

***INSTRUCTOR IDENTITY:
THE IMPACT OF GENDER AND RACE ON FACULTY
EXPERIENCES WITH TEACHING***

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Introduction

Teaching requires skill, insight, intelligence, and diligence, and faculty struggle and succeed in a variety of ways to meet the challenges of the classroom. Many teaching problems are experienced by all faculty: variations in students' preparedness and competing priorities in the lives of both students and faculty complicate the already daunting task of making the unknown known. At the same time, some teaching challenges are enacted along gendered and racial/ethnic lines in ways that significantly alter the teaching experience for women faculty and faculty of color. In this *Occasional Paper* we describe findings from the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching's (CRLT) research about these challenges, contextualize these findings in the literature on gender and student ratings, and suggest strategies for U-M faculty and administrators in regard to teaching and using student evaluations. Through this analysis we document the ways that social identity affects teaching, highlight the creative ways faculty meet these challenges, and identify mechanisms for colleagues, administrators, and promotion and tenure committees to recognize these efforts.

CRLT Research on Gender, Race, and Teaching

In consultations, classroom observations, workshops and seminars, many white female faculty and male and female faculty of color describe classroom experiences that are framed by students' social stereotypes. To better understand these experiences, CRLT directed two studies to explore instructors' experiences and student perceptions.

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The first study, conducted in 1997-98, brought together 29 female University of Michigan faculty to participate in six focus groups arranged by race/ethnicity, department gender composition, and course content. These women were asked to reflect on the relevance of their identities to their instructional approaches and experiences with students. Most of the women were assistant or associate professors. The second study, conducted in 1998-99, explored 24 male and female undergraduates' expectations and perceptions of more than 150 female and male instructors¹ through a six-month-long series of interviews and focus groups. Both the faculty and student data were analyzed statistically and qualitatively.

Because of the focus of CRLT's research, this *Occasional Paper* primarily addresses the experience of female faculty with distinctions made where possible to how women's experiences vary by race/ethnicity. Other research suggests that similar dynamics are at play in the experiences of some male faculty because of their race/ethnicity, age or sexuality (Hendrix, 1998; Moore, 1996; Russ, Simonds & Hunt, 2002; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). The results reported here are consistent across disciplines, with the exception of differences related to subject matter that focuses on race/ethnicity or gender.

The Experience of Women Faculty

A major theme running through CRLT's faculty research is a sense of loss, something akin to looking in the mirror of teaching and not being able to find one's own reflection. Faculty repeatedly encountered students who disputed their roles as academic professionals and challenged their efforts to teach or to manage the classroom environment. For example, more than four-fifths (82%) of the faculty focus group participants reported being challenged about their professorial identity, such as being mistaken for a graduate student instructor or a secretary.

While these experiences with students were often frustrating, most focus group participants successfully developed strategies to address these challenges. Of greater concern to these women faculty was the fact that these encounters generally were not recognized by colleagues, nor did they receive credit or respect for their successful efforts to

overcome these challenges. This invisibility played out in both informal and formal interactions and can be categorized into the following types of experiences. Female faculty's italicized quotes exemplify their experiences with students and colleagues that create these effects:

- dismissals of effort by colleagues, committees, and administrators:

If a guy is a good teacher, I think it is seen that he is serious and is a good teacher. If a woman is a good teacher, the talk about her is that she's too easy and she's nice. And because she's nice and she's easy, students give her a higher evaluation, whereas the men are serious and are really teaching them something.

People said, "Well, you're a woman. Students like women better.... Students love you because you're very good at that rapport thing, like women are." And then [they are] even dropping hints that maybe I'm easier on them than other people are, when they hadn't visited my class and had no idea.

- denial or ignorance of the effort required to establish basic professorial authority as women faculty and as faculty of color:

[There are] things [students] wouldn't say to a person that looked like a "real professor" ... [like] asking you if you have a Ph.D., and all of these kinds of tests that people set up.... I'm amazed at the variety of tests we get put through, just a battery of them sometimes... [because] we don't look like balding white professors with glasses and a tie.

