PERCEPTIONS OF FACULTY BEHAVIOR BY STUDENTS OF COLOR

Mark A. Chesler

CRLT Occasional Papers

The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching

The University of Michigan

No. 7

Students' reports of their experiences in the classroom provide clear evidence of the need for faculty instructional development. Students of color, in particular, often report demeaning and discouraging contacts with the faculty. They do not argue, generally, that the problematic behaviors they encounter are deliberately or intentionally discouraging, but that they affect them negatively nonetheless.

Many faculty, especially white faculty who profess good faith interest in the welfare and achievement of students of color, indicate that they often do not know what they may be doing in the classroom that is experienced as problematic by students of color. To that end we sought to fill some of the gaps in this pattern of ignorance. As part of FAIRteach's (1994) faculty development efforts,[1] we conducted a series of 15 focus groups with undergraduate students of color. We asked students to address the following questions:

- Have you ever been made uncomfortable by assumptions or comments in the class related to race and/or ethnicity?
- Do your instructors expect you to do well?
- Are there ways in which the faculty could make the subject matter of certain courses more meaningful to you?
- Has an instructor done something constructive about race relations in or out of class?

Each of these focus groups was composed of a homogeneous collection of three to eight students of color (e.g., African-American or Latino/a or Asian-American or Native American), and each discussion was led by a trained undergraduate or graduate facilitator whose race/ethnicity matched that of the group being interviewed.

Themes from Students' Responses

Analysis of the students' responses elucidated a series of important themes. For faculty members who have not thought about these issues, or who may not know the ways in which they may have negative impact on students of color, the following themes may be quite illuminating. We further illustrate these students' experiences by reporting some of their direct observations.

The faculty have low expectations for us.

Many students of color reported that the faculty did not expect them to perform well in class, and thus did not encourage them or affirm their abilities.

> I wasn't doing well in the course and the professor said, "Oh, well, drop the course. There's nothing I can do for you and there's nothing you can do."

Mark A. Chesler is Professor of Sociology and 1995/96 Faculty Associate at the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. *A longer version of this piece was published as Chesler, M., Wilson, M., & Malani, A. (1993, Spring). Perceptions of faculty behavior by students of color. The Michigan Journal of Political Science, Issue 16, 54-79.*

Since I am Latino, whenever I went into office hours I always felt like the professors were thinking, "You know, he can't keep up with the class."

They never really seem to think that I have the intelligence to be in these classes. I don't know if it is because I am a woman or because I am Black.

These experiences certainly are not unique to University of Michigan students; they have been reported elsewhere (McBay, 1986) and a number of researchers have made similar observations of faculty attitudes or behaviors (Astin, Astin, Bisconti, & Frankel, 1972; Blauner, 1972; Katz, 1991; Trujillo, 1986).

The faculty do not care about us...or reach out to us...or have time for us.

As a result, several students indicated they were reluctant to reach out to faculty members, to visit during office hours, etc.

Because my first language is not English I usually take a little longer to understand something that is said. Not too much longer, maybe about 2 or 3 minutes longer. Once I got into a verbal disagreement with one of my TAs, and he said that he didn't care if I did not understand, he didn't have time for me.

It is difficult when you walk into class and realize that there are only maybe one or two other minorities in the class. So if the professor or TA has this attitude of not caring, then you really feel as though you have no support in this class and it's like you are on your own.

McBay's (1986, p. 11) report on the MIT survey of Black alumni provides similar views: "The majority of respondents (55%) communicated generally negative perceptions of the personal and academic support provided by MIT faculty members."

The faculty do not understand that we are different from the white students the faculty are used to.

Some students of color reported that they felt estranged and even excluded by assumptions made by the faculty about students in general that just did not apply to them.

My one professor named some book and said, "I'm sure all your parents have read this because I know all your parents are probably 50-55 years old." I was like, dang, because that happened to be my grandma's birthday, and I told my friend next to me, "My grandma just turned 62 and my parents aren't like 50 or 55."

One of my TAs was talking about students having to work and he said, "None of you have to work to earn money because you can write home to your parents." I was working 35 to 40 hours a week and if I wasn't a really strong-willed person I would have felt really bad.

Perhaps these assumptions fit the reality of the white middle and upper-middle class students with whom the faculty usually were in contact, perhaps not. But they certainly didn't fit these students' worlds. The commonality of these class-based differences in interracial university settings also has been reported by Allen (1986).

