to know the contents of the bags that our students carry, but merely be aware that students are people often dealing with major life issues while getting their education. We do not need a degree in psychology or a background in social work to teach; we need only make a human connection with our students. As educators, we are experts in our field. As faculty, we must improve our interpersonal expertise; for instance, we might ask ourselves, "How can we effectively teach the subject content to students while remembering their human conditions?" As I entered the classroom that morning to teach, I wondered how many other students had a similar story in their invisible bags. We need to remember that those we meet are carrying two invisible bags and that we should:

- be empathetic and kind without compromising academic standards;
- be nonjudgmental and practice acceptance;
- become familiar with campus and local resources.

For additional reading in the area of creating positive faculty-student interactions, please refer to the following:

- Cox., B. E., and E. Orehovec. 2007. Faculty-student interaction outside the classroom: A typology from a residential college. *Review of Higher Education* 30 (4): 343–62.
- Schmier, L. 1997. *Random Thoughts II: Teaching from the heart*. Madison, WI: Magna Publications.

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