

Resource Guide

Avoiding Deficit Thinking by Emphasizing Cultural Wealth

Deficit thinking is rooted in the idea that there is a “correct” way to be a student and that some students “lack” the necessary tools, ability, or experience to succeed (Davis & Museus, 2019). This is most often observed in descriptions of students from historically oppressed populations, using the metric of the “right” way to do things to hold these students responsible for the challenges and inequality they are faced with. The “blame the victim” nature of deficit thinking can also be adopted by students, who may blame themselves for shortcomings due to their background or lack of experience. Yet, these same students demonstrate high resilience and resourcefulness (Avila Reyes et al., 2023). How can we avoid deficit thinking while acknowledging the systemic challenges faced by historically oppressed and underrepresented groups?

- **Self-Reflection: Recognize deficit thinking, especially when evaluating student performance**
 - Inevitably, you will be put in a position to interpret student performance. Reflect on the tone and content of your explanations and recognize where you may be applying deficit thinking. When this happens, ask yourself what aspects of your course could have contributed to the performance of your students. Additionally, are any of your expectations rooted in deficit thinking? Such as, “students must participate in my class by speaking in discussions because that is the hallmark of a ____ course.” This presumes there is a “right” way to interact with course content that may disadvantage students from other cultures, where classroom norms may be different. It also creates a situation where a deficit mindset is inherent, due to the assumed “failure” by students who seem to fail to understand classroom expectations (Chavez & Longerbeam, 2016).
- **Focus on cultural wealth**
 - Yosso’s Cultural Wealth Model (2005) seeks to provide a framework for moving beyond the idea that race itself constitutes a “cultural difference.” Yosso identifies six forms of wealth: aspirational, familial, social, linguistic, resistant, and navigational. Application of this model includes recognizing that there are inherent skills (i.e. wealth) derived from all backgrounds. For instance, navigational wealth – the ability to navigate social institutions - possessed by some students may not reflect the higher education environment. Aspirational wealth – the ability to maintain hope in the face of barriers – may be higher in students from historically oppressed cultures.
- **Don’t make assumptions: Structural course-level changes over individual focus**
 - Some applications of cultural wealth place the responsibility for recognizing and applying cultural wealth on the students (Naylor & Mifsud, 2020). This is

problematic, as it adds additional expectations to the students the institution may be seeking to help. As an instructor, you don't need to make assumptions about the forms of wealth present in your students.

- Instead, make changes to the structural components of your course: the readings, assignments, and other course materials. Simply discussing cultural wealth and expanding the perspectives represented by course readings and other materials can help to improve outcomes for students (Reyes & Duran, 2021). You can go further by encouraging students to apply their own lived experiences, especially in course assessments, providing a way to apply their cultural wealth even when working with unfamiliar concepts.

Resources

Ávila Reyes, N., Navarro, F., & Tapia-Ladino, M. (2023). "My abilities were pretty mediocre": Challenging deficit discourses in expanding higher education systems. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 16(6), 723–733. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000366>

Chávez, A. F., & Longerbeam, S. D. (2016). *Teaching across cultural strengths: A guide to balancing integrated and individuated cultural frameworks in college teaching*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Davis, L. P., & Museus, S. D. (2019). What is deficit thinking? An analysis of conceptualizations of deficit thinking and implications for scholarly research. *NCID Currents*, 1(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/currents.17387731.0001.110>

Naylor, R. & Mifsud, N. (2020). Towards a structural inequality framework for student retention and success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(2), 259–272, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1670143>

Reyes, H. L., & Duran, A. (2021). Higher education scholars challenging deficit thinking: An analysis of research informed by community cultural wealth. *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, 6(1), 7–20.

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race ethnicity and education*, 8(1), 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>

For more information or to discuss how you might incorporate these ideas into your courses, contact the Reinert Center by [email](#).