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Obstacles Facing New African- American Faculty at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities

by Keith McElroy

Many African-Americans beginning their first faculty appointment at predominantly white colleges and universities may be in for a surprise. They may be under the illusion that engaging in good publishing, good teaching, and to a lesser degree, good service will ensure their advancement to tenure. Although many authors have explained in detail the consequences of not publishing, few have focused on the obstacles involved in obtaining good teaching evaluations. In many instances, African-American faculty may find their teaching evaluations are based on students' personal opinions rather than on the professors' pedagogical approaches.

This essay will examine some of the obstacles new African-American faculty may face in obtaining good teaching evaluations, the lack of which can threaten their advancement to tenure. By drawing upon the author's own professional experiences, as well as that of others, the essay will illustrate that the issues raised here are not unique. This reality is one with which many professors must contend. It is only through open dialogue with African-American mentors that I am able to embark upon this discussion. It is my hope that discussion surrounding this critical issue in higher education will enable African-American first-year faculty to enter this profession aware of the obstacles to obtaining good teaching evaluations.

Perception is reality. This is a statement that most people in advertising or marketing would affirm. In terms of marketing, it means that how a consumer perceives a product is that person's reality. In other words, if a consumer sees a product as low-quality, then to that individual, the product is low-quality. Even if it really is not, that is the perception of the consumer. Perceptions are extremely hard to overcome, and they are not just limited to products. Many students at predominantly white colleges and universities have negative perceptions of African-Americans. African-American faculty should not be surprised that the biggest obstacle blocking them from obtaining good teaching evaluations is the result of the presence of self in the classroom. For the purpose of this article, *presence of self* will be defined as the existence of a professor's ethnic identity and cultural background. These factors alone could negatively influence classroom dynamics, and subsequently, students' evaluation of that professor.

Race and racial conflicts have both been defining elements of this country right from the beginning. Material abounds to support this assertion both from history and from contemporary social analysis. When African-American faculty enter the classrooms of predominantly white colleges and universities, they bring along their experiences and culture. These may be unfamiliar to many of the students in such institutions. It should not be surprising for the faculty therefore to find in their classrooms yet another venue for racial conflict.

From the empirical evidence of people who have been involved in providing instruction to students at predominately white colleges and universities, there exists in their classrooms racial dissonance. For example, Michele Foster, an experienced African-American professor who has been involved in providing instruction to students at predominately white colleges and universities, identifies racial conflicts in her classroom. In one example she writes:

Who is this African-American woman, they ask, who demands that they come to class, defend their assertions, read the course material, and write with clarity and precision? Who is this African-American woman who refuses to acquiesce to their demand that a grade be changed merely because they question it? What leads this African-American woman to believe that she recognizes competent writing? In this regard, my very presence in the university classroom is a challenge to the ideology of who can be a source of authority in the classroom.¹

Foster's findings speak to the issues regarding students' perceptions of who should have authority, who is competent, and what is acceptable behavior from a professor. She infers that her mere presence in the classroom influences how she is perceived as a professor by her students. Taking this in regard, some students at predominately white colleges and universities may enter African-American faculty-led classrooms with the perception that they will have problems with the professors. This self-fulfilling prophecy may become the basis of their evaluations.

On the other hand, some students may see African-American faculty members as both authority figures and as the embodiment of an established set of personality characteristics based on their ethnicity. White students may believe that African-American faculty members will use their authority to push unwanted changes on them. With this firmly entrenched in their minds, the students may selectively look for evidence that will confirm their assumptions. Students of color may tend to expect African-American faculty members to be a champion of their perspectives. When this does not occur, they may feel that they have been betrayed. Thus, despite African-American faculty person's competency in middle-class European-American academic conventions and discourse

practices, it may be the students' perceptions that form the basis of their evaluations.

The author's own teaching experiences have been almost entirely in predominantly white institutions. Over my years of teaching, African-American faculty members in these institutions have related many stories of racism on campuses and in classrooms. Some of the stories reflected real and subtle racism, and other times an incident might even be considered open to interpretation. The majority of experiences, however, were neither subtle nor open to interpretation. My personal experiences with racism are numerous, and I will recount a few of them here.

