For white faculty members to be effective in a minority institution, they must be aware of how their racial identity affects their perceptions, content knowledge, and classroom values, and they must be willing to share these insights with their students.

Integrating Nonminority Instructors into the Minority Environment

Barbara K. Townsend

In 1996–97, more than 90 two-year colleges had a student body that was predominantly black, Hispanic, or Native American. These institutions included 14 two-year historically black colleges, 26 predominantly black colleges, 21 predominantly Hispanic, and 29 tribal colleges (Townsend, 1999). In addition, during that same academic year, over 50 two-year institutions had a student body that was predominantly minority. For example, in 1996–97, 83 percent of Miami-Dade Community College’s fifty-one thousand plus students were minorities: 59 percent Hispanic, 22 percent black, and 2 percent Asian or Pacific Islander (Peterson’s Guide, 1997).

Although over half the students at these colleges are nonwhite, many of their instructors are white. Over 25 percent of the faculty at two-year historically black colleges are white (Foster, Guyden, and Miller, 1999), and almost two-thirds of tribal college faculty members are white (Boyer, 1997, p. 32). At only 5 two-year colleges do black instructors constitute more than 50 percent of the faculty. Similarly, Hispanic instructors make up over 25 percent of the faculty at only 3 two-year colleges, and at no colleges are they in the majority. When Hispanic and black faculty members are combined, they become the majority of instructors at only 2 two-year colleges (“Fifty Top Colleges by Number of Black Faculty,” 2000).

Thus, white faculty members are in the majority at most community colleges, including those at which over half the students are nonwhite. What is it like to be a white or nonminority faculty member at a minority institution? How does this situation differ from being a minority faculty member at a predominantly white college? In this chapter I compare the experiences of minority faculty members at majority institutions with those
of nonminority faculty members at colleges where the student enrollment is predominantly minority. I also provide some recommendations on how a nonminority faculty member can be an effective teacher at a minority institution.

**Faculty Members as Racial/Ethnic Minorities at Their Institution**

In an ideal world, being a faculty member whose racial or ethnic group is different from that of most people at a college or university would not matter. However, in the real world, being “different” because of one’s race or ethnicity may affect one’s relationships with students as well as with fellow faculty members. Certainly, the literature is replete with stories and studies of the difficulties minority faculty and staff members encounter at predominantly white colleges and universities (for example, de la Luz Reyes and Halcon, 1988/1996; Gregory, 1995; Harvey, 1999; Olsen, Maple, and Stage, 1995; Rains, 1998, Stein, 1996).

Mitchell (1983/1998) describes minority faculty members as being “visible, vulnerable, and viable” (p. 257). Most minority faculty members have high physical visibility at a majority institution. They are also very “vulnerable” to demands not only from their academic community but also from their racial/ethnic community. For Native Americans, “the social value and preeminent goal in life . . . is the survival of the Indian people” (Cross, 1996, p. 335), and Native American faculty members share this goal (Stein, 1996). Similarly, Chicano faculty members typically “maintain a strong affiliation with their community and feel a strong sense of responsibility to improve the status of other Chicanos in the larger community” (de la Luz Reyes and Halcon, 1988/1996, p. 345; see also Rendon, 1992/1996). For African American faculty members, ties with the black community are usually very important, partly because of “the African heritage of communalism” (Gregory, 1995, p. 7). Balancing commitments to one’s racial or ethnic community with commitments to one’s institution and the broader academic community is difficult partly because of the time required to meet both communities’ demands. The demands may also be “philosophically and culturally disparate in their orientation” (Mitchell, 1983/1998, p. 262), rendering “[m]inority faculty members whose area of specialization involves ethnic communities . . . particularly vulnerable to conflicts between the criteria of the university and the community” (p. 260). The university community’s demands for objective research, couched in the language of the discipline, conflict with a minority community’s desire for “research that advocates change, that helps to get money, and that speaks in plain language” (p. 260). To succeed as minority faculty members in a predominantly white institution, these instructors must develop a bicultural awareness of the norms of both their racial/ethnic community and their professional community, and they must “situate themselves in the overlap between the two” (p. 262).
Although fairly “visible,” nonminority faculty members at a minority institution are not vulnerable to the same extent that minority faculty members are at a majority institution because most whites do not consciously think of themselves as white and therefore having a racial community to which they must contribute to improve its status (McIntosh, 1988/1995; McIntyre, 1997). The few works that have focused on the experiences of nonminority faculty members at a minority institution, however, suggest that in such situations, nonminority faculty members do become aware of their own racial identity, usually for the first time in their lives. Henzy’s remarks (1999) are typical of this insight: “[A]s I walked into my first classes that September (at an historically black college), for the first time in my life I felt really white. I had always thought of myself generically as just a person. Now I was conscious of myself specifically as a white person” (p. 17). Similarly, Bales (1999) wrote about being outside a classroom during his first week at the historically black Xavier University and realizing, “[M]ine was the only white face in sight. I was immersed for a brief moment in a scene where I was the different one” (p. 38).

