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Cultural Diversity in the College Classroom

College classrooms have never been more diverse. Yet too many students feel isolated and express concern that their experience is marginalized or their viewpoints are trivialized.

Here you can find out how to make your classroom a more inclusive learning environment by learning the diversity do's and don't's.

Don't...

1. Assume that:

a. Students who are members of a particular group

- are experts on issues related to that group
- are comfortable serving as representatives and sources of information about that group
- share a common outlook.

b. All forms of diversity are visible.

Many forms of diversity, such as sexual orientation or religious affiliation, are not.

2. Single out students as spokespersons for a particular group or viewpoint.

3. Assume that all students share common cultural or historical reference points.

4. Makes sweeping generalizations about any cultural group.

5. Equate student silence with satisfaction with your class.

A student might be unhappy with the absence of alternate perspectives or inaccurate or incomplete information and not say anything. It's important to monitor or probe their attitudes.

Do...

1. Be acutely sensitive to terminology and to matters of importance to your students.

There is no reason to offend students or to be insensitive to their deeply held beliefs.

2. Be aware of potentially problematic assumptions.

We are all susceptible to bias. And if we are not self-conscious, we can assume that all members of the class share certain common assumptions about what is normal or what is good or bad.

3. Anticipate potentially "hot" topics.

4. Avoid crude binaries.

Binaries discourage students from recognizing complexity and nuance.

5. Recognize your own biases and preconceptions.

Do you assume that athletes are satisfied with lower grades? That poor writers are unintelligent? That students from historically under-represented groups need to be protected? That students from particular groups can only relate to examples drawn from their own racial, ethnic, or other group? Assumptions like these discourage instructors from giving all students an equal opportunity to learn.

6. Recognize that students have very different styles of self-presentation and argumentation.

Some students are aggressively argumentative. Some like to bring their own personal experience into discussions. Others are more reticent or more indirect in their modes of expression. Make it clear that you want all students to participate in discussion and that civility requires everyone to be sensitive to multiple modes of self-presentation.

7. Be aware of your classroom's dynamics.

Do certain students, perhaps unconsciously, dominate discussion or badger or interrupt others? Do you respond differently to students depending on some facet of their identity, for example, their gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation? It is essential that you treat students even-handedly and convey the same level of confidence in the abilities of everyone in your class.