



# Empathy Is the Gateway to Academic Rigor

**By Kristen McQuinn, MA**

There is a long-standing, institutionalized message within academia: to be empathetic to students is to throw academic rigor out the window. Maybe in certain circumstances that idea is true; there is, after all, a dearth of research surrounding the connection between empathy and academic performance at the collegiate level. Or perhaps it holds true for a certain demographic, such as the students at traditional universities who enter straight out of high school and who generally lack real-world professional experience. Those students do need to learn how to handle deadlines and manage their time to complete multiple tasks on a deadline or face the consequences of failing to do so. However, for the adult student who has a full-time job, maybe children or aging parents or both to tend to, and a household to manage, the argument that they need to be taught about time management falls flat. Those students already know about time management and hitting deadlines – they are caregivers and employees, and they manage to juggle a variety of tasks on a daily basis. These are the students who may benefit the most from being shown compassion when difficulties arise. In fact, for working adult students, empathy may well be the secret to genuine academic rigor.

One project that may shed some light on the issue of empathy and academic success is The Empathy Project. This project, in short, is a “collaborative, project-based learning assignment in which students design a test of human empathy and pitch it to a hypothetical business” (Hutchison 2016). Although this is specifically a project intended to be completed with group work, it is still relevant to University of Phoenix students in the following ways. The Empathy Project’s founder, Michol Hutchison, had the goal to get students to explore and understand empathy for themselves and how they can apply it. The students eventually discover that empathy contributes to curiosity and intrinsic motivation. Curious and intrinsically motivated students are by definition going to be eager to complete and do well on assignments. As much as possible, they will try to find creative ways to complete their work. According to Demetriou and Nicholl (2022), “empathy can ignite and infuse the creative process” (p. 5). University of Phoenix faculty members can lead the way for students to apply empathy to their own coursework which leads to fostering intrinsic motivation and, ultimately, helps students gain or refine employable skills.

Gaining skills employers desire also ties in directly with the impact of empathy on education. Empathy is playing a much more prominent role in employers' hiring and operational practices across many fields, from medicine to education to architecture and design. One real-world example, which was discussed in the article by Demetriou and Nicholl (2022), was the designing of a device which would make pediatric inhalers less scary or painful for children to use. Having an understanding of empathy and its possible applications allowed the students on the project to successfully create a pediatric inhaler that didn't intimidate children. The project highlights how empathy and compassion at a fundamental level will directly benefit students in their own search for a job.

Designing a child-friendly inhaler and the academic success of our students may not initially seem to be related. But, just as a design based on empathy makes taking medication less frightening for children, so too can an empathetic instructor make learning course materials less overwhelming to students. Everyone has had a time when there was a death or illness in the family, or a boss assigned a project at the last minute, or everything simply went wrong all at once. In those times, it is natural that a student's mind will be on those other issues and not necessarily on their schoolwork. A student's failure to submit an assignment by the due date is not automatically an indication of poor time management, multiple grandparental deaths, or any other commonly heard reason. Even when a student does make a mistake because of those competing priorities it may be that they have previously had experiences where they were not shown compassion. In turn, that can be a cause for students to manufacture excuses for why their work is late.

In such cases, faculty members can still demonstrate grace and empathy as the situation warrants. Doing so may even create a safe environment in which students feel they can reach out to faculty or take intellectual risk, leading to deeper learning. Students are usually very aware of the work they are neglecting in their classes but are unable to do anything about it at the moment. That is a stressful situation and can lead to a student feeling they can't continue and dropping out of the class, or even out of school entirely.

The goal for any class is to teach students the course content as thoroughly as possible. Demonstrating empathy in the classroom will help students to be academically successful by showing them that the course content is doable and that they have the ability to complete it. If completing it necessarily comes with an extension on one of their assignments in one course during one program, then that is what we can do. The extension has no bearing on the student's comprehension of the assignment, course content, or rigor when it is occasional or rare; it is simply giving them the situational empathy they need to adequately complete the work and demonstrate to their instructor how well they have absorbed the information all while dealing with extenuating circumstances. After all, "whilst good exam grades do matter, in order for society to thrive, creative, communicative and empathic individuals also matter" (Demetriou and Nicholl, 2022).

## References

- Demetriou, H., & Nicholl, B. (2021). Empathy is the mother of invention: Emotion and cognition for creativity in the classroom. *Improving Schools*, 25(1), 4–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480221989500>
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## About the Author

Kristen McQuinn is a medievalist by study, a nerd by nature, and a single mother by choice, but her day job is spent as a Faculty Development Chair for the College of General Studies. She received her master's degree in medieval literature from Arizona State University. She has been published in her field, with her most recent publication being *The Two Isabellas of King John*, in 2021 by Pen and Sword. She is passionate about diversity in literature and maintains a blog dedicated primarily to literature at [hergraceslibrary.com](http://hergraceslibrary.com). Her next passion project is going to be creating a Little Free Library of banned books. She teaches various classes for the University as well, primarily the science fiction literature and fairy tales and folklore courses.