I think some of the male students have on occasion challenged me in ways that my male colleagues find incredible.

I remember getting one comment ... that said, "I wish Professor X would keep her viewpoint about [content area] issues to herself and just teach us [another content area]." [I wanted to respond,] "This is not a viewpoint of mine. This is true. This is an established fact. I didn't make it up."

In office hours, I've found male students especially who were arguing about their grade or who really are upset about the

material in class. I've had this happen to me three times ... [They] move their chair very close and are sort of just invading your space in a very ... physical [way].

I had a student come into, no, push the door open, no knocking — you know, I'm available, right? Or situations where a student would drop off a recommendation form and say, "I'll pick it up later," without even saying, "I'd like you to do this, would you?"

- lack of awareness on the part of white or male colleagues about the intersection between identity and factors such as clothing, stature, and physical appearance:

I usually wear a comfortable long dress with a jacket, and a male colleague of mine challenged me. He said I could wear jeans and a sweatshirt to class. [He asked me,] "Are you doing that because you're feeling insecure?" And I thought, "Damn, ... yes, but I may have more reasons for feeling insecure than him."

There's sort of a double standard because the men come in rags sometimes ... and yet, we ... can't come in rags.

There are teaching faculty who ... go sit on the table in the classroom. There is no way that I would ever go sit on a table in a classroom with men because that would be perceived as way too sexual.

[I had a Graduate Student Instructor who] would say things like, "Oh, you look so great. Look at all the young guys sitting in the first 10 rows." ... Just the comment itself was really terrible! ... And to add to this terrible, terrible situation, he was commenting on my clothes and so on, and I had to stand on a stage with a microphone. It's like being a nightclub waitress... And then in our department we had a system of senior faculty evaluating [us]... And I was told, "You look great up there on the stage, even if you don't do anything. Even if you don't lecture at all." ... And that has to do with, of course my being female, but more I think, my being an Asian woman. Asian women have a reputation of being either a maid or a sexual figure.

- denial or ignorance of increases in the workload associated with student responses to gender and race/ethnicity:

Why is it always in my office that the students break down and start crying and start talking about their problems with their wives, their problems with their kids, their problems getting through the program?

Just this semester, I have a woman who ... was raped six months ago who disclosed in my office. I had a student ... who just had a baby two weeks ago [and] called me the day after she had the baby to tell me there were problems.

Stand out in the hall and look to see where the students are lined up. They are disproportionately lined up, male and female students, ... in front of women's offices in my department.

And there are also students of color who might want to see me, who are looking for a mentor.

These patterns were exacerbated by course content and race/ethnicity. In a comparison of focus group discussions among faculty who taught identity-related content (e.g., gender and race-related subject matter) and those who did not, instructors teaching identity-based content reported student challenges to their basic authority and identity as a professor at a rate six times that of their colleagues teaching identity-neutral subject matter ($p \leq .001$). Furthermore, within this group of instructors teaching identity-based subject matter, women of color experienced such challenges at a rate twice that of white women ($p \leq .001$).

The challenges faced by these women and the associated lack of recognition of these challenges by colleagues constitute a negating force with three significant implications:

- 1) insufficient resources for coping with the identity-related challenges associated with teaching;
- 2) a reduced ratio of faculty recognition and rewards to faculty effort, with success and accomplishment often unnoticed or dismissed; and
- 3) high frustration with departmental dynamics, making the days longer, the hurdles higher, and the politics trickier.

The Student Perspective

The experiences identified by women faculty are corroborated through CRLT's research on student responses to faculty gender. More than four fifths (83%) of the students interviewed described different standards for female and male instructors. For many students, these higher expectations for female faculty were conscious and explicit.

