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Students' Perceptions of Instructors' Identities: Effects and Interventions

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ABSTRACT:
The impact of perceived identity upon learning is a crucial area of scholarly focus. Most studies in this area center around students’ identities; however, this study focuses on instructor identity. This study investigates the effects of students' perceptions of instructors' race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality on teacher performance evaluations. It also assesses faculty cognizance of the effects of student bias in the classroom. This study was conducted as part of an on-going interest in the recruitment and retention of faculty from "minority" populations. It is believed that the results will contribute to an increased understanding of the ways instructor success, tenure, and promotion can be negatively affected by student bias.

KEYWORDS: Student perceptions
Race/Ethnicity/Sexuality/Gender
Teacher evaluations
Teaching and learning
Our Study

This study resulted from the authors’ interest in how students’ perceptions of faculty identity (primarily race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and academic rank) influence students’ learning and instructors’ classroom experiences. For this article, we focused on courses that fulfill the “cultural diversity” general education requirements at our university. The three courses that most students in the College of Arts and Sciences take to fulfill this requirement are ACS 250 Cultural Pluralism in the U.S., ETHN 101 Introduction to Ethnic Studies, and WS 200 Introduction to Women’s Studies. Combined, these courses serve approximately 1400 students each semester.

Our study is comprised of a survey completed by instructors who teach the Cultural Diversity courses and our interpretation of the students’ evaluations of these instructors. The three units (WS, ETHN, ACS) do not use the same evaluation forms. Therefore, our analytical method focused primarily on the qualitative data in the surveys and the evaluations, although we do have preliminary information about quantitative data. While reading each instructor’s survey along with her/his evaluations (that instructor’s data set), we looked for internal consistencies and inconsistencies. We then noted similarities and differences across the data sets and noted consistencies when cross-referenced with instructors’ identity markers.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The Sample Population: All individuals who taught cultural diversity general education courses during fall semester 2002 and spring semester 2003 were selected to be in the target population. This group consisted of 35 members of whom 18 agreed to participate in this study, a return rate of 51%. Most of the participants were White, female, heterosexual, full-time
employees who had worked at the institution for a fairly short period of time as instructors or graduate student instructors (See Tables 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8). Although the overwhelming majority of the respondents were US citizens, some came from other countries (See Table 5). In addition, the ages of the respondents were fairly evenly distributed across six age ranges (See Table 3).

**Race:** The question of credibility is a recurrent theme throughout the participant responses when analyzed according to race. The sample consisted of Blacks, Whites, and Asian Americans. While similarities between answers provided by Blacks and Asian American may have been expected since both are racial minorities, this is not the case. Often Asian American responses stand in contrast to answers from both Blacks and Whites. This supports others’ observations and experiences that there are multiple experiences based on race.

Students may have granted their instructors of color more credibility regarding the subject matter due to a combination of personal experiences and academic research. This is suggested by the response given by Black instructors, an equal number of whom state that they SD, A, or N that their race negatively affects relations with White students, while most Black instructors indicated SD, D, or N that their race negatively affected interactions with students of color.

Interestingly, Whites and Blacks exhibited a range of opinions when asked about the effects of race, gender, and sexuality. Responses reflect intersections of privilege and oppression depending upon which traits seem to be more salient for participants. For example, race does not seem to be a particularly significant issue for Blacks, according to their answers. However, this overlooks the fact that most of the Black respondents were also heterosexual males. Therefore, race may not be as salient an issue as might be expected because of male, heterosexual privilege.
The interplay of race, gender, and sexuality with privilege and credibility seems to run throughout the survey. Both Whites and Blacks responded across the range on all survey questions. By comparison, Asian American instructors’ responses tended to agree that race did negatively affect instructor-student relations.

Finally, although most instructors stated that they had not experienced violent or extreme student behavior during their course, almost half of the White participants and all of the Asian American participants strongly agreed or agreed that they had.