We are not all alike!

In contrast to the prior category, students of color also experienced being stereotyped or lumped together when they were not all alike.

I was sitting in a hallway with a group of friends and this professor came up to me and asked if I spoke Spanish. I said, "Yeah, a little bit." She said she just got this maid from Mexico who doesn't speak any English, and she thought it would be nice if I could come over and talk with her. I was kind of offended because I'm not from Mexico, I'm from America. The way she brought it up I found really offensive.

A TA for a class assumed I was from Detroit, since I was Black. Since my paper wasn't that good he assumed that is how all Detroit people spoke and wrote.

When I went to pick up my exam the professor didn't look as if he knew exactly who I was, but he automatically found the paper with the lowest grade and handed it to me. I told him that that was not my name and not my paper. When I told him my name and he found my paper, my actual score on the exam was perfect.

In the last example, it seems clear that the faculty member did not know (or remember) the young African-American woman's name —not a great problem in and of itself. But in order to save embarrassment the problem was greatly compounded–in racially stereotypic ways–and in ways that created pain and distress for the student.

Some faculty single us out as "experts" and "spokespersons" for our racial or ethnic group.

Some students reported feeling uncomfortable when they were identified and asked publicly to be a classroom authority on issues assumed to be relevant (and unique) to their racial group or on issues of racism and racial relations. They often felt that such identification escalated one (often sole or narrow) aspect of their social identity, put undue pressure on them, targeted them for curious or stereotypic reactions from white students, and sometimes asked for expertise that they were embarrassed to admit they did not have.

> When you take classes at the University, and you talk about racial issues, they look at you assuming that you know all about the topic. For example, living in the ghetto. Professors and students look at you like you're the person who should know all about it.
>
> An Asian article came up in class and the teacher looked at me and said, "I'm sure XXX will have much to say about this next article."
>
> I've been in classes where the professors look to me for answers to racial questions.

The treatment of students of color as "show and tell experts" or "testifiers" has been identified as common in law schools (Crenshaw, 1989), and also was reflected in reports from graduate students of color in the UM's School of Public Health as "The expectation that all African-American students are experientially expert in 'The Black Experience,' which is equated with poverty, and the expectation that they teach whites about racism" (Task Force on Racial and Cultural Concerns, 1990, p. 3).

The curriculum, and classroom interaction, often exclude us.

Some students indicated that their group's history (or art or life experience) was excluded from course materials and curriculum. In addition, some students reported that they felt ignored or overlooked by a certain privileged type (white and upper middle class).

> The professor prefaced everything by saying that most of the stuff we were going to be doing was Western art, European art. And I realized that they, and we, were missing entire cultures of Asian art, African art and South American art.
>
> I had a professor who didn't really acknowledge that there had been any Black scientists in history, no matter how often I brought evidence of this to class.

And sometimes when racially diverse content or issues were discussed, they were approached within such a narrow context that exclusion was still experienced.

> A professor broke down American families into Blacks, whites, and Japanese families to represent the Asian-American population. And I felt very alienated because I am not Japanese, but I am Asian.
>
> And whenever he mentions minorities it's always Asians, Africans and Hispanics. And this has happened three times and he's never said Native Americans once.

Similar concerns have been present in contemporary debates about the (Eurocentric) content of the curriculum or the canon, and have been specified in reports from Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley, respectively (Building a Multiracial, Multicultural University Community, 1989; The Diversity Report, 1990). As the Stanford student survey indicates, "Most of the participants (from 84% to 93%) in each of the minority groups believe the Stanford curriculum does not teach students about the contributions of diverse racial and cultural groups. While not as large a percentage as in the minority groups, a number of white participants (55%) agreed" (1989, p. 7).

In addition to the curriculum itself, some students reported that they felt ignored or overlooked by the faculty when the time came for classroom participation.

> I would ask a question concerning the text and then my TA would explain to me that it wasn't a question of general concern so it was just put away.
>
> I feel as though I have to prove that I am smart enough to be in the class, but when I raise my hand to answer a question it seems like some of my professors are hesitant to call on me.
>
> The teacher was going around the room asking everyone about their heritage. He skipped over all the Black people.

Condon has suggested that it is natural that the evidence of an exclusive academic culture would appear in more than textbooks and syllabi: "But perhaps most important of all, they appear in the interaction or communication that takes place in the classroom" (1986, p. 14).

The faculty sometimes seem uncomfortable or cautious with us.

