

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

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## Impediments to Teaching a Culturally Diverse Undergraduate Population\*

**Barbara Solomon, *Graduate Dean, USC at Los Angeles***

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The recent calls for cultural diversity in the undergraduate population mean that, in the coming semesters, you probably will have ample opportunity to address in some depth various strategies, prophecies and programs designed to meet the special needs of students who differ in regard to ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, country of origin and so on. This suggests that we do indeed have great diversity in the student population. But such a suggestion is misleading.

It is true that before 1900 American universities were quiet enclaves having little impact on the outside world. At that time less than 5% of the nation's youth attended college, most of those from the privileged class. Apprenticeship, the ultimate strategy for ensuring limited access, was the main route to the professions. So, it is legitimate for us to identify the current diversity as dramatically different. Yet for many groups whose representation in colleges and universities is far below their representation in the general population, "more" diversity falls far short of "sufficient" or "acceptable" diversity. The reaction is the same as that of an airline

passenger, tired and frustrated over delays resulting in a nine hour trip from New York to Los Angeles, being reminded that the trip used to take three months by covered wagon.

It is exactly because of the fact that our colleges are not yet sufficiently diverse, that it is so imperative that we become more effective in teaching students who are not middle and upper class white males. There is considerable evidence that our ability to attract and retain students who are different depends on the extent to which faculty are sensitive to their needs and issues. The most effective way to accomplish this would be to have a critical mass of minority faculty who would serve not only as role models and bridges between minority students and the main stream cultural institution that is the university, but also would understand the unique stresses inherent in the status of minority students and how to reduce them.

But, candidly, the probability that we can have a critical mass of minority faculty in all, or even a substantial number of our more than 3,000 institutions of higher education in the near future is practically zero. Over the past ten years, the number of white Americans earning doctorates fell by 5%, while the number for black Americans fell by 22%. To drive home the point, in 1988 only four black Americans received a Ph.D. in mathematics. If every university in the country mandated that each of its academic units hire a minority faculty member within five years, there would be no way that it could be accomplished for even a small minority of our institutions.

These facts have two important implications. First, the ability to achieve some kind of parity in the future will depend upon increasing the number of minority undergraduates who remain in college and go on for advanced degrees. Second, for the foreseeable future these undergraduates are most likely to be taught by a white professoriate. Minority faculty to serve as mentors and role models simply will not be available in sufficient numbers for a while. Therefore, the white professoriate must be more effective in teaching and mentoring minority students. And yet this must be done in a context in which certain recent changes in practices and attitudes towards diversity can seriously affect our success.

What are these changes? The first is the decline of ethnic studies.

Ethnic studies programs proliferated during the sixties and seventies in response to demands by blacks and other minorities for equal time in the curriculum. But more relevant to our discussion, they met an urgent need for research which included the minority perspective and therefore provided more valid propositions about minority culture. Now when we ask ourselves the question, "How can we educate teachers to be more effective with diverse populations?" we begin to realize how deficient our knowledge base really is. How much research is available that illuminates cross-cultural comparisons of behaviors relevant to the teaching-learning process? Do we know enough about these to be able to understand the probabilities for misunderstanding in cross-cultural student-teacher relationships?

There is a vast amount that we do not know about the dynamics in cross-cultural teaching-learning relationships. We do know that they can be decidedly complex, since there are faculty who are domestic minority, domestic majority, or internationals teaching students who are domestic minority, domestic majority, or internationals. Further complicate this by the fact that domestic minority may include blacks, a variety of Hispanic groups, American Indians, and a variety of Asian American groups, whereas the domestic majority may include those from geographical areas that have their own regional cultures, like New England, the South, and the Mid-west. And, in my own institution, internationals include students from more than a hundred countries.

In the past we have dealt with such complexities by the assumption that main-stream middle class Anglo culture will be the culture to which all who want to be educated and who want to work in this country will be expected to conform. However, a society of diverse ethnic cultures is seen by many now as the ultimate goal of this society. The need for an understanding of how to deal with ethnic diversity is crucial, and yet the one area of study for which this is the main focus is on the decline.

Another change affecting our ability to teach the diverse student population is reflected in the increasing incidents of racial tension and conflict on our campuses. Shelby Steele, in a 1989 *Harper's* article, describes the situation and his visits to a number of colleges to interview students about the issue. Their responses were

illuminating. For example, he says "a black student told me that he felt defensive every time he walked into a class and saw mostly white faces. When I asked why, he said, 'Because I know they're all racists. They think blacks are stupid.'" Of course, it may be true that some whites feel this way, but the singular focus on white racism allowed this student to obscure his own racial anxiety. On the other hand, when Steele talked to some white students, one told him, "Blacks do nothing but complain and ask for sympathy when everyone really knows they don't do well because they don't try. If they worked harder, they could do as well as everyone else."

The point that Steele attempts to make is that when difference is emphasized instead of merely remarked, i.e. when we push to identify only the differences among people, people then think only in terms of difference. This emphasis on finding differences then leads to overgeneralizations and stereotyping. We find ourselves saying "most blacks do this..." or "most Hispanics feels this way" when in reality a lot of individuals within those groups don't. There is probably as much intragroup variability in attitude and behavior as there is intergroup variability. We have to remember that each of us is simultaneously: 1) like everybody else, because we are all human; 2) different from some but like others, because we share some experiences which are common for a given cultural group; and 3) totally unique, because nobody else has had exactly the same set of experiences that we have had. And so, it is necessary to understand whether in the present situation we are dealing with a characteristic of the individual which is: 1) something universal in the human condition; 2) something that is a consequence of some experiences that this person has had as part of a group; or 3) something which is their own personal idiosyncratic way of being in the world because of their unique life experiences. These alternative ways of viewing "difference" might help us in combating the racial tension and stereotyping which can so easily result from a model based only on group differences.

The end must be a celebration of the multi-racial, multi-ethnic nature of our country rather than a fear of difference. Most important must be the understanding of how to interact with each other to our mutual gratification. The demand of every group for fair play and justice must not only be heard but translated into specific strategies. The

psychiatrist, Comer, in his book, *Beyond Black and White* quotes the following nursery rhyme:

There were two cats of Kilkenny  
Each thought there was one too many  
So they fought and they fit  
And they scratched and they bit  
Until there wasn't any.

The message is clear: either we learn to make diversity work for all of us or we destroy our society for all of us.