

Faculty Forum: Is Diversity Relevant to What I Teach?

Diversity Digest

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Business

Bentley College, Waltham, Mass.

Marcy Crary

Our team-taught elective, "Managing Diversity in the Workplace," focuses on the opportunities and challenges of a diverse workplace and the knowledge and skills required for working productively with differences. We use simulations, role-plays, case-studies, and exercises to explore the individual, group, and organizational dynamics in which we all play a role.

Students do a "cultural immersion" paper for which they are asked to visit a place in which they are in the minority and write about their experience. They also interview two managers (one the same race and gender as the student and the other a different race and/or gender) about their personal experiences with diversity and their companies' strategies for creating more inclusive and productive work environments.

Mathematics

Brookdale Community College, Lincroft, N.J.

Teresa Healy, Elaine Klett, Barbara Tozzi, Linda Wang

Many courses in our mathematics department have strong problem-solving components where students use mathematical skills and concepts while working with real-world data. This provides an opportunity for introducing issues of diversity. For example, students in our statistics course compare and contrast data on diverse population groups. These students might also perform Chi Square Tests of Independence on data relating types of professional jobs held at colleges to ethnic groups. Students in basic math courses analyze charts and graphs relating race and age to health and other social issues.

Problems like these are incorporated into homework assignments, classroom lab projects, or tests. Instructors might provide the sources of data or students themselves might be responsible for finding data. These activities allow students to recognize the value of mathematics beyond the classroom. It moves the subject matter beyond pure theory to real-world applications that keep students of all backgrounds engaged in their learning.

Biology

SUNY–Albany, Albany, N.Y.

Bonnie Spanier

Evidence reveals that the sex, cultural heritage, class, and sexual orientation of the majority of scientists have influenced the priorities chosen for research--and even the models and paradigms chosen to explain biological phenomena (including evolution, animal behavior, human biology, sexuality, and health). In biology, students need to understand that "race" is not a biological or fixed category. Stephen Jay Gould's *Mismeasure of Man* or Ruth Hubbard's *The Politics of Women's Biology*, for instance, offer evidence of the social, political, and economic nature of the categories.

One exercise about the complex interplay of biology and culture is to ask students to write about the ways that being a student affects their biology. Student life affects stress, weight, body shape and strength, menstrual cycles, susceptibility to illness, pregnancy, etc. In addition, students can discuss how sexism, racism, and homophobia affect their physical and mental well-being.

Engineering

Texas A&M, College Station, Tex.

Karen Watson

In a digital system course, we emphasize the importance of teamwork for design projects. Teams are given a problem that they work together to solve. Teams are then rated in categories such as: (1) number of useful ideas generated; (2) novelty level of ideas; (3) most logical next improvement for the design; and (4) the best ideas to gain significant acceptance by customers. A few teams always show a significantly higher ranking. The class explores why these teams are so successful.

The high-performance teams most often include diversity of social and life experiences, educational paths, and cultural backgrounds. The conclusion of most students during this kind of exercise is that they hope to be hired by a company with a great diversity of engineers.

Communication Tips

Classes in which students are applying their skills in unusual ways--by analyzing local demographic data or exploring how workforce diversity benefits a local company--can be the focus of engaging feature stories that subtly convey the value of diversity education.

If you teach such a class, consider asking a features editor or a television producer who specializes in features to consider a story. Local National Public Radio affiliates, too, are often interested in features of this sort.