Several students reported instances where they felt that the faculty were intimidated by them or by their own concerns about classroom order. In addition, when faculty spent a lot of time talking or joking with white students, or lecturing on the "white side" of the classroom, students of color interpreted this as a sign of differential comfort.

> I had one professor tell me he didn't want anyone messing up his class because until now he had done everything right. He didn't have tenure but he was real close to it and he really didn't want anything to mess it up.
>
> She was very racist; she told us once that she was afraid of Black people.
>
> I had a teacher who was scared of me. She just saw a tall Black male. I just thought, "Lady I don't want you, I just

want to ask you a question." Once, this lady literally backed up from me.

One of my TAs (a female) is afraid to come to the back of the lab to help me. They don't back down from another tall white guy in the class. As a result, I don't get the type of help the white guys in the class get.

The professors never joke in class with Black students. Their jokes are directed toward the white students. You would think they know the white students personally. When professors and the TAs favor the white students that makes you feel uncomfortable, it affects you.

It may well be that some white faculty are scared of some students of color (Katz, 1991). Our social history of racial separatism and differential privilege may explain the oft-cited finding that white faculty themselves may be uncomfortable in interracial classroom situations (Blauner, 1972; Mingle, 1978; Peterson et al., 1978) and helps account for the common report from African-American students that they have fewer interactions and informal contacts with faculty than do white students (Allen, 1988; Fleming, 1981; Stikes, 1984).

Faculty sometimes take overt stances in class against diversity issues and initiatives.

Some students reported feeling intimidated when the faculty stated clearly negative positions in class regarding University actions or policies designed to hasten progress on or celebrate diversity or anti-racism efforts. This was especially the case when such comments were not intended or presented in ways that facilitated open dialogue. Students of color often wished to respond to these stances but reported feeling intimidated by the faculty's superior power and authority in class.

Out of class interactions with the faculty are minimal and difficult.

Some students indicated that it was difficult to establish relationships with instructors. This was particularly true outside the classroom.

You are not going to get a relationship with a professor outside of class. You cannot expect that. That is how this university is set up.

In the MIT report, many Black alumni also indicated their reluctance to visit faculty members for help: "Negative encounters also often led to a negative attitude about seeking academic help" (McBay, 1986, p. 13). And in the Stanford report, over 50% of the students of color (including some who felt that the faculty was approachable in general) indicated that "none" or only "a few" faculty were sensitive to minority students' needs (Building a Multiracial, Multicultural University Community, 1989). Similar findings have been reported by Allen (1988), Fleming (1981) and Willie and Cunningen (1981).

Classroom structures and pedagogical approaches are too limited.

Some students remarked that the methods of classroom instruction that they experienced were unstimulating or ineffective, or seemed designed to fit a narrow range of student behaviors, interests and learning styles.

If too much information is thrown out at once, which is usually the case, there is no chance for internalization. You spend a lot of time trying to copy what is on the board or overhead and not really listening to what they are saying.

Professors and TAs should try to make classes enjoyable for everyone. There needs to be more interaction with students and students should be allowed to ask more questions.

Whenever I ask my TA for help, rather than explain something to me, he just works out my problem set for me. I think he means well, and I do well on those assignments. But in the long run it does not help me, because I do not get a chance to make mistakes on my own.

Some of these examples represent apparently race-neutral behavior that white students as well as students of color may object to or find ineffective. However, students of color may be especially vulnerable to or alienated from the emotionally distant, impersonal and bureaucratic educational approach reflected in most large lecture classes. In the context of a predominantly white classroom and academic culture, and when combined with some of the other issues reported earlier, the effects for them may be especially problematic.

Relations with white peers in class sometimes are problematic.

Some of the same reports of low expectations and awkwardness that were attributed to the faculty were repeated with regard to relationships with white peers in class.

In class, when the TA was having a problem doing a problem I tried to help. I knew the answer. The white students in class looked at me like, "Who does he think he is, trying to teach a TA how to do a problem?"

White students and the TA were surprised I did well on the examination. It's as though they expect you to do poorly. They shouldn't have to be surprised when I do well.

In lab I was the only Black person. When it was time to pick lab partners they shifted away from me.

There is a lot of networking between members of white fraternities and sororities.

