Chapter 28

Mastering Diversity and Gaining a Competitive Advantage on University Campuses

Denise Gates

Arkansas State University, USA

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the salient classroom and university interactions between students and instructors of different cultural backgrounds and to offer insight as to how educators and other leaders on campus might maximize effectiveness with diverse groups, gaining a competitive advantage. Inspired by the lived experiences of an African-American graduate student in a department staffed predominately of Caucasian-American faculty members, this chapter calls instructors and other leaders at educational institutions to cultivate healthy professional relationships with students and to create environments conducive to learning by employing pedagogical strategies which acknowledge the unique learning styles of learners.

INTRODUCTION

Since the start of graduate school at a predominantly Caucasian university, one African American, heterosexual, female, graduate student faced numerous race-related challenges with a Caucasian American, female, recently divorced, heterosexual professor who was born in the southern part of the United States. The student was enrolled in this professor's class in addition to teaching three classes of her own as a graduate teaching assistant. This professor pressured the student to self-disclose more personal content than the student felt comfortable sharing with a professor she barely knew. The professor said the student was not teaching her enough about her race, and this educator suggested that part of the reason the student had been accepted into the graduate program in the first place was to offer the "Black Perspective." However, the professor was dismayed when she learned that many of the views of the student did not deviate, as expected, from those of other students in the class. The professor seemed to expect greater variations in views, opinions, experiences, etc.

Did this educator need a paradigm shift? Do professors dictate how students enact their cultural roles within their respective races, or should professors embrace how students embody those roles within their various cultural groups. Who gets to define for students who they are and how they must communicate within the realm of reasonable communication for a university campus? The professor was baffled at the student's professionalism and conservative nature. Because the student had worked in corporate American prior to attending graduate school, she was used to and very comfortable in professional settings. Perhaps this educator needed to expand her view of what it meant to communicate like an African American woman. Attempts made by the student to gracefully decline requests for information about her personal life, including who she was dating, resulted in far more of an issue than necessary. Moreover, the student was subsequently surprised when the professor informed her that she had gone through her personnel file hoping to learn more about her because she was such an enigma, a file the professor illicitly shared with another graduate student. The unauthorized sharing of the student's information as well unnecessarily accessing her file constituted a violation of the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The professor's actions didn't just have cultural implications, but if not contained the matter could have escalated into a legal battle.

This educator who was in her first year as tenure-track professor, repeatedly told the student, "many people in the department," as she said, do not know how to approach you because you are so private. The professor went as far as calling the student "different" and implied that her behavior was due to a personality flaw, completely refusing to examine the situation from a cultural perspective. Being the only African-American instructor and graduate student at a Midwestern university's main campus, among more than 20 faculty members and many students, this learner was confident that the conflict was due to cultural differences. This professor, who had designated herself spokesperson for the department, said the student could not attribute her behavior to her cultural background because it was not necessarily consistent with that of other African Americans. Knowing her own cultural upbringing far better than this Caucasian-American woman, the student respectfully disagreed with her on the grounds that the research is contrary to her assertions. Dace (1994) cited Kochman, 1981, as saying:

Blacks resist information-seeking probes not simply for reasons of etiquette but because, as a minority group, they have been and continue to be vulnerable to the way such information might be interpreted and used....Were blacks-as well as other socially vulnerable populations-better able to influence or control the way information about them is officially interpreted and used, this would not be the case (p. 25).

Affirming the findings of Dace and Kochman, Corsini and Fogliasso (1997) added:

African-Americans both control information concerning subjects they consider personal, and are circumspect when inquiring about information that may be considered personal to others (p. 41).

Dace (1994) concluded that African Americans do not self-disclose because the information is either misinterpreted or their experiences are denied or diminished by people of the dominant culture. By denied, Dace means members of the dominate culture question the veracity of the stories conveyed by non-dominant group members or they diminish the importance of them by telling stories that they view as being worse. When African Americans sense that others are only partially committed to listening and understanding, they stop self-disclosing and are hesitant to attempt it again with these same individuals in the future. Dace specifically reported that Caucasian Americans expect African Americans to trust

11 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/mastering-diversity-and-gaining-a-competitive-advantage-on-university-campuses/270831

Related Content

Creativity in the Schools: Educational Changes Lately?
Daniel Fasko (2017). *Exploring the Benefits of Creativity in Education, Media, and the Arts (pp. 92-116).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/creativity-in-the-schools/157852

MoBip Project: To Raise Awareness about Bipolar Disorder through an 3D Pop-Up Book
Hakan Altinpullukand Gulsun Eby (2016). *Psychology and Mental Health: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 493-514).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/mobip-project/153412

Culturally Affirming Approaches for School Counselors Working With Latinx Students
Albrina M. Burgerand Claudia Calder (2022). *Developing, Delivering, and Sustaining School Counseling Practices Through a Culturally Affirming Lens (pp. 128-146).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/culturally-affirming-approaches-for-school-counselors-working-with-latinx-students/302433

Creativity and Giftedness: A Study of Attitudes
Vaitsa Giannouli (2017). *Exploring the Benefits of Creativity in Education, Media, and the Arts (pp. 179-197).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/creativity-and-giftedness/157856

Media Salience and Mass Murder: Examining Frame Changing Across Mass Shooter Events, 2000-2012
Jaclyn Schildkrautand Glenn W. Muschert (2019). *Assessing and Averting the Prevalence of Mass Violence (pp. 129-153).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/media-salience-and-mass-murder/212229