

In the Classroom 75
**The Four-Letter Higher Ed Word
That Drives Me Crazy**

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Stan: Thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. You can be doing wonderful things, probably are doing wonderful things, but still hanging out with me. In Western New York, it is a beautiful day, but it's hot, hot, hot, hot. Humidity is setting in, I think it's supposed to get to 87 today, it is hot.

This week, it's been building up. I'm just going to go on a little rant. Hopefully, you can endure this but looking at the climate of our nation, and in terms of respect, I thought it would be a good time to put this particular episode out. This week, I am going to address one of my pet peeves. It focuses on a four-letter word that is frequently used in higher education by faculty and staff alike. It is a four-letter word that's also used in college sports and even professional sports. What is that word? Give me a second we'll get there.

I am not a native to higher education. I didn't go into higher education right out of high school. In fact, I did a 20-year stint in the Air Force. I was in an entirely different culture for the first 20 years of my life outside of high school. During my time in the Air Force, I cannot ever remember this four-letter word being used to refer to members of the military. Members of the military in the Air Force were referred to by their name or their rank, but never, never this four-letter word. I also reached out to other vets and asked them about their experience with this four-letter word. One replied and I quote, "Hell freaking no," when referred to that four-letter word.

Then I get into higher ed and I'm shocked that I hear college students, those who are post-traditional learners being referred to as kids. That is my four-letter word, kids. It drives me absolutely crazy. I joined the military when I was 17. That is the last thing that my parents ever did was sign for me to go into the military. After that, I was responsible for all my other decision. I was legally responsible. I was responsible financially. I was responsible for my decisions and the actions that I took. To refer to college students as kids, I find that very disrespectful. Like I said, in light of what's happening around our nation with another group of individuals, this is also tied to this idea of respect.

Our college students are not kids. This term kids, is in my mind, extremely disrespectful, especially when these students are post-traditional learners who are going to college. According to the American Council of Education, 60% of our students are post-traditional. What's post-traditional learner? They meet one or more of these criteria. 24 years or older, financially independent, care for somebody, care for dependents, work full time while going to college or have some military

experience. There are students that I see at the community college that I'm at where they meet multiple parts of that criteria. They may not even be 24 years old yet, but they're working full time and they're caring for dependents, they're single parents. To be called kids, I don't get it. I totally don't get it.

Like I said, when I joined the military, I was 17 years old. My parents had to give their permission for me to join, last time that I have needed their permission or assistance in that way. Legally at 18, I can do many things that I could not do as a child. If somebody called me a kid, that would be extremely offensive to me, especially as somebody who was in the military. We just did not use that term. In the military, they treated you as a professional. Now naturally, you had a job to do, they expect you to do that job. I don't see that term really being used. Part of it is because I'm not in the workforce, but I don't hear it being used for employees. Employees that we have at the community college that are in that age range, we certainly don't call them kids, but we call students kids. I don't get it, I do not get it.

There are many issues with using this term kid. Primarily, it is lack of respect for the individual. If you want to have respect, you need to give respect. What it does is it creates this mindset that the individual is not mature, that they certainly are not equal. When you have this mindset, you set in motion all these disrespectful encounters. I watch through the 20 years in higher ed, and this is the third institution that I've been at in higher ed, and I've heard this term for all 20 years. I watch how faculty and staff treat students. They talk down to them. Not in all cases, that's broad reaching but I see it enough that it raises concern. I've brought this attention for this four-letter word on many occasions, but yet, I still keep hearing it.

In my department, I had individuals who would often refer to students as kids. I had to lay down the law that that was not a term that we would be using. It took a while. I was not fully successful in eradicating that term but I have made a strong headway in getting rid of that term, at least in my department, that these students are not kids. This whole mindset, when you refer to somebody in a way that other than how they should be referred to, as in this case, adult, then you set into motion these behaviors where you're holding them down. You basically trivialized them.

Right now, across our nation, we're seeing how these different types of aggressions have worked out in race relations and the systemic biases that come with that. Are we doing the same thing when we keep referring to students as kids? Basically, we are giving them less respect than they deserve. It trivializes them. Basically, we're also discrediting what they have to say before they even open their mouths, because we just think that they don't have the knowledge and they don't therefore have anything important to say, far from the truth.

My experience in the military, as I was working my bachelor's degree, I was overseas. I remember specifically one class where the professor was talking in absolute terms about different countries. Regularly throughout the class, the students, vets, kept raising their hands and basically calling him on what he was saying because they had actually been to those countries. They had a working knowledge of those countries. We would have these major discussions, what he was saying based on what he was learning, what the professor had learned but never

been to those countries compared to individuals who had experience of being in the countries. When you immediately call somebody kids and discredit what they have to say, you're missing out on valuable experience they may be bringing to the table.

Our students, for the most part, are 18 years and older. An 18-year-old is a legal adult. They can sign contract. They have earned the right to vote. They can serve on juries. They can be drafted. These are very adult experiences. According to education data, the largest percent of the US population enrolled in college in the undergraduate or even postgraduate studies were 20 to 21 years old. The average age for students enrolled in full time undergraduate program was 21.8 years of age compared to 27 years for those enrolled part time. Our part time students are post-traditional students. They have responsibility. They have been adulting. They have been going out and living on their own, paying their bills, paying their way through college. Only 27% have parents paying for college. Nearly three quarters of them have been doing it on their own.

Another problem with calling kids is it can seep into the class policies. For example, I have witness faculty members call out students because they pull their cell phone out and they would berate them in front of the class. I have never seen a faculty member chastise another faculty member in a meeting for doing the same behavior. This is a lack of respect. You can certainly have policies and there's ways to do it that you would treat adults and work with adults. To do this to these college students the way we do it to them, because of this mindset that we treat them as kids, it is not helping with learning. I say try this activity with your colleagues in the staff meeting. Somebody pulls out a phone, see if you can get away with berating them. Try it. You won't do it. I challenge you, but you won't do it.

The last thing that I really just want to leave you with is this idea of the Pygmalion effect. According to Wikipedia, the Pygmalion effect basically targets the expectations internalized with positive labels. Those with positive labels succeed accordingly and the opposite happens. A similar process works in the opposite direction in the case of lower expectation. The idea behind the Pygmalion effect is increasing the leader's expectation of a followers performance will result in better follower performance.

Through this four-letter word and this mindset, we are encouraging substandard behavior. By calling them kids, we expect them to act like kids. By expecting this, they in turn will follow through and act like kids. We need to start treating them like adults, like professionals in the field. When I was in a program called Civil Air Patrol, I worked with 12 to 18-year-olds in a leadership program. It was a cadet program. When I was working with a large group of cadets, I explained to them in jest but in part truth that I hated kids. I hated kids but I loved cadets. If they acted like cadets, we were going to get along fine. If they acted like children, they would be treated like children.

I knew that they were 12 to 18-year-olds so in fact, they were kids. When they had child-like behaviors, I would call them to the carpet and ask them. I said, "Are you acting like a kid or a cadet?" Once they understood that I really wanted them to act like cadets, like professionals, they started acting like that. Like I said I don't

understand how and why we continue to do this, but we need to stop. Let's just stop calling these learners kid. It is not helping the learning process.

That's the end of my rant. Another topic I'm passionate about is I think you should be reading and reading professionally and widely. With that, I'm going to make a quick plug for my book.