



June 2006

Who's Biased Now?

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Recommended Citation

Gasman, M. (2006). Who's Biased Now?. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/27

Postprint version. Published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Section: The Chronicle Review, Volume 52, Issue 43, page B5.

Publisher URL: <http://chronicle.com/>

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Abstract

Marybeth Gasman, an education professor at the University of Pennsylvania, presents students with many perspectives — and tries not to lose her own perspective on the ensuing gripes.

Comments

Postprint version. Published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Section: The Chronicle Review, Volume 52, Issue 43, page B5.

Publisher URL: <http://chronicle.com/>

The Chronicle Review

Observer

Who's Biased Now?

By Marybeth Gasman, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania

Recently one of my students — an African-American woman — came to my office with a disturbing question: Had I given her an A on a paper she wrote for my "History of Higher Education" course because she was a member of a minority group? Shocked by her question, I asked her why that idea had occurred to her. She answered, "I shared my graded paper with a white student whom I trust, and she said there wasn't anything special about it and that you must have given me the grade because you like students of color." At first I was speechless — stunned and angry. But at the same time I wondered what *she* must be feeling, and what experiences she had had that made her so mistrustful.

I reassured her: "I gave you the grade that you earned; your work was terrific." I said that I thought her friend's comment was tainted by racism, and that I was sorry she had felt the need to ask me about the grade. About a week later, I received the course evaluations. Although over all the 40 student evaluations were positive, two students made disturbing comments. The first said that I was "too pro-black" in my teaching, and the other noted that the course should have been called "The History of African-American Higher Education" because the focus was solely on black issues (despite the fact that only eight of our readings out of 40 articles and a 350-page book were related to African-Americans).

If I were African-American, those complaints would be common. Both research and anecdotal evidence show that white students and colleagues regularly accuse African-American faculty members of favoring black students. Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and many other scholars have written extensively about facing such accusations. Because I am a white woman — who happens to study African-American education, specifically historically black colleges — I had not experienced that type of complaint and was surprised at how deep students' prejudices seemed to run.

I have noticed recently that when I include in my history class perspectives of women and men of color, some white students accuse me of being biased. How often do white students make similar objections when a professor includes only white male authors on the syllabus?

I always begin my history courses with a discussion of researcher bias and the interpretive nature of history. I tell students that history is not about objective facts; that it is shaped by those who articulate it. I also admit to having a commitment to social justice and racial uplift

in my scholarship and teaching. As a result, some white students accuse me of being unable to teach, grade, or conduct research fairly.

Despite my belief that history is interpretive and that it is impossible to be 100 percent objective, I do care deeply about presenting multiple sides of an issue in the classroom. In my research, I present what I find, both negative and positive about my subject. In my particular field, that is critical: Black colleges cannot improve unless they can discover their weaknesses as well as their strengths. As I've mentioned, I am not the only faculty member being accused of focusing too much on minority issues in the classroom. Two of my friends — one black, one white, both of whom teach the history of higher education at elite research institutions — told me recently that they have faced the same criticism from some of their white students.

Out of curiosity, and because I take student evaluations seriously, I decided to look at the grades I have given to see if I could find any support for my students' claims of bias toward minority students. I discovered that out of a class of 40 students (27 whites, eight African-Americans, two Hispanics, and three Asian-Americans), I had given five minority students A's (38 percent of the total number of minority students) and 17 white students A's (63 percent). Likewise, I had given six B's to minority students (46 percent of the grades given to that group) and 10 to white students (37 percent). In other words, I saw no evidence of bias in my grading.

It disturbs me that the white students who do not receive A's feel the need to use minority students, in particular African-Americans, as scapegoats for their own inadequacies: White students who get lower grades than they think they deserve don't conclude that their work is inadequate but that I favor students of color.

I try to learn from every experience, even those that leave a bad taste in my mouth. So I have spent considerable time reflecting on those incidents and talking to mentors about them. I have concluded that part of my students' reactions to my teaching comes from my willingness to challenge them and push them beyond their comfort zone. A young woman who took my history course actually told me she had deliberately avoided my course on diversity in higher education, and so she resented having to learn about minorities in history class. I am sure she is not the only white student so resistant to learning about (or even acknowledging) the experiences of people of color.

When students make comments like that, I usually respond by pointing out that the history of American higher education includes all Americans, and that I specifically avoid focusing on whites alone.

For faculty members who want to present multiple perspectives in their classes I suggest a couple of strategies: First, don't give in to pressure from students. If you raise tough issues often enough, a few students will become more receptive. I have found that the students who resist new ideas the most strongly are often the ones who come back and thank you later.

Second, support faculty colleagues who also feel a sense of obligation to challenge students' perceptions. When students experience the teaching of multiple perspectives in many different classrooms, they are more likely to view that kind of teaching as good, comprehensive instruction.

Faculty members need to challenge racial inequity in their teaching, not perpetuate it by glossing over it. If we don't cover minority issues in the classroom, our courses will be taken as further evidence that intellectual accomplishment is for whites only.