**Gender and Sexuality:** These categories demonstrated identical patterns: with respect to how their gender and their sexuality affected interactions with students, most respondents who identified as lesbian/bi-sexual did not believe that they were a negative influence. There were some variations in the strength of this perception. In relationships where the instructor and student were of the same race or gender, most of the instructors indicated that they strongly disagreed. Thus, there seems to be some awareness of the potential influence of race. However, when the race or gender was different, most instructors only disagreed.

Despite the parallels, sexuality did show some exceptions to the pattern. Most instructors indicated that they only disagreed that their sexuality influenced relations with both heterosexual and lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, queer students.ii

This suggests that instructors and students who are LGBTQ or LBTI have a stronger identification and bond with each other due to their shared experiences and oppression. But this assumes that both the students and instructor are aware of each other’s sexual orientation, which may not necessarily be the case—many people who are LGBTQ have not come out of the closet.

Half of the respondents who identified as lesbian/bisexual agreed that they had experienced violent or extreme student behavior during their course while the other half strongly
disagreed, but all of the respondents in this category strongly agreed or agreed that they had witnessed acts of racism, sexism, and heterosexism in their classroom.

**Age:** Issues of rank, respect, authority, and scholarship do not seem to have a significant negative impact on instructor-student relationships. Most participants answered that they believed students were respectful of them, viewed them as credible scholars and authority figures, and were not affected by their rank (Full professor/Associate/Assistant, full/part-time instructor, graduate student instructor).

Most of the instructors aged 45 and older—predominantly Black and male—reported similar findings, providing additional evidence of how race, gender, age, credibility, and privilege intersect. The potentially negative effects due to race are altered by gender and age.

The tendency of most respondents across all age ranges was to SD or D that their race, gender, or sexuality negatively impacted relations with students. However, participants were more varied in their responses concerning male students. While a majority of the individuals were SD or D that their gender negatively affected their relationships with male students, nearly as many participants answered that they were SA, A or N on the same question—respondents’ answers fell into each category when queried about male students. This did not occur for any of the other student-instructor relationships defined by race, gender, or sexuality.

Interestingly, most of the respondents indicated SD or D that they had experienced violent or extreme student behavior during their course, consistent with other data analyzed by race and sexuality on this same survey question. Moreover, most of the instructors surveyed SA or A that they had witnessed racist, sexist, or heterosexist behavior in their classes.

**Identity Attribution**
After reading all the data sets, we worked out a paradigm for how the relationship between the student and the instructor is negotiated and called it “The Identity Attribution Model.” In her book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*, Kate Bornstein (1995) draws on the work of Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1978) to describe the various ways gender identity is constructed in the U.S. In Bornstein’s description, gender construction is a multi-layered process involving gender assignment (determined within the power structures of cultural institutions, such as medicine and education), gender identity (self-defined), gender roles (actions and traits associated with a given gender identity as defined by culture), and gender attribution. Bornstein defines “attribution” as taking place on an interpersonal level: “we look at somebody and say, ‘that’s a man,’ or ‘that’s a woman’” (p. 26). She notes that while attribution takes place on an interpersonal level, it manifests itself both individually and culturally and inflects our communication, biology, socialization, myth system, and power structures. In our paradigm, we extend Bornstein’s analysis of “gender attribution” to account for multiple aspects of identity and how those aspects intersect and interconnect. In our model, Identity Attribution names the determination of identity markers by those who interact with us, which happens both interpersonally and within power structures of institutions and systems. It is important to note that Bornstein does not assert (nor do we) that one has no control over this process; rather, Identity Attribution, while imposed from without, is based on a system of culturally-sanctioned cues that enjoy a particular hegemonic status. This means that, as my identity cues are being “read” and an identity is being attributed to me, I am participating in two ways: I am aware of these identity cues and making conscious choices regarding my participation with them (my short hair, for instance); and I am reading others’ identity cues and either attributing identity markers to them according to those cues, or consciously choosing not
to. As we have defined this model, “placement” names the student’s influence over this process and “positioning” names the instructor’s influence, and both are continuously negotiated through Identity Attribution. In our data sets, Identity Attribution is strongly influenced by cultural stereotypes, and we suspect that Identity Attribution is a process that can shift over time (although we have not yet collected data to confirm this), particularly if the attributing individual experiences exposure to people who are “different” from the self. In order to test this theory, we would need to do entrance and exit surveys of students, from which we could compare students’ attribution of instructor identity at the beginning of the term with those at the end.