Many nonwhite faculty members working at a minority institution may experience racial discrimination for the first time. In an edited book about the experiences of nonwhite faculty members teaching at historically black colleges and universities (Foster, Guyden, and Miller, 1999), some faculty members wrote about what they perceived to be racism directed toward white faculty. At a two-year historically black college (HBC), a white colleague of mine claimed that “some of the black leadership in the college did not believe that a white person was capable of understanding the depths of what it meant to be black in America and, therefore, [were] not capable of making certain decisions” (Sides-Gonzales, 1999, p. 177). At another four-year HBC, the president announced in a faculty meeting that she held white faculty members to higher expectations than the nonwhite faculty members. Why? Because the white faculty members’ “ancestors had established conditions that kept her ancestors suppressed” (Redinger, 1999, p. 33).

Being in the minority, whether because of one’s racial or ethnic group or gender, or for any other reason, is typically not a comfortable situation. It may be particularly difficult for people who are used to being in the majority. Becoming aware that they too have a racial identity and learning what it is like to be a minority in a particular setting helps nonminority faculty members develop an increased “sensitivity to issues of minority participation and inclusion” (Thomson, 1999, p. 60).

Part of this sensitivity includes understanding that, unlike minority instructors in a majority institution, white faculty members, because of their race, are in a position of power and privilege within society. Although they may experience racial discrimination directed against them while teaching in a minority college, white faculty members can “on a daily basis . . . escape that experience and reenter a familiar world” (Redinger, 1999, p. 34) in which they are the powerful majority. Perhaps in gaining this understanding,
nonminority faculty members have achieved a kind of bicultural awareness that helps them be more professionally “viable” in the context of the minority institution. However, developing viability within the larger professional community of one’s academic discipline does not have a racial or ethnic dimension to it for nonminority faculty members. Unlike minority faculty members, nonminority faculty members are generally not criticized, at least by most academics, for doing work that focuses on their own racial group. Mitchell (1983/1998) makes this point when she states how minority faculty members conducting research on their own community run the risk of having this research viewed as having “a self-referential level that the work of nonminority faculty members seems not to possess” (p. 260).

**Being an Effective Faculty Member at a Minority College**

What are some recommendations for being an effective nonminority faculty member at a minority institution? Because being an effective teacher may be the area of most concern for nonminority faculty members, it seems logical to begin with recommendations on effective teaching. A well-known article about what constitutes good teaching is Chickering and Gamson’s “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” (1987/1997). Chickering and Gamson’s principles can be construed as recommendations for effective teaching. If written as recommendations, they might read as follows:

- Have contact with your students both in and outside the classroom.
- Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students.
- Use active learning techniques.
- Give prompt feedback.
- Emphasize time on tasks.
- Communicate high expectations.
- Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

These recommendations seem like common sense to me, but I am a white, middle-class person born in the United States. A brief look at cultures of classrooms in other countries reveals that some of these recommendations are culture-bound. For example, the recommendation to use active learning techniques in which students work with others to learn would not be an effective one at universities in many Asian countries, in which faculty members, rather than students, are viewed as the authority in the classroom (George, 1995). In such a context, the professor or instructor as “sage on the stage” is expected, whereas the professor or instructor as “guide by the side” would be discomforting for many Asian students. Another example is the principle of emphasizing time on task. Even within the United States, this principle is culture-bound. According to Watson and
Terrell (1999), Hispanic Americans like the “freedom to move about and take breaks” (p. 50) and some African Americans “may respond poorly to timed, scheduled, preplanned activities that interfere with immediacy of response” (p. 49). If a faculty member considers time on task to mean sustained, concentrated effort within a limited time frame, this expectation may cause tension between her and some students.

It is interesting to note that Chickering and Gamson’s explanation of the principle “Respects diverse talents and ways of learning” (1987/1997, p. 546) does not include any references to diversity stemming from one’s race or ethnicity. Rather, the authors see styles of learning in terms of preferences for hands-on experience versus theory, or for setting one’s own pace in learning.

Another perspective on effective teaching is found in Grieve’s (1996) handbook of advice to adjunct and part-time faculty. Grieve states that “good teaching” means the following (p. 3):

- Knowing your subject content
- Knowing and liking your students
- Understanding our culture
- Possessing command of professional teaching skills and strategies

For those unsure of what Grieve means by “our culture,” the only explanation given is, “Understanding our culture has become more complex for today’s instructor. Sensitivity to the diverse cultures in your classroom is necessary to success in teaching” (p. 3). Grieve seems to be saying that “our culture” consists of “diverse cultures.” This is an important point for all faculty members to understand and remember. They must also understand that their own racial background affects their perspective on the teaching-learning process.