I always have higher expectations for female instructors than male instructors. And, yeah, when they don't meet them it's a let down. And if it's a male instructor I tend to blow it off and say, "Well, that's typical..." I mean, I don't expect my male instructors to be as caring or concerned as I expect my female instructors to be. Whether that's good or a bad thing to be going on in my head, it's just a real thing. And I think it's pretty universal. (female student)

Differences in standards also were expressed through a higher tolerance for bad teaching or undesirable characteristics on the part of male faculty and higher consequences for women faculty who do not meet the higher standards students tend to hold for them.

I realized I probably wouldn't be as annoyed with her if she were a male...because then she would fit, like, this stereotype of the absent-minded professor. (female student)

I think that if he was a she...people wouldn't give him the same respect. Because he's very knowledgeable...and has a lot of control over what's going on in the class. I think that a lot of people might, like, step back and analyze it more if he was a female and say, "She's a bitch"...They'd call her something a little less positive than knowledgeable. (female student)

I don't think highly of this guy to begin with and I think if he was a woman I would think less of him...I hate to admit it but...he's very disorganized and he doesn't articulate his thoughts well...If he was a woman, I would just probably have no tolerance for that...You sit there and you really try to figure out what he's trying to say. You're very attentive, trying to get into it. But if he was a woman, I think I would just sit back and be like, "This is ridiculous." (male student)

I think that stereotypes play a big role. I mean, if you're looking at a male teacher and he's overbearing, you might just excuse it and say, "Yeah, well, you know, he's a professor. He's just doing his job." But if you look at it as a woman professor you'd be like, "Women are supposed to be a lot nicer, and, you know, a lot more friendlier and she's acting like such a bitch." (male student)

As a result of these attitudes, students also noted that female professors often need to take extra steps to earn credibility in the classroom.

It's almost like she has to prove herself...Let's say if you just take physics. I would assume that there's really no way that you could be at that level of physics without knowing what you're talking about. Yet, if a woman stepped up there, it'd almost be like she had to kind of prove it to herself. And I can see it in other people, too...They're just waiting for her...to show that she's able in the field. (male student)

Classroom Strategies That Offset Identity-Based Teaching Challenges

To meet these challenges, the white women faculty and women faculty of color we interviewed demonstrated a tenacity that translated into on-going self-evaluation and an iterative investment in pedagogical strategies. Faced with student distrust, resistance, and challenges, they attended seminars, consulted with colleagues, and continually reviewed their basic teaching goals in order to identify ever more successful approaches to their teaching and learning endeavors.

I resent having to take time in the beginning and sort of establish my authority, but there you have it...I'm rather tough too, and I started off being a little more tough than I guess I am now, but somebody did a study, and they found out students prefer a warm authoritarian as a teacher (that sort of combination of the two), so I do try to bring a little warmth and a little joy and a little jubilation...into the classroom – and humor and that kind of thing. At the same time, if I notice that says to people,... "Her boundaries are nonexistent," then I have to take steps to correct that...You sort of keep trying all of these different paths until you achieve a kind of balance.

“I have tried on so many different faces in my classroom,” was the way another professor described how she sifted through many different strategies to find the ideal pedagogical approach.

Like these women, female faculty and faculty of color may choose to think intentionally and reflectively about their approach to teaching. The U-M faculty in CRLT’s focus groups indicated that they developed a number of strategies to manage undergraduates’ impression of them and the course, and to create a conducive and successful learning environment in their classrooms. Each of these strategies comes with both benefits and costs which vary based on individual circumstances and style. Faculty often chose from among these strategies to create the approach to teaching that was most successful for them, striking a balance between preferred pedagogical styles and the requirements and challenges of their environment. These approaches included:

- using dress and demeanor strategically

I still dress up at the beginning of the term so they can “get it” [and] recognize that I’m the teacher. And then, when you come in wearing jeans, they kind of like that.