Our model of Identity Attribution was defined by the data sets for this study, informed by theories of: cultural power and privilege; racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual oppression; and stereotyping. There are two primary steps to Identity Attribution: identity assignation, and essentialization.

**Identity Assignation**

The *identity assignation* step takes place at the moment of first impression. The perceiver (the student) assigns the perceived (the instructor) identity markers (race, class, gender, sexuality, age, etc.). Many of the instructors indicated that this happened almost immediately. For example, a white lesbian who describes her “demeanor” as “authoritative” and “safely masculinized” (because of her age, her low voice, and her appearance) posits that this masculinization “gives me a ‘credibility’ that is assigned . . . the minute I begin class on the first day.” An Asian American instructor concurs: “Being a woman of color teaching diversity classes, I am instantly perceived as pushing forward my personal opinion (angry minority) rather than an instructor teaching issues of race, class, gender, etc.” And an African American notes
that “many students . . . are not expecting a 30-something, full-figured, braid-wearing, African American woman teaching their college level course.”

More than one instructor mentioned the role that stereotypes play in identity assignation. For example, an African American heterosexual male wrote, “students tend to relate an instructor’s identity with the stereotypes . . . and competency with course materials. That is, if a student is taking a course in math and the instructor is Asian, then the student might assume a certain level of expertise. . .” This perception was shared by instructors of various identifications. One white, heterosexual female wrote that because she teaches Women’s Studies, “students assume I’m a lesbian and are surprised when they see me with my male partner.” However, another instructor wrote about her ability to turn this stereotyping on its head: “due to my fairly conventional ‘feminine’ appearance, heterosexual students both feel at ease with me and work in themselves to undo . . . stereotypes. Lesbian, gay, or transgendered students seem to feel more relaxed in my classroom, feeling they’re not alone.” And a Black, heterosexual male instructor summed up the impact stereotyping can have on students’ assignation of instructors’ identities in this way: “My sense is that in predominantly white communities, instructors of color . . . begin with some kind of deficit in the classroom. . . . Students . . . tend to be surprised when persons of color know their stuff. They tend to be disappointed when white professors don’t.”

**Essentialization:**

The surveys also suggest that, once an identity is assigned, students determine what the instructor can and will do, based on that identity. This determination, which we call “essentialization,” is shaped by what Jennifer Ho (2002) calls “the authority/authenticity paradox.” In “When the Political Is Personal: Life on the Multiethnic Margins,” Ho explains that
many students in her multiethnic literature courses grant her “automatic authority because of my authenticity as a racial minority.” At the same time, however, “some students discredit [that] authority” because her identity is perceived to increase her emotional investment in the material, which subverts her ability to be “objective” (67) We noted in our study that this essentialization seemed to be happening and that it tended to place instructors into two very broadly defined groups: credible, and biased. Essentialization into credibility describes the process where a student determines that an instructor is more credible because her/his experiences mesh with the subject matter; essentialization into bias describes the process in which a student decides that an instructor has an “agenda” and is biased because the instructor’s experiences mesh with the subject matter. One instructor wrote about the process of essentialization “sometimes the students learn . . . when they perceive me as an insider . . . but some prefer it when I’m ‘objective’ because I’m being ‘factual’ and not speaking from personal experience — as if the two were mutually exclusive.” One African American male instructor described how his students essentialized him as credible: “…based upon my ethnic background, especially when discussing the Black experience in the United States.” A student writing about a lesbian instructor who came out to her class said, “Personal experiences are helpful to understand the issue.” Many of the other students in this instructor’s class noted her “openness” as a positive attribute. And in classes where the instructor seldom used self-disclosure, students noted this absence in their evaluations, indicating they would have liked more.

