Instructor Finds Joy in Teaching Plus 50 Learners

Plus 50 students are a delight to have in the classroom, according to English composition and literature instructor Robin Jenkins, who teaches at Georgia Perimeter College. He meets many adults age 50 and up who are returning to college to train for a new career or expand their professional skills.

In an interview, Jenkins said that plus 50 students are “almost unanimously excited” about learning. “For a lot of the older students and returning students, it’s like every day is a joyous new discovery,” said Jenkins.

But returning to college can be daunting. “One of the dynamics I see with students who have been out of school for 25–30 years, is they often are very nervous. They’ll come up to me after class on the first day, and they’ll say they are worried about the class and how they will do.”

That’s not an uncommon experience for instructors working with plus 50 students. Jenkins said it’s important for instructors to reassure these students. He points out to these older students the value of their life experiences and the advantages they give them in the classroom.

He tells them, “This is a writing class and 80% of writing is having something to say. The fact that you have life experience means you have a lot to say. You are going to do fine. Students in your situation are routinely some of my best students.”

Seeing other plus 50 adults in the classroom can help calm nerves. “They think they are going to be the only person in the class who is not 18-years-old,” said Jenkins. “When they show up and see others who are older, they are more comfortable.”

Sometimes plus 50 students have to learn (or re-learn) how to study, but Jenkins said they are often very motivated to study. He feels this motivation gives them an advantage over the other students in the class right away, as their attitude toward the class and learning the material is very positive.

Another plus these students bring to the classroom is their willingness to ask questions, said Jenkins. “They’re not shy about asking questions typically. You reach a point in life
where you just don’t care as much what people care about you and are more interested in learning what you need to learn,” said Jenkins.

Jenkins has some advice for other college instructors working with plus 50 students. “Just be supportive when they express fears early on. Be encouraging to them,” he said.

Instructors should consider carefully their word choices and how they frame issues when giving a lecture or talking with students informally. “Try not to aim your lecture or class discussion at just the younger age students. There’s a tendency sometimes to speak to the younger generation and while that’s important, you want to make sure you don’t leave out the older generation. They want to be treated like everyone else,” said Jenkins.