Being professionally viable within a minority college means being trusted and respected by one’s colleagues and students. Probably the most important thing nonminority faculty members can do to achieve this viability is to acknowledge their racial identity and how it frames their perspective and behavior. For this to happen, nonminority faculty members must first begin to understand that it is not only blacks or Hispanics or Native Americans or Asian/Pacific Islanders who have a racial identity. So, too, do whites. Once white faculty members are conscious of their own racial identity, they can begin to see how it affects their behavior, their knowledge base, and their perceptions of appropriate classroom behavior.

Becoming aware of one’s whiteness is a natural by-product of teaching at a minority institution, as has already been indicated. Becoming aware of how being white affects one’s interactions with students is more problematic. Whiteness as a racial identity is now a topic of scholarly study (see Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993), and some attention has been paid to the effect of white K–12 teachers’ racial identity on their teaching
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(see McIntyre, 1997). A few white authors writing about teaching in a minority college or university have indicated how their racial identity influences their teaching. For example, Henzy (1999) believed that as a white, middle-class suburbanite, he automatically or customarily emphasized the importance of abstract thinking—a type of thinking that permeates “America’s formal teaching methods and curriculum” (Watson and Terrell, 1999). Cultural differences in how one learns can affect what happens in the classroom because there may be a cultural mismatch between how the faculty member thinks students should learn and how students are used to learning. Thus, nonminority faculty members need to be aware of their cultural or “white” expectations of student learning (Watson and Terrell, 1999; see also George, 1995).

How can white faculty members become aware of their “whiteness” and its implications in the classroom? During the 1980s and 1990s, workshops in diversity training and multicultural education were a popular means of sensitizing white faculty members to cultural diversity in the classroom (see Harris and Kayes, 1995; Harris and Shyrel, 1996). A criticism of this approach is that it typically addresses characteristics that differentiate people—such as race, ethnicity, and gender—but “mute[s] attention to racism (and ignore[s] patriarchy and control by wealth), focusing mainly on cultural difference[s]” (Sleeter, 1994, p. 5).

Less typical efforts to address racial identity include study groups, which are sometimes funded by the institution and are sometimes developed informally among faculty and staff members. For example, when I was a faculty member at Loyola University Chicago, the School of Education Multicultural Committee met regularly in the early 1990s to discuss diversity in the school and the university. It was here that I first became truly conscious of my “whiteness,” as we spent sessions discussing our racial identity and its implications for us as individuals. When I moved to the University of Memphis, I participated in a semester-long study group funded by that university. We each received copies of several books designed to increase faculty members’ understanding of the intersection of race, class, and gender (see Quadagno, 1994) and met every three to four weeks to discuss them. The conversations were often angry and even hostile, as the racially mixed group discussed the effects of race and gender on social class. As painful and unpleasant as these discussions sometimes were, they forced group members to become more aware of their racial identity and its possible effects upon their social class and attitudes. While at Memphis and now at the University of Missouri-Columbia, I have belonged to informal groups that wanted to discuss current works about race, ethnicity, and gender. These monthly meetings with other women open to discussing their racial identity have helped me to better understand my own.

Self-awareness of one’s racial identity and how it informs one’s expectations about learning styles and appropriate classroom behavior is vital if
a nonminority instructor is to be successful in a minority classroom. It is equally important for faculty members to be honest with students about how an instructor’s cultural background affects his or her ability and subject matter expertise. For example, one English instructor, in his first semester at a historically black college, had trouble pronouncing his students’ names correctly because he was unused to names that are common among African Americans. Sensing his students’ growing impatience and realizing he was about to lose the class, he decided to be open with his students and acknowledge “the limitations of . . . [his white, middle-class, suburban] background” in which people were only named “Billy or Betty or Sally or Tommy.” As a result, the students relaxed, and “teaching [was] possible again” (Henzy, 1999, p. 18).

This same faculty member also increased his acceptance among his students by directly addressing what he as a white person could bring to discussions of works by black authors, particularly those who write about racial discrimination. Acknowledging to his students that they had a far better cultural understanding of the content of some of these works, he stated that what he could contribute was his knowledge of “the abstractions of pattern, symbol, allusion, and theme” (Henzy, 1999, p. 20), a knowledge he had gained not only from formal study but also from his cultural background: “the abstract homogeneity of middle-class suburbia” (p. 21).

Conclusion

Being an effective nonminority faculty member at a minority institution demands a level of awareness about one’s self and one’s racial identity—and how this racial identity influences one’s teaching—that is not the norm for majority faculty members teaching at majority institutions. Therein lies the challenge and the reward. The insight gained about one’s teaching will be beneficial in any other academic setting, while the insight gained about how one’s race affects one’s behavior will benefit relations with people of all races.

References


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BARBARA K. TOWNSEND is associate dean for research and development at the University of Missouri-Columbia, where she is also professor of higher education. She is a former community college faculty member and administrator.