Upon reading students evaluations of instructors, we did indeed find evidence that students were essentializing their instructors into credibility. One student, writing about a lesbian instructor who came out to her class, said, “Personal experiences are helpful to understand the issue.” And in classes in which the instructor apparently does not use self-
disclosure, students note this absence in their evaluations. Another student, writing about a white, heterosexual, female instructor noted, “the material in class would have been better received if the teacher could use personal experiences or relate to us through ‘stories.’” Students may innocently ask for such disclosures without being fully aware of the consequences for an instructor providing such personal information; although most of the lesbian and bisexual respondents noted that they do come out to their classes, not all did. On our campus (as well as on many others), coming out is not always safe. At the same time, one white, lesbian instructor did note that being able to choose when to come out to her students is a “privilege that I enjoy,” unlike instructors of color and in some instances women instructors, neither of whom have that choice.

While being granted credibility is not at all a bad thing—and we certainly do endorse the perspective that the voices of the marginalized are among our best tools for understanding and dismantling oppression—essentialization is not a process of empowerment or a tool for transformation. Rather, when members of dominant/majority groups essentialize people from subordinated groups into credibility about issues of oppression, those dominant/majority members may well be abandoning their own responsibility for understanding and dismantling oppression and privilege. “I can’t really speak with authority about racism because I am a white person” is just a more sophisticated version of “racism is the problem of people of color.” If we are going to be effective at guiding our students through the learning processes that are the goals of diversity classes, then we all must challenge students not to grant authority to anyone on the slippery basis of identity, but rather on the solid basis of information, knowledge, and credible argumentation; our students who are members of dominant/majority groups must work to create
their own credibility based on these same criteria, and not on the basis of their dominant/majority status.

While some instructors described being essentialized into credibility, others described how their students would essentialize them as biased. For example, an African American heterosexual female instructor noted, “When I discuss issues of inequality based on race, class, gender, and sexuality, sometimes students believe that I’m talking about my personal issues and therefore I’m bias[ed] . . . they think it’s my opinion and not factual information.” And an African American heterosexual male instructor wrote that his students often hear bias, even when he might not be speaking about race. He noted that students often “comment that all my examples or illustrations used to explain a point are ‘black’ or ‘black & white.’ This is . . . the students’. . . re-interpretation of my own experience. . . . How else can I explain my experiences—whether race is mentioned or not—but through my own eyes.” An Asian American heterosexual female instructor recounted a similar incident of re-interpretation. She had asked a student to elaborate on the student’s point and asked “why did you think that?” The instructor explained that the student said,

You just said “white people.” I said “no, I never said why do ‘white people’ think that. I said why do you think that.” The student said “oh” and realized that she was automatically thinking everything in terms of “instructor (representing all people of color)” vs. “students (white people).”

This essentialization into bias was also prominent among evaluations of white female heterosexual instructors who were often essentialized as biased against males or as “too feminist,” as we see in the following two examples: an instructor who was not teaching in Women’s Studies was described by students as “biased and bitter” and “was disrespectful, rude . . . taught with a feminist tone. Tried to teach opinions sometimes rather than fact”; and of another who was teaching in Women’s Studies “needs to stop being male bashing 101.” One
instructor noted how essentialization into bias, like essentialization into credibility, could lead to a lack of responsibility for the material on the part of the students. She wrote that labels can give students a “safe and easy ‘out’” making it more comfortable for them to “discount me as a ‘man-hater’ than to grapple with complexities that are part of their life as a result of living in a patriarchal society.”

