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The Responsibilities of White Male Faculty

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Since appearance is critical to my comments, I should make mine explicit. I'm a tall 54-year old white man with silver hair. Were I to follow my students' lead and check my genetic ancestry, it would likely reveal some overwhelming percentage from "northwestern Europe." In short, I look like an old Dutchman.

I have taught at a regional state university since 1993. I've witnessed the changes in the field of French history and the move from a Western Civilization/Humanities requirement to a World History/Humanities class that I helped to design. Our collective research questions and resultant course content have evolved considerably since I entered the profession. I've excitedly followed those changes, and I strongly believe that curricular changes in the direction of global history have opened up more opportunities in class to consider racism. Like others, I seize the chance.

However after years of conversations with colleagues of color, both on my campus and elsewhere, I am convinced that I have had an easy ride. As a senior colleague and former chair, I have been reviewing colleagues' student evaluations for twenty years now, and I continue to be amazed by how often my female colleagues and colleagues of color are accused of being "biased" or "obsessed" with issues of race or gender inequality. It is not a criticism that I receive, despite the fact that I purposely provoke students into considering issues of past and contemporary inequality. My department has a peer review system of colleagues at all ranks, so I am sure that our course contents are comparable and that I push students every bit as much.

In short, I think I benefit from a white male privilege of presumed objectivity in the eyes of some students. I have long figured that when I commented on racism in the past that (white male) students either agreed or disagreed silently but would accept the comment from someone who looked like their father (students of color and most women seemed to be nodding or commenting). I have repeatedly learned that my students of color are more than willing to talk about race while my white students generally clam up. My colleagues of color cannot push the students as hard without reaction, so it is my job to push harder because I can do so without generally being criticized as "biased." Unlike colleagues of color, I never face accusations about focusing "too much" on black history or Latinx history—even when I teach exactly what my colleagues teach.

I have not been an activist. I have done too little to root out the structural racism of the contemporary American academy. I have some guilt about simply working on another book, teaching another new class, and doing the requisite service. I often get the feeling that students of

color in my huge surveys don't have high expectations when they see me on the first day of class. I do my best to surprise them. By contrast, my colleagues of color find themselves recruited by students as student group advisers, teachers of "un-classes," and as important mentors—with the incredible time expenditure those commitments demand. This fact needs to be a significant part of all discussions about equity and diversity in faculty hiring, tenure, and promotion. As I like to say in these discussions, "no student has ever come into my office, sat down, and expressed relief that there is someone on campus who understands."

Until now. My role seems to be changing. In the past year, I have had more than a dozen white male students come to seek seemingly peculiar advice. They sense that I seem comfortable talking honestly and openly about racial and sexual injustice, informally and formally, and they want to learn how to do the same. Few of these young men come from Akron or Cleveland. They usually come from the largely white suburbs and rural counties. My sense is that they have had comparatively little experience interacting with anyone of color or discussing racism seriously.

I am not sure why they are appearing now. Perhaps in reaction to the U.S. president, white male students feel the need to point out to others that they are not part of the problem, even if they are unsure of how to be part of the solution. Perhaps they are simply a subset of this generation of students—whom I find as a group more open, more tolerant, less racist, less sexist, and less homophobic than any I have taught. They give me hope for the future in these troubling times. While the global turn of my large history/Humanities survey is surely a factor in fostering discussion, the course has been around for a decade, and it is only now that I am noticing a change among these students.

I hope that one reason is the time I am spending with students outside of class. When I returned from sabbatical in the fall 2017, I started holding my office hours in the Starbucks in the Student Union. I had assigned a global history of rubber that I authored, and I wanted to spend the royalties on the students enrolled in the class (all 400 of them if possible). So I offered any students who came to my office hours coffee, tea, or a snack. I had more students in my office hours in one semester than I have had during the entirety of my teaching career, and a more diverse lot of them too (all backgrounds, gender, and ages). Some days, there were eight of us; other days, there was just me and one student. I did not have a single office hour without a student all semester. We talked about the lectures and discussions, about the readings, and especially about contemporary issues. It was informal.

I wonder if such informal conversations about social justice in the past and present, including the kind of free-floating, unguarded conversations that I would normally have with colleagues or graduate students, made these general education students—including the white, male students—more willing to approach me individually for advice. They seem to understand that they need to become more comfortable talking about issues of social justice and getting outside what had been their comfort zone. My response varies by student, but it inevitably includes the need to open up around students of color. I assure students that they will indeed say things that could be insensitive or clueless, as they are finding their way. Fellow students and new friends will likely attempt to correct them. But if they are open, they'll work at getting the education that college is supposed to be about.

“Anecdotal” evidence is not in vogue in educational assessment circles, but in the end, we educate one person at a time. Even though I teach at a university and not a small college, I have come to see the importance of spending time with individual students and small groups if I want to help them grow. My colleagues of color have been doing this—a lot of this—for a long time. It is my responsibility too.

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