These difficulties in student-peer relations often have their roots in broader perceptions and attitudes held by white students. As noted in the UC-Berkeley report, "The operating assumption among many of the white and Asian students that we interviewed was that Black, Chicano/Latino, and Native American students don't 'belong' at Cal" (The Diversity Report, 1990, pp. 30-31). Accordingly, many undergraduate students of color reported that they felt they had to convince their peers that they were competent and, having proven that, that they were not therefore exceptional from other students of color.

Learning from Students' Responses

The fact that these patterns of racial exclusion and distance occur between students in class makes them part of the legitimate and necessary concern of the faculty. If faculty do not pay conscious attention to these patterns, harmful and destructive classroom dynamics will arise and be permitted to continue. Even faculty who are aware of these issues, and who feel some measure of responsibility for dealing with them, may hesitate because of caution, and lack of comfort, skill, or experience in dealing with interracial and group dynamics.

This report does not quantify the extent of these themes; it merely indicates their presence to some degree. Moreover, all these self-reports are vulnerable to the claim that these events did not occur, that they exist only in the imaginative reports of one party to multi-party interactions. However, each theme indicated above also has been documented in other studies and commentary on the experiences of students of color at predominantly white universities. Finally, some suggest that these themes are not limited to the experience of students of color; many white students also may have similar encounters with the faculty. Be that as it may, their presence in the experience of these students of color requires attention on their own basis, although the recognition that they are not simply race specific (although they potentially have differential impact for a racial minority group in a predominantly white environment), may make it even more imperative for remedies to be developed.

Some Positive Things Students Saw—and Appreciated

The students interviewed reported that some faculty succeeded in creating good classroom relations, in attracting and maintaining student interest, in establishing a peer climate of comfort, and in facilitating their academic performance.

Faculty introduced inclusive curricular material.

Black social scientists were included in the readings. This was the first time I've seen Black social scientists doing something.

In one course the professor devoted part of six lectures to issues related to the important role Black people played in the motion picture industry. Then he backed that up by making it a part of the midterm and final exam. For the first time I felt what it was like to be like a white student in the American educational system. To have an internalized part of you and to watch other students struggling with it.

Faculty used more effective pedagogical techniques.

One professor was really into the class. She would lecture, show films, and did other things that were interesting and that kept our attention while in class. She didn't just show up and drop all this information on you. She was very excited about the material and really wanted us to learn it.

Faculty encouraged us and had confidence in us.

Some professors and TAs expect you to do well, and that helps when they have confidence in you.

My instructor kind of took me under her wing and she encouraged me to do more and say more about myself and put myself into the class as a Native American.

I did poorly on one exam and I went to talk with the professor. After talking with him he realized that I knew the material, but for some reason didn't do well on the test. After that he held regular sessions with me and we kept the lines of communication open, and I began to do well. But if he had just blown me off I probably would have continued to do poorly in the class.

Faculty led open and guided discussions of racial issues, and evidently did so in ways that avoided the assignment of "expert status."

We had a discussion about the idea of affirmative action and the idea of racism and racial tension in general. I think we all got to see both sides of the issues. I think it really was helpful.

In a class some students said that one of the authors was sexist as well as racist. The professor put it on the computer

conference and said that people needed not just to read the material but to actually discuss the differences in perspective.

A person mentioned a racial incident (where a number of Black students were maced by campus police), but some people said they couldn't relate to it. The professor stopped the class and wanted to discuss how the students viewed racism. It was addressed in an open arena, and because the class was small, people were pretty friendly with one another. It was good because the problem was talked about and it wasn't taboo.

The presence of faculty of color in general was seen as important.

It would help to have some Black professors. I think you just feel better in the class, more comfortable. It is difficult always having to adjust to white professors and the way they teach and conduct the class.

Addressing Students' Concerns

FAIRteach (1992) has used these themes, and the direct excerpts from students' voices that exemplify them, in presentations and workshops with faculty groups. The result often has been surprise, confirmation of the likelihood of these encounters, and serious problem solving to suggest alternative ways of presenting classroom material, designing courses, interacting with students, setting course guidelines, etc. Discussions about these reports with faculty members have led to four sets of suggestions—things that we faculty members can undertake ourselves to address these concerns.

1. Broaden and make inclusive classroom content and pedagogy. These students' reports suggest that it is important to broaden the curriculum to more adequately represent the diverse traditions and scholars present in almost all disciplines and areas of inquiry. In addition, students suggest the need for a more inclusive classroom pedagogy, ways of working with and presenting curricular materials that actively engage students—with one another, with the instructor and with the material. Several scholars have suggested that different students have different learning styles (which may or may not be associated with specific cultural backgrounds), and that a broader set of teaching styles therefore is required to effectively reach all students.