**Student Resistance**

As we analyze these surveys and evaluations along with our own experiences as teachers and students, we have also become aware that the process of Identity Attribution plays an important role in incidents of student resistance in diversity courses. In her article “Interrupting Patriarchy: Politics, Resistance, and Transformation in the Feminist Classroom,” Magda Lewis (1990) describes the model of student resistance that has emerged out of critical pedagogy theory. In this model, which is based on studies of working class students’ experiences with mainstream education, “student resistance to the experiences of institutionalized education is forged from the contradictions [students] perceive between the dominant discourse of school knowledge on the one hand and their own lived experiences of subordination and violation on the other” (p. 471). In our study of students’ responses to diversity education we have found that diversity classes inspire incidents of student resistance that seem to be the exact opposite of those described in critical pedagogy scholarship. According to our survey (and our own experiences), student resistance often correlates to their membership in culturally dominant identity groups and/or to students’ assignation of instructors to membership in culturally subordinated identity groups. (It is important to note here that our student evaluation forms collect no demographic data; therefore, our analysis of students’ identity group membership is based completely on data collected from the instructors’ surveys. At the same time, it may be relevant to note that the
student population at BGSU is overwhelmingly white, and most of us are surprised if we find that we have more than one student of color at a time in a class.) In other words, we often encounter the most resistance from students who are male, white, and usually heterosexual. This does not mean that all white, heterosexual, male students behave in resistant ways (far from it!), nor does it mean that we never encounter resistance from students of color, from women, or from LGBTI students. Still, the patterns reveal that privilege and resistance often correlate.

In those instances, it seems that the critical pedagogy model of student resistance might not be helpful. After all, there is a world of difference between a marginalized student’s resistance to mainstream methods and content and a culturally privileged student’s resistance to the discourses of diversity education. Or is there? When we listen to the statements made by resistant students (and when we read statements from students’ evaluations of instructors), we see an interesting trend. A white female student from an affluent suburb says angrily, “you keep talking about white privilege, but I don’t feel privileged”; white students critique Affirmative Action, calling it “reverse discrimination,” and male students complain that Women’s Studies classes ignore men or bash them. In students’ evaluations, we have noticed that if they mention race, either explicitly (“…her teaching focuses were too much on the African American race…”) or implicitly (“Everything we talked about felt like it was against me. The stuff we learned was how whites are bad”), it is almost always in the evaluation of an instructor of color. Only two white instructors’ data sets revealed any comments about race: in one, a student evaluation comment suggested “more cross-cultural content,” and in the other, an instructor noted that students have accused her of “hating white people.” Similarly, women instructors inspired more comments about sexism or gender bias, and out lesbian instructors inspired more comments about heterosexism or sexuality bias. For instance, one student wrote “Women’s Studies =
Homosexual Studies”; other overt references to sexuality occurred in the evaluation of lesbian instructors or of female heterosexual instructors whose gender identity is not easily stereotyped as “feminine” based on their appearance. In all these examples, we see a tendency for inverted readings of cultural power reinforced by backlash discourse (men are victimized by feminism’s critique of male violence against women; white people are discriminated against by affirmative processes to make educational opportunities more equitable; heterosexual marriage must be “defended” from the homosexual threat to the family; etc.).

We posit that resistant white/male/heterosexual/mainstream students respond to diversity courses by inverting the dominant/subordinate paradigm: the white student perceives him/herself to be subordinated by the discourse of diversity and resists it as if she/he were the marginalized party. Thus, a model of resistance that appears to be opposite of that offered by critical pedagogy theory is revealed to be merely an inversion of it. Interestingly enough, if we permit ourselves to read the statements in students’ evaluations from within this paradigm, we can see that the closer the instructor of a diversity class is to the “idealized” faculty identity (i.e., “white, male, heterosexual, and fifty” [from an instructor survey]), the less likely that instructor is to inspire resistant statements on evaluations. And, conversely, the further the instructor is from that idealized faculty identity, the more intense and abusive the resistance can become.

It is very important to note that we are not claiming universality in this study. There was a wide variety of student responses, and often the same instructor who inspired incredibly negative and abusive statements from some students would also inspire glowing responses from other students. Only one instructor (a young white heterosexual female) received very negative student evaluations across the board: students complained that she was disorganized, was not open to hearing others’ opinions, did not prepare them adequately for graded assignments, etc.
In her case, we are fairly certain the primary problem was a lack of teaching skills and that her identity was not the primary shaping force. Still, it is notable that a few students associated her ineffectiveness in the classroom with her “feminism”—another example of the essentialization of identity. So when we do locate a correlation between an instructor’s Identity Attribution and students’ responses to the instructor’s teaching, we are not claiming a simple causal relationship. Rather, we suspect that students’ perceptions of instructors’ identities are only one factor in this complex relationship.

