

## Consider your and your students' social identities and their implications for learning

---

*"Even though I come into the classroom as a professional teacher, I do not leave my social identities at the door. I need to monitor the gaps in my knowledge and sensitivity, areas in which I still have ignorance, fear, and uncertainty." - "Jerry"*<sup>7</sup>

The demographic makeup of U.S. college students is shifting, with a noticeable increase in students who identify as Black or Indigenous or as people of color (BIPOC). At Northwestern, for example, from the class of 2017 to the class of 2027, the proportion of Black students grew from 7 to 11 percent and Hispanic/Latinx students grew from 11 to 14 percent. These changing student demographics are a critical focal point for educators as they engage in new and innovative ways to teach.

Adapting to new realizations and expectations can be difficult for instructors, particularly if they are asked to modify their teaching techniques and classroom material to be more inclusive. It is even more difficult when the instructors have been taught, overtly and covertly, that the way in which they were taught as students themselves is the best or only one. Weinstein and Obear contend that "expectations are increasing for instructors not only to be sensitive to issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism, regardless of their academic specialization, but also to treat these issues as part of their teaching responsibilities."<sup>8</sup>

The knowledge of how identity is cultivated by environment can help develop successful teaching strategies. Social identity refers to those aspects of people's self-concept that derive from the social categories or groups (e.g., gender, race, ability, social class) to which they perceive they belong along with the value and emotional significance attached to those categories or group memberships.<sup>9</sup> Social identities and the responses they evoke can affect student learning.<sup>10</sup> For example, the existence of a negative stereotype about a group with which one identifies can result in the negative performance on a given task (e.g., an exam). This phenomenon is referred to as stereotype threat and is often reported by students who identify with marginalized and minoritized groups in educational contexts.<sup>11</sup> Studies of stereotype threat in learning environments highlight the need for instructors to understand how beliefs and behavior can be interpreted and how they can influence the learning experience of all students.

Based on the idea that people must recognize their own culture before truly understanding another person's culture, instructors must also reflect on their own identities.<sup>12</sup> Instructors are not blank slates when they enter a classroom. They have inevitably acquired biases and opinions that affect their teaching.<sup>13</sup> As educators, we can have unconscious feelings toward particular students related to their identities, and "these powerful, emotional reactions to a student signal an internal conflict and a need to consider whether the problem lies in the student or in yourself."<sup>14</sup> Unintentional prejudice occurs when society's unwritten rules about status, respect, and worth are perpetuated by even the most egalitarian educators. Inclusive instructors continually work to address their biases and other prejudicial behaviors that can have a negative impact on student learning. Relatedly, educators can also encounter biases and assumptions from colleagues and students. It is important to note that faculty of color, particularly women, experience microaggressions and stereotyped expectations.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, honoring and being compassionate toward your own lived experience in the classroom context is pivotal.

Inclusive educators, who are aware of their own multiple social identities and how their corresponding lived experiences have implications for their teaching, contribute to the development and success of all students.<sup>16</sup> By failing to acknowledge the influence of social identity and background on their pedagogy and teaching practices, instructors may unknowingly perpetuate inequities in the learning environment. When instructors engage in understanding differences and accepting their own roles in the present campus culture, then all students have an opportunity to succeed.

## TEACHING STRATEGIES

1. **Engage in personal racial, ethnic, and multicultural identity development work** to increase their awareness of privilege, oppression, and racial consciousness. Those in positions of power and privilege can examine how their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors may unintentionally perpetuate prejudice, discrimination, and bias in the classroom. For example, those who identify as White can learn the different ways they may unintentionally perpetuate microaggressions toward their racially/ ethnically minoritized students and in turn take the necessary steps to mitigate this form of subtle racism. Inclusive instructors can engage in this ongoing work by seeking educational development workshops and other resources such as literature on social identity, equity and inclusion, and antiracism.
2. **Reflect on how instructional identities impact teaching.** We all have salient identities that grant us membership into groups characterized by race, gender, class, religion, nationality, ability, and other sociocultural distinctions. These group memberships create the lens through which we see and experience differences among members of other groups. Our beliefs, assumptions, values, and attitudes show up in the ideation of course content, student expectations, engagement, and ascriptions of intelligence (both positive and negative). Do stereotypes about race, gender, or another identity affect who you call on most frequently, for example? Do you hold all students to the same high standards for expected achievement?

## EXAMPLE

Before the start of each academic term, instructors may engage in one or more activities that require them to reflect on their different social identities. For example, a queer, Latinx woman who teaches in a STEM department may consider which identities are salient to them as they develop their course content and modality of teaching as well as how the many identities they hold may impact their interpersonal communication and relationships with their students. They may also ask themselves whether their identities relate to any preconceived notions they have about teaching courses where it is likely that the majority of students will be White men? A tool that may be useful in their reflective process is the [Social Identity Wheel](#). By engaging in the [Social Identity Wheel](#) activity, they may become more cognizant of how different identities may impact the way they see their students as well as how their students may perceive and treat them.

## FURTHER READING

- Barnett, P. E. (2020, December 24). "Social identity and privilege in higher education." *Liberal Education*, 99(3), 30-37.
- Bentrim, E. & Henning, G. W. (2022). *The impact of a sense of belonging in college: Implications for student persistence, retention, and success*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bliuc, A. M., Ellis, R. A., Goodyear, P., & Hendres, D. M. (2011). "The role of social identification as university student in learning: Relationships between students' social identity, approaches to learning, and academic achievement." *Educational Psychology*, 31(5), 559-574.
- Haynes, C., & Patton, L. D. (2019). "From racial resistance to racial consciousness: Engaging White STEM faculty in pedagogical transformation." *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 22(2), 85-98.
- Lewis, J. A. et al. (2019). "Racial microaggressions and sense of belonging at a historically White university." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(8).
- Lyons, E. M., Simms, N., Begolli, K. N., & Richland, L. E. (2018). "Stereotype threat effects on learning from a cognitively demanding mathematics lesson." *Cognitive Science*, 42(2), 678-690.
- Mavor, K. I., Platow, M. J., & Bizumic, B. (Eds.) (2017). *Self and social identity in educational contexts*. Taylor & Francis.
- Singh, A. A., Finan, R., & Estevez, R. (2023). "Queer and trans resilience: Moving from affirmation to liberation in our collective healing." In J. M. Koch, E. E. Townsend-Bell, & R. D. Hubach (Eds.), *Identity as resilience in minoritized communities: Strengths-based approaches to research and practice* (pp. 1-22). Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Torres, V., Howard-Hamilton, M. F., & Cooper, D. L. (2011). "Identity development of diverse populations: Implications for teaching and administration in higher education." *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report* (Vol. 12). John Wiley & Sons.
- Wilkins, S., Butt, M. M., Kratochvil, D., & Balakrishnan, M. S. (2016). "The effects of social identification and organizational identification on student commitment, achievement and satisfaction in higher education." *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(12), 2232-2252.