- enforcing a preferred form of address

My undergraduate work was at a small undergraduate school where people called professors by their first names, and so a lot of times [I have] a sense that we should break down that hierarchy somewhat and have an intellectual exchange on that level....[I told] students to call me by my first name, but instead I got, “Miss [Name]” and people asking me midway through the semester, “So are you a professor or are you a graduate student?”...I went in with this sort of ideal that they would call me by my first name, and now I’ve got to put “Professor” on everything.

- making clear their expectations about behavior, assignments, and advising boundaries

I have to have...a more authoritative role in the class for quite a while until...things have gotten more worked out.

I have at least a half a page outlining exactly how this

course is going to be taught, how they are going to be graded and what I expect of them, and we spend pretty much the first class going through this. And every time a problem set or an assignment is due or a midterm comes up, I go through the rules and regulations surrounding that. I just feel like so much of my attention and energy in teaching, especially when I’m doing [a course with identity-related subject matter], goes to [student disclosures]...I just have to keep those boundaries and do the referrals.

- being selective about making personal disclosures about one’s life in the classroom

I don’t share many [experiences] in the classroom,...but I’ll share that stuff one-on-one.

I’m going to modify my personal style....I have been pretty open with students about my background because...I did a lot of different things relevant to [the course], and I shared those experiences, and I really got raked over the coals last year for doing that....I have to say that I will not [do that again].

- maintaining high standards for students

We’re tougher than our male colleagues....We have to be....The stakes are higher with us.

Other research has identified additional instructional strategies that women faculty and faculty of color have successfully used to address identity-related challenges in the classroom. Research has demonstrated that these strategies tend to enhance student perceptions of instructor competency. Again, the success of these strategies may vary based on personal style, discipline, and other factors. They are summarized here as suggestions to guide individual faculty in the process of identifying those strategies that are most effective for their specific circumstances and to document the types of behaviors that need to be recognized by administrators and committees who are evaluating faculty’s success in the classroom. Research suggests:

- emphasizing credentials and qualifications on the first day of class and a commitment to helping students succeed. These

behaviors establish professional capability while demonstrating caring for students (Bennett, 1982; Basow, 1998; Statham, Richardson & Cook, 1991).

- posting and keeping regular office hours. This demonstrates reliability and accessibility to students (Bennett, 1982). However, while it is important to be responsive to students' needs, research also indicates that *constant* availability to students does not have a significant positive impact on student ratings (Bernstein et al., 1995 in Basow, 1999), and it is likely to have a deleterious effect on other academic responsibilities.
- demonstrating concern for individuals by acknowledging student contributions and relating the subject matter to students' experiences. Statham, Richardson, & Cook (1991) report that students find female faculty more competent and likeable when they recognize what students bring to a class. Additionally, students react positively when faculty link material to students' lives, such as encouraging students to discuss their own experiences in the classroom or using examples from a student's daily life to illustrate course concepts.
- using questions that check for student understanding and soliciting student input through discussions, presentations, and questions (Statham, Richardson, & Cook, 1991).
- gathering feedback from students before the end of the term. This will offer an opportunity to correct any misperceptions students may have and/or to better meet student needs through modifications of teaching approaches (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Brinko, 1993).

While this list of behaviors and strategies represents a response to the question of how women faculty and faculty of color effectively meet the challenges they face in the classroom, it is equally (if not more) important to note that many of these compensatory strategies are also identified as best practices in the literature on teaching and learning (Goodwin & Stevens, 1993; Statham, Richardson, & Cook, 1991). The triumph for faculty of overcoming gender and racial stereotypes is also a triumph for students because they are more likely to encounter classrooms framed by active learning, clear expectations, and strong communication.