The causality that we do find in the students’ evaluations of an instructor is between each instructor’s Identity Attribution and references to identity politics. Although five student evaluations of white instructors mentioned racial politics, these instances all qualify as “constructive criticism”: “I thought a bit more emphasis on the different cultures would be nice”; and “I also wish that the cross cultural section included more countries than the U.S. and 3rd world nations.” In contrast, our data sets included thirty-two references to identity politics that followed a pattern in which instructors who were persons of color explicitly or implicitly were accused of racism, female instructors were accused of sexism, and lesbian/bisexual instructors were accused of bias against heterosexuals. For example, one heterosexual African American female instructor was referred to as “uptight and above all others,” and as “‘run[ning]’ the classroom.” Similarly, a student of a white, bisexual female instructor wrote that “[she] feels very strongly about women’s issues, obviously, but I feel that her opinion sometimes is too strong & overpowering.” Clearly, these students are describing feelings of disempowerment which have been inspired by having dominant-group experiences decentralized in the diversity classroom, an inversion of the typical power dynamics experienced by most of our students in daily life.
In his article, “Moonwalking Technoshamans and the Shifting Margin: Decentering the Colonial Classroom,” Louis Owens (2002) describes similar responses by white students in a Native American Novel course he taught. He describes this class as more diverse in composition than most of his classes, with nearly one-third of the students identifying as Native. While the Native students blossomed in a learning environment in which the topic was pertinent to their self-identification and they were numerically stronger than usual, the white students responded as if they were in crisis. Owens writes,

For the first time in their lives they felt marginalized, disenfranchised, deprivileged. . . . Faced with something like what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has termed the “multiplication of the margins” and the “coming to voice” of the “other,” they were experiencing what postcolonial critics have called a “deterritorialization” of the knowledge that defined their cultural and social selves. . . . The tables had been turned and the experience was painful. (258)

Owens notes that his strategy for dealing with this “political and cultural crisis” was to address it overtly in the classroom. He explained to the class that what the white students were experiencing was “the kind of experience those on the margins of American society experienced every day in not just every classroom but every social situation,” and he suggested to the white students that they take advantage of this “rare opportunity to experience the Other’s experience” (p. 259). Although Owens admits that there was still tension in the classroom, he also notes that this class became “the finest teaching experience I have had in my career” (p. 259). Owens’ story suggests that perhaps instructors of diversity courses might benefit from foregrounding the feelings that students from dominant groups experience in our classes and challenging all our students to see the classroom as a microcosm of social relationships.
However, there is another, less-obvious lesson to be found in Owens’ highlighting the racial/ethnic diversity of this amazing class: he attributes the dynamics of the class to that diversity. It might be said that he experienced a rare situation in which his own marginalized identity was granted stronger authority by the presence of corroborating perspectives in the classroom. On campuses such as our own, where diversity among both students and faculty is still a much-discussed goal but far from being achieved; where diversity courses are required of students but not legitimated to them (because they are usually taught by graduate student instructors and part- and full-time instructors); where the knowledge bases developed in the one required diversity course are often not reinforced—even sometimes derogated—in the students’ other courses, students’ perceptions of faculty identity are still largely formed within systems of stereotyping and privilege. As Maureen Reddy (2002) writes in her essay, “Smashing the Rules of Racial Standing,” “White professors face fewer direct challenges than do professors of color” and “[t]hat lower level of hostility and challenge translates into a classroom environment in which it is easier for . . . students to feel confident in the professor’s ability to maintain the class’s respectful attention.” Further, Reddy states that

[t]he presumption of authority attending on whiteness . . . also insures that white professors’ course evaluations will be superior to those of professors of color in similar courses, which in turn leads to an easier time getting tenure, promotions, and the many perks doled out by institutions such as released time for research, merit pay, and the like. (54)

Among our surveyed instructor population, made up primarily of graduate student teachers and non-tenure track instructors, the consequences of teaching diversity classes may well be a tougher time finishing degree requirements and getting tenure-track jobs. The attendant essentialization of credibility (which in some ways derogates the instructor’s knowledge by
locating its source in identity rather than in expertise and training), accusations of bias and resistant behaviors all take their toll in one’s resources. Reddy challenges us to recognize the role that privilege and oppression play in students’ evaluations of instructors and in the hierarchy of the academy.

