Since the 1960s and the rise of the civil rights movement, American colleges and universities have been engaged in an ongoing debate about how best to enroll, educate, and graduate students from groups historically underrepresented in higher education: women, African Americans, Chicanos and Latinos, Native Americans, American-born students of Asian ancestry, and immigrants. As enrollment statistics show, changes in both the demographics of the applicant pool and college admissions policies are bringing about a measure of greater diversity in entering classes (Levine and Associates, 1990).

Once they are on campus, though, many of these students feel that they are treated as unwelcome outsiders, and they describe having encountered subtle forms of bias (Cones, Noonan, and Janha, 1983; Fleming, 1988; Green, 1989; Hall and Sandler, 1982; Pemberton, 1988; Sadker and Sadker, 1992; Simpson, 1987; Woolbright, 1989). Some students of color have labeled this bias "the problem of ignorance" or the "look through me" syndrome (Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1991). As reported by the Institute for the Study of Social Change, students talk about subtle discrimination in certain facial expressions, in not being acknowledged, in how white students "take over a class" and speak past students of color, or in small everyday slights in which they perceive that their value and perspective are not appreciated or respected. Though often unwitting or inadvertent, such behaviors reinforce the students' sense of alienation and hinder their personal, academic, and professional development.

There are no universal solutions or specific rules for responding to ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity in the classroom, and research on best practices is limited (Solomon, 1991). Indeed, the topic is complicated, confusing, and dynamic, and for some faculty it is fraught with uneasiness, difficulty, and discomfort. Perhaps the overriding principle is to be thoughtful and sensitive and do what you think is best. The material in this section is intended to help you increase your awareness of matters that some faculty and students have indicated are particularly sensitive for women and students of color. Some of these problems affect all students, but they may be exacerbated by ethnic and gender differences between faculty members and their students.

The following ideas, based on the teaching practices of faculty across the country and on current sociological and educational research, are intended to help you work effectively with the broad range of students enrolled in your classes.

**General Strategies**

**Recognize any biases or stereotypes you may have absorbed.** Do you interact with students in ways that manifest double standards? For example, do you discourage women
students from undertaking projects that require quantitative work? Do you undervalue comments made by speakers whose English is accented differently than your own? Do you assume that most African American, Chicano/Latino, or Native American students on your campus are enrolled under special admissions programs? Do you assume that most students of color are majoring in Ethnic Studies?

**Treat each student as an individual, and respect each student for who he or she is.** Each of us has some characteristics in common with others of our gender, race, place of origin, and sociocultural group, but these are outweighed by the many differences among members of any group. We tend to recognize this point about groups we belong to ("Don't put me in the same category as all those other New Yorkers/Californians/Texans you know") but sometimes fail to recognize it about others. However, any group label subsumes a wide variety of individuals—people of different social and economic backgrounds, historical and generational experience, and levels of consciousness. Try not to project your experiences with, feelings about, or expectations of an entire group onto any one student. Keep in mind, though, that group identity can be very important for some students. College may be their first opportunity to experience affirmation of their national, ethnic, racial, or cultural identity, and they feel both empowered and enhanced by joining monoethnic organizations or groups. (Source: Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1991)

**Rectify any language patterns or case examples that exclude or demean any groups.**

Do you

- Use terms of equal weight when referring to parallel groups: men and women rather than men and ladies?
- Use both he and she during lectures, discussions, and in writing, and encourage your students to do the same?
- Recognize that your students may come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds?
- Refrain from remarks that make assumptions about your students' experiences, such as, "Now, when your parents were in college . . . "?
- Refrain from remarks that make assumptions about the nature of your students' families, such as, "Are you going to visit your parents over spring break?"
- Avoid comments about students' social activities that tacitly assume that all students are heterosexual?
- Try to draw case studies, examples, and anecdotes from a variety of cultural and social contexts?