Guidelines for the Use of Student Ratings

Much of the existing research on students' evaluations of college teachers finds small, inconsistent differences in ratings of male and female instructors. (See Feldman, 1992, 1993 for an overview of this research.) Other researchers argue that while the statistical effect of instructor sex alone may be insignificant, gender is best understood as interactive and contextual. In other words, being a female professor *and* being a woman of color or teaching in certain ways, courses, or disciplines may have a significant impact on ratings. (See Basow, 1998 for a summary of this research.) However, even this latter body of research concludes that most gender differences in student ratings are small, and some circumstances result in higher ratings for women than men.

The common interpretation of this body of research is that student ratings are not biased by gender. However, our findings suggest a more nuanced interpretation. While statistical analyses of student ratings data demonstrate that female and male faculty attain similar levels of success in the classroom, they provide no information on how that success is attained or the contexts and challenges within which that success is achieved. In fact, since statistical analyses are dependent upon the assumption that what is measured is drawn from comparable experience and populations, it may be argued that it is inappropriate to compare the student ratings of white male faculty with those of white women faculty or of faculty of color. Rather, student ratings data are only a single measure that must be interpreted within the framework of the teaching contexts from which they arise.

This conclusion also is supported by research on the use of teaching evaluations in faculty tenure and promotion portfolios, which advocates the use of multiple measures of teaching effectiveness for all faculty (Arreola, 2000; Cashin, 1985; Seldin, 1993). Other indicators of instructional efficacy such as peer observations, course materials such as syllabi, and student work can help situate student ratings as only a glimpse into the richness of an instructor's teaching performance and the circumstances in which that performance is rendered. Additionally, a teaching statement can be an invaluable space to both contextualize ratings and highlight time and effort spent developing pedagogical strategies in response to student

feedback. (Franklin, 2001 offers one model.) On its website, CRLT provides an annotated bibliography of the literature on gender and student ratings, and instructors who want to contextualize their evaluations with research findings may find this resource useful (<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/multiteaching/multiteaching.html>). In addition, CRLT's website contains information about writing a teaching statement, along with examples (<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/teachings.html>). Faculty can get help with the process by contacting one of CRLT's instructional consultants by email (crlt@umich.edu) or phone (764-0505).

Conclusion

A significant amount of attention is paid to the process of diversifying the faculty through hiring and promotion practices. However, common practice tends to focus on numerical representation rather than equity of experience and quality of life. To be successful, the process of diversifying any population must recognize and account for the fact that historical homogeneity is considered the norm, and differences from this norm will typically be challenged.

Research conducted by CRLT and others indicates that female faculty and faculty of color face unique challenges in the classroom related to historically-based stereotypes of university professors. These challenges are often successfully negotiated but are not typically recognized by their colleagues. These conclusions are not news to many. The stories come easily when faculty are given the opportunity to tell them, but such opportunity is rare in the day-to-day realities of departments, schools, and colleges (Boice, 1993; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996).

The findings presented here are not intended to devalue white men's instructional efforts, but to cultivate a conversation about how best to manage and recognize the particular challenges faced by female faculty and faculty of color. Indeed, such a conversation has relevance for many white male faculty as well, such as those who encounter similar challenges because of their ethnicity, sexuality, or age (Hendrix, 1998; Moore, 1996; Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002; Tierney & Bensimon, 1996). Faculty who are aware that gender, race, and other characteristics of their identities may affect classroom dynamics can plan how best to preempt or address student challenges. Administrators and committee members who are aware that their colleagues may encounter additional instructional challenges can plan how best to appreciate their efforts, construct an equitable workload, and recognize good teaching. And teaching itself may be improved through an investigation of how creative and tenacious faculty who do not fit the stereotypical norm of classroom authority and expertise successfully rise to the challenge of engaging students in the process of learning.

¹ Student perceptions of instructor race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and age were also explored in this study. However, both the social climate and the study design were more conducive to eliciting student comments about instructor gender than other identity characteristics.

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- For further information on gender, identity, and student ratings, review CRLT's annotated bibliography on gender and student ratings at <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/multiteaching/multiteaching.html>.

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