**Conclusion: What can be done?**

In our survey we asked instructors to address the issue of students’ perceptions of instructors’ identities and the negative impact of those perceptions on learning by suggesting ways these issues could be addressed by university communities. They suggested many good strategies and tactics that instructors can build into their pedagogical practices to counter the effects of students’ perceptions of faculty identity. One white, lesbian graduate teaching assistant (GTA) wrote, “I think it’s important to address the topics head-on, early in the term. For example, on the first day of my Intro to WS class … I asked how many students held the stereotype of a feminist as a short-haired, hairy-legged, Birkenstock-wearing lesbian who hated men [. . .] all hands went up & we laughed; then we discussed the source of the stereotype & unpacked it all semester.” Other instructors expressed frustration at the lack of power some experience in the classroom and indicated that this is a larger problem than simply pedagogical. One African American heterosexual female GTA called for a systemic examination of these problems beginning with an assessment (citing this survey as an example) of the classroom experience; also forums, small talk-sessions where teachers could share the effects of “students’ negative perceptions”; and informal departmental events such as lunches where teachers and students could talk outside the classroom environment in an effort to alleviate the students’ negative perceptions. A white, heterosexual, female Canadian GTA noted that addressing these problems “should be considered a part of” faculty responsibility, in that grad students need more
back-up support from their mentors in disputes with students, thus reinforcing the GTA’s authority, not undermining it. These suggestions indicate that this problem is systemic and institutional and therefore in need of a systemic and institutionalized response.

Because of this, it is more revealing to look at the instructors’ responses to the following question: “What can administrators do, individually and/or collectively, to counteract any negative effects of students’ perceptions of their teachers’ identities on learning in the classroom?” Some focused on the ways individual administrators could set examples and function as role models for change. One white, heterosexual female instructor wrote, “I think administrators also can challenge students, faculty and staff to recognize the impact…” while a white, lesbian, graduate student instructor noted that “Administrators [could] be overtly, regularly, & loudly supportive of the various kinds of people that exist on university campuses.” Another instructor, who identified as white and lesbian/bisexual, agreed, noting that administrators might be in need of some “good old-fashioned consciousness-raising;” that racism and sexism are so pervasive in our culture that to deny either in oneself is like saying “I breathe … the air … [but] I don’t inhale!” “Acknowledging the presence of it is the first step.”

But the majority of respondents focused on the ways administrators need to address these problems systemically and institutionally. A male heterosexual Ghanaian instructor wrote, “Administrators need to be more proactive in addressing this issue. Usually they tend to address the issue only when there is a crisis.” Several instructors noted the need for administration to support those who teach general education courses. A white, non-Hispanic heterosexual female GTA wrote that administrators should “make sure students understand why [general ed] classes are required” and a heterosexual African American male GTA wrote, “More value needs to be placed on graduate teaching. That is, time and credit should be given to graduate students who
teach so that they can devote the necessary time and energy to course prep and student contact.”

Others indicated that the problem exceeds the bounds of general education. An Asian American heterosexual female instructor thinks that “…the larger problem is the compartmentalization of diversity classes,” and suggested that “the issues of race, class, gender, etc. should be taught in all classes.” Another instructor, who is white, heterosexual and female, agreed with the need to value diversity in a larger scope. She wrote that administrators should “stop giving lip service” to diversity and instead support the departments and programs that are actually focused on the issue. She added that the definition of diversity needs to be widened—that “diversity means more than retention of students of color and/or hiring faculty of color—and our Diversity Initiatives and Codes of Conduct, Mission statements, etc. should state this.”