**Do your best to be sensitive to terminology.** Terminology changes over time, as ethnic and cultural groups continue to define their identity, their history, and their relationship to the dominant culture. In the 1960s, for example, negroes gave way to blacks and Afro-Americans. In the 1990s, the term African American gained general acceptance. Most Americans of Mexican ancestry prefer Chicano or Latino or Mexican American to Hispanic, hearing in the last the echo of Spanish colonialism. Most Asian Americans are offended by the term Oriental, which connotes British imperialism; and many individuals want to be identified not by a continent but by the nationality of their ancestors—for example, Thai American or Japanese American. In California, Pacific Islander and South Asian are
currently preferred by students whose forebears are from those regions. To find out what terms are used and accepted on your campus, you could raise the question with your students, consult the listing of campuswide student groups, or speak with your faculty affirmative action officer.

**Get a sense of how students feel about the cultural climate in your classroom.** Let students know that you want to hear from them if any aspect of the course is making them uncomfortable. During the term, invite them to write you a note (signed or unsigned) or ask on midsemester course evaluation forms one or more of the following questions (adapted from Cones, Janha, and Noonan, 1983):

- Does the course instructor treat students equally and evenhandedly?
- How comfortable do you feel participating in this class? What makes it easy or difficult for you?
- In what ways, if any, does your ethnicity, race, or gender affect your interactions with the teacher in this class? With fellow students?

**Introduce discussions of diversity at department meetings.** Concerned faculty can ask that the agenda of department meetings include topics such as classroom climate, course content and course requirements, graduation and placement rates, extracurricular activities, orientation for new students, and liaison with the English as a second language (ESL) program.

### Tactics for Overcoming Stereotypes and Biases

**Become more informed about the history and culture of groups other than your own.** Avoid offending out of ignorance. Strive for some measure of "cultural competence" (Institute for the Study of Social Change, 1991): know what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior and speech in cultures different from your own. Broder and Chism (1992) provide a reading list, organized by ethnic groups, on multicultural teaching in colleges and universities. Beyond professional books and articles, read fiction or nonfiction works by authors from different ethnic groups. Attend lectures, take courses, or team teach with specialists in Ethnic Studies or Women's Studies. Sponsor mono- or multicultural student organizations. Attend campuswide activities celebrating diversity or events important to various ethnic and cultural groups. If you are unfamiliar with your own culture, you may want to learn more about its history as well.

**Convey the same level of respect and confidence in the abilities of all your students.** Research studies show that many instructors unconsciously base their expectations of student performance on such factors as gender, language proficiency, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, prior achievement, and appearance (Green, 1989). Research has also shown that an instructor's expectations can become self-fulfilling prophecies: students who sense that more is expected of them tend to outperform students who believe that less is expected of them - regardless of the students' actual abilities (Green, 1989; Pemberton, 1988). Tell all your students that you expect them to work hard in class, that you want them to be
challenged by the material, and that you hold high standards for their academic achievement. And then practice what you have said: expect your students to work hard, be challenged, and achieve high standards. (Sources: Green, 1989; Pemberton, 1988)

**Don't try to "protect" any group of students.** Don't refrain from criticizing the performance of individual students in your class on account of their ethnicity or gender. If you attempt to favor or protect a given group of students by demanding less of them, you are likely to produce the opposite effect: such treatment undermines students' self-esteem and their view of their abilities and competence (Hall and Sandier, 1982). For example, one faculty member mistakenly believed she was being considerate to the students of color in her class by giving them extra time to complete assignments. She failed to realize that this action would cause hurt feelings on all sides: the students she was hoping to help felt patronized, and the rest of the class resented the preferential treatment.

**Be evenhanded in how you acknowledge students' good work.** Let students know that their work is meritorious and praise their accomplishments. But be sure to recognize the achievements of all students. For example, one Chicana student complained about her professor repeatedly singling out her papers as exemplary, although other students in the class were also doing well. The professor's lavish public praise, though well intended, made this student feel both uncomfortable and anxious about maintaining her high level of achievement.

**Recognize the complexity of diversity.** At one time the key issue at many colleges was how to recruit and retain African-American students and faculty. Today, demographics require a broader multicultural perspective and efforts to include many underrepresented groups. Although what we know about different ethnic groups is uneven, avoid generalizing from studies on African-American students (Smith, 1989).