

The Students I Expected, the System I Found

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Her teaching career began at Saint Tonis College, Inc., where she served as a Junior High School teacher and adviser from 2019 to 2021. Since 2021, she has been part of the faculty at Kalinga State University, where she continues to shape students' academic growth and intellectual development. With a strong academic foundation and extensive teaching experience, she remains dedicated to fostering critical thinking and advancing a deeper understanding of the social sciences.

The first time a college student asked me, "Ma'am, can you just give us the answer?" I smiled, thinking it was a joke. It wasn't. The class genuinely expected that learning meant receiving answers rather than discovering them.

That moment stayed with me.

When I graduated from a city university, I expected to build my career there. Instead, I chose to teach in a provincial public university. The decision was personal. I wanted to leave behind the relentless pace of city life, believing that returning to the province would offer a quieter life and an opportunity to contribute where I was most needed.

Like many beginning instructors, I entered the classroom carrying idealism. I believed that college students, after more than a decade of formal education, would already possess the foundations of higher learning. They would know how to comprehend what they read, think critically, manage their time, and approach problems independently. My university had instilled in us the value of academic freedom, encouraging future educators to teach creatively while maintaining rigorous standards. I assumed my students would be ready to meet those expectations.

They were not.

The students I taught were not unintelligent. Many were courteous, hardworking, and genuinely wanted to graduate. Yet I encountered patterns that I had never expected from college learners. Many waited for classmates to provide answers instead of attempting the work themselves. Some relied almost entirely on PowerPoint slides or photographs of the board instead of reading the learning modules provided to them. Others struggled whenever examination questions were worded differently from examples discussed in class.

One afternoon, I asked my students to write a short reflection on a social issue. Before anyone picked up a pen, one student raised a hand and asked, "Can we use ChatGPT?" The activity was not about gathering information. It was about expressing their own thoughts. The question revealed something deeper than unfamiliarity with technology; it suggested that some students had become uncomfortable trusting their own thinking.

Artificial intelligence, like any educational tool, has enormous potential. Used responsibly, it can expand learning. But inside my classroom, I often saw something different.

For some students, AI appeared to replace rather than support the thinking process. Faced with open-ended questions, they hesitated until technology supplied an answer.

Initially, I found these behaviors frustrating. It was easy to conclude that students had become lazy or entitled. Over time, however, I realized that such judgments ignored a much larger story.

Many of my students carried burdens invisible inside the classroom.

Some traveled for hours each day just to attend classes. Others helped their families cultivate farms before coming to school. Some worked construction jobs on weekends simply to pay for transportation and meals. Others cared for younger siblings or sick relatives. Financial hardship, unstable internet access, and family responsibilities shaped their education long before they entered my classroom.

Understanding these realities did not erase the learning gaps I witnessed, but it helped explain why they existed.

Gradually, I became convinced that the problem did not begin in college.

By the time students enter university, much of their academic foundation has already been established, or neglected. Reading comprehension, analytical thinking, writing, and independent learning are not skills developed overnight. They are cultivated throughout elementary and secondary education. When those foundations remain weak, university instructors inherit challenges that cannot be resolved within a single semester.

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly deepened these difficulties. Years of disrupted schooling accustomed many students to passive learning and reduced opportunities to develop the habits that face-to-face education naturally encourages. Yet the pandemic alone cannot explain what I continue to observe.

Educational policies deserve equal scrutiny.

When students advance through grade levels without mastering essential competencies, learning gaps accumulate until they eventually arrive in college. University instructors then face the impossible expectation of teaching advanced concepts while simultaneously rebuilding skills that should have been mastered years earlier.

Technology further complicates this reality. Information has never been more accessible, yet understanding still demands patience, curiosity, and sustained effort. Digital tools can support education, but they cannot replace the intellectual discipline required for genuine learning.

Teaching these realities forced me to confront my own shortcomings as well.

My greatest mistake as a beginning instructor was assuming that every college student entered the classroom equally prepared. They did not. I had to adapt my methods without lowering my expectations. Explaining difficult concepts in the local language often improved understanding. Group activities allowed stronger students to support classmates who struggled. Frequent discussions and question-and-answer sessions exposed misconceptions before they became permanent.

Most importantly, I discovered that patience is not merely a personal virtue but a professional obligation.

There were countless moments when frustration threatened to overwhelm me. Yet every class also included students who quietly exceeded my expectations. They completed

responsibilities without constant reminders. They asked thoughtful questions. They challenged ideas respectfully. They reminded me that the issue was never an entire generation but the unequal educational experiences students brought into the classroom.

That distinction matters.

It is tempting to blame Generation Z for declining academic performance. It is far more productive to ask what kind of educational system shaped them. Students who spend years being rewarded for compliance rather than curiosity naturally struggle when finally asked to think independently. Those who have rarely been challenged to read deeply or solve unfamiliar problems cannot suddenly acquire those habits simply because they have entered college.

Responsibility, therefore, extends far beyond university classrooms.

Elementary schools must strengthen reading comprehension because every discipline depends upon it. High schools should emphasize mastery instead of merely completing crowded curricula. Universities must preserve meaningful academic standards while providing thoughtful support for struggling learners. Parents remain indispensable partners in teaching discipline, responsibility, and respect for education. Policymakers, meanwhile, should ground reforms in the realities teachers encounter every day rather than in abstract theories alone.

Teachers, for their part, must continue doing what they have always done: teaching with conviction, compassion, and persistence, even when progress is slow and recognition is scarce.

After several years in the classroom, my definition of a good teacher has changed.

A good teacher is not simply someone students like. Neither is it someone who maintains perfect classroom order. A good teacher is willing to challenge students, insist on growth, and sometimes become unpopular in the process. Learning is rarely comfortable because genuine education demands effort from both teacher and student.

If one of my students reads these words years from now, I hope they understand that every difficult assignment, every correction, and every expectation I placed upon them came from confidence in their potential, not disappointment in their limitations.

Today, I no longer ask whether this generation is less capable than those before it.

I ask a different question.

Have we built an educational system that teaches students to depend on answers instead of discovering them for themselves?

Until we answer that question honestly, universities will continue trying to solve problems that began long before students ever walked into a college classroom.