My participation in an African-American community has significantly influenced who I am. I have something of value to contribute to my students' understanding of science teaching methodology and this shows in my stance, poise, manner, voice volume and intonation as I teach. Most students at predominantly white colleges and universities have rarely encountered African-American faculty in an instructional setting. When they do encounter an African-American faculty member, these students may feel their very beliefs about African-Americans to be threatened by the professor's level of confidence. Students, therefore, have viewed this author's teaching style as arrogant and intimidating. This is evident in the following opinion expressed in one student evaluation:

Dr. McElroy was not a good instructor. He intimidated the students in the class from the first day of the course. I understand that we need to have diversity in the classroom, but as an instructor it is not proper or right to subject students to sarcasm and ridicule. I understand that Dr. McElroy had a difficult childhood. That is not my fault. He needs to get on with life and learn to look forward not backward. I did not appreciate the way he talked to me when I approached him and asked for certain things.

Not only were the student's initial reactions negative, but they were based on stereotypes. For example, the inference that the professor's childhood was difficult is typical of the naive perceptions many students have of African-Americans. This student had no substantial background information with which to draw that conclusion.

In another instance, students' initial perceptions also predetermined whether they heard and understood what I said. One student stated it this way: "It was after talking with Keith four weeks into the course that I began to hear what he said." As the student put it in our informal conversation, "He said nothing different. He was saying the same things he had been saying all along in class. However this time, I started listening to him in class as a teacher (as opposed to an African-American)."

In the classroom, some students also question the

African-American professor's competency. This is especially apparent when grading their academic work. It is clearly stated in my course syllabus that scientific language is important. To not use scientific language will result in the loss of points. Often, after an assignment is returned, some students who did not earn an "A" demand that their grades be changed because, as they see it, "They are A students." My refusal to change their grade usually results in protests to my superiors (i.e., the chairperson or dean). An anecdote serves to illustrate this point.

After a class in which I had returned a portfolio assignment to my students, cries rang outside my classroom: The professor doesn't know what he is doing! How can he dock us points for not using the right words? I'm an "A" student. I won't take this! This is supposed to be a science course, not an English course! The voices blended into a chorus: "Our professor can't teach."

Later that day, a group of students went to the chairperson of the department to complain about my grading. They complained about being marked down for not using the correct words to explain the processes of scientific inquiry. The students had used phrases such as, "to notice" and "to figure out." I corrected the phrases with, "to observe" and "to infer," respectively. The chairperson did not rush to criticize me. She understood the context of what I was trying to accomplish. I was conveying the idea that science has its own language, and that as future teachers, it was appropriate for me to flag their improper use of that language.

When teaching I strive to be consistent and actually do what I say I will do, whether it is giving back papers in a timely manner or whether it is in carrying out penalties for handing in assignments late. Many professors at the college level do not model the methodology they teach. For instance, one might be lecturing about the advantages of the activity approach to teaching science, but nonetheless conduct this lesson with a lecture approach. Many students have grown accustomed to this inconsistent behavior, and when faced with consistency, they react with anger. Consequently, some of my students become angry when I do not change a policy or methodology to fit their liking.

The observations presented here are meant to demonstrate the role that racial and ethnic stereotyping can play in classroom encounters and student evaluations of their African-American professors. In some cases, students' perspectives about teachers' performances are accurate. Could that be the case here, or is learned racism influencing those perspectives?

This discussion aims to open dialogue on precisely this question. The discussion will generate more empirical research and impact the evaluation practices within colleges and universities. Moreover, new African-American professors should realize how much the 'presence of self' influences pedagogy as well as teacher evaluations. As Foster concludes: this practice raises a number of issues for administrators, especially as universities start to place more emphasis on teaching in deliberations about merit, tenure, and promotion. Do

undergraduates respond to comparable behaviors of Black and white faculty members in a similar manner? Do they judge them in the same way? These issues are worth further investigation.²

Notes

¹Michele Foster, "Strategies for Combating Racism in the Classroom," in C. P. Kottak, et al., eds., *The Teaching of Anthropology: Problems, Issues, and Religions* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1996), 169-180.

²Ibid.

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