2. Attend to the issues involved in "managing" a diverse socio-educational system. These reports indicate that the classroom is, in real terms, a "social system," albeit one focused on educational matters. In any social system issues such as power and status are present, and students' comments about being ignored, about dealing with low faculty and peer expectations, about caring about being cared about, and about being identified as spokespersons all point to this reality. Deliberate attention to these interpersonal and group dynamics issues might help create a more just and effective learning enterprise.

3. Examine and "manage" ourselves and our own baggage on racial matters. If racism is present in the U.S. society, we can expect that most of us, as faculty members and as citizens, carry some of the lessons of our early socialization and schooling with regard to these matters. Consciously or not, we mirror in some sense the racism in the U.S. culture and social structure. Thus, work on our own internalized assumptions about racial issues should be a continuous process of our own learning, and one which might enable us to respond proactively, rather than reactively, to student distress, inappropriate racial interactions and classroom incidents.

4. Deal with the organizational context surrounding individual classrooms. Classrooms do not exist alone. The surrounding context of the university and larger community constantly impact all our lives in important ways. Tense and unfortunate campus events, or events in the society at large, can create a context where harmonious and productive classroom interracial relations are difficult to achieve. Moreover, if university-wide priorities do not address the need to attend to these issues in the classroom, and to the teaching enterprise more generally, progress will continue to be difficult.

---

[1]FAIRteach (Faculty Against Institutional Racism-Teaching) is a group of University of Michigan faculty members who have been presenting workshops and assisting faculty colleagues to enhance their approaches to teaching and learning in diverse classrooms.

References

Allen, W. (1986). *Gender and campus race differences in Black student academic performance, racial attitudes, and college satisfaction.* Atlanta: Southern Educational Foundation.

Allen, W. (1988). The education of Black students on white campuses: What quality the experience? In M. Nettles (Ed.), *Toward Black undergraduate student equality in American higher education.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Astin, H., Astin, A., Bisconti, A., & Frankel, H. (1972). *Higher education and the disadvantaged student.* Washington, DC: Human Service Press.

Blauner, R. (1972). *Racial oppression in America.* New York: Harper & Row.

Building a multicultural, multiracial university community. (1989). Palo Alto: Stanford University.

Condon, J. (1986). *The ethnocentric classroom.* Unpublished manuscript.

Crenshaw, K. (1989, Winter). Foreword: Toward a race-conscious pedagogy in legal education. *National Black Law Journal, 11*, 1-14.

FAIRteach. (1992). *Report of activities, 1988-1992.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

Fleming, J. (1981). Special needs of Blacks and other minorities. In A. Chickering (Ed.), *The modern American college.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Katz, J. (1991). White faculty struggling with the effects of racism. In P. Altbach & K. Lomotey (Eds.), *The racial crisis in American education.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

McBay, S. (1986). *The racial climate on the MIT campus.* Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Mingle, J. (1978). Faculty and departmental response to increased Black student enrollment. *Journal of Higher Education, 49*(3), 201-217.

Peterson, M., Blackburn, R., Gamson, Z., Arce, C., Davenport, R., & Mingle, J. (1978). *Black students on white campuses: The impacts of increased Black enrollments.* Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research.

Stikes, C. (1984). *Black students in higher education.* Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

Task Force on Racial and Cultural Concerns. (1990). *Year-end report of problems identified and actions recommended.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan School of Public Health.

The diversity report. (1990). Berkeley: Institute for the Study of Social Change, University of California at Berkeley.

Trujillo, C. (1986). A comparative examination of classroom interactions between professors and minority and non-minority college students. *American Educational Research Journal, 23,* 629-642.

Willie, C., & Cunningen, D. (1981). Black students in higher education. *Annual Review of Sociology, 7,* 177-198.

Colleagueship and assistance to faculty members who wish to explore these issues in their own classroom endeavors is available from faculty colleagues in FAIRteach and from the staff and programs of CRLT.

The *CRLT Occasional Papers* series is published on a variable schedule by the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan. Information about extra copies or back issues can be obtained by writing to Publications, CRLT, 3300 School of Education Building, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259. This issue was edited by Lisa A. Mets.

CRLT Occasional Paper No. 7

The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching

The University of Michigan
3300 School of Education Bldg.
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259