Several respondents called on administrators to play a strong leadership role in improving teacher-student relations. One instructor, a heterosexual African American female GTA, explained that administrators should not simply accept the status quo—that complaints and concerns from teachers regarding negative situations between them and their students need to be investigated. She also feels there is a need for administrators to explore how diversity classes affect students, perhaps polling them before and after the course.

One instructor, who identified as a Caucasian lesbian, wrote extensively and eloquently about the cultural environment that helps shape students’ responses and reactions. She noted the hypocrisy of expecting students to expand their consciousnesses in an environment in which oppression is still practiced—and tolerated—on an institutional level. Her response bears quoting in full:

“Thanks so much for asking this question. The most productive action that administrators can take is to begin to signal their respect for all teachers regardless of any individual teacher’s institutional or personal status. That is to say, administrators should enact university policies which: make graduate
students’ stipends a living wage with all of the benefits that should accompany a living wage (health care, etc.); refuse to exploit part-time faculty (offer these teachers health care benefits and other tangible evidence that they are valued); offer domestic partner benefits to all employees regardless of the couple’s legally-recognized marital status; do not qualify what constitutes “equality” – in the University’s non-discrimination policy there is an asterisk next to “sexual orientation” (the asterisk directs readers to a note which indicates that some groups are, in fact, allowed to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation); talk about an Orwellian “All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others”!; demand that all agencies (government and private) which participate in the life of the university abide by a real non-discrimination policy — if that means booting ROTC off this campus because of their discriminatory practices which reinforce compulsory heterosexuality, then so be it. These details matter. Students can see which constituencies this university values and which constituencies this university exploits. Why should students treat teachers any differently than the university does?”

Obviously, administration should work on addressing the problems that accompany the requirement of these courses from the faculty and staff perspective. We are convinced that the influence of students’ attributions of instructors’ identities play a primary role in students’ evaluations of instructors. Other scholars (e.g. Bachen, McLoughlin, and Garcia, 1999; Feldman, 1993; Kierstead, D’Agostino, Dill, 1988; Cooper, Stewart, and Gudykunst, 1982; Bennett, 1982) have been examining this for over two decades and their findings have yet to be incorporated into college and university retention policies and practices. What we are saying is not news to faculty of color, women faculty, or LGBTQ faculty. In a 2002 article in Black Issues in Higher Education, an African American female professor says “When I try to take control of my classes, I get student evaluations that say ‘I’m mean,’ ‘I’m intimidating,’ ‘I make them uncomfortable,’ ‘I force my opinions on them’” (Hamilton, 2002, 32). Bonnie TuSmith explains, “Traditional methods in pedagogy and our evaluation processes have not caught up with the reality of college classrooms today. And this is affecting people’s lives—their merit raises, promotions, tenure. Something has to be done” (36).
While instructors are doing the work of educating students to celebrate diversity rather than to fear it, administrators should be working to support the endeavors of these instructors. A good beginning would be to set up meetings with the faculty and staff who teach these courses in order to identify the teaching problems related to students’ perceptions of faculty identity. Once the problems are identified, administration must commit to address them immediately.

More specifically, administrators should do the following:

1. Educate themselves about bias in student evaluations of faculty.
2. Train deans, department heads and faculty to recognize the difference between students’ critiques of, and biases against, faculty.
3. Institute procedures for effective peer evaluation of faculty teaching.
4. Provide alternative methods for determining merit, tenure, and promotion when bias is evident in student evaluations of a faculty member.

Generally, the academy has accepted the importance of diversity education. Most institutions are offering classes that are designed to increase students’ awareness of the world in which they live. We have honed the curriculum without strong institutional and administrative support for the people delivering that curriculum. Bonnie TuSmith (2002) calls these instructors “frontline teachers.” People at the frontlines in the war against inequality need someone at their back.

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1 The range of answers available to the respondents was Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree, and are abbreviated throughout this article as SA, A, N, D, and SD.

2 The designation lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer will be abbreviated as LGBTQ; and where intersex is used instead of queer, the acronym is LGBTI.