



MAKING MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN GRADUATE SCHOOL MORE MANAGEABLE



Graduate schools increasingly expect students to take courses in multicultural education. For instance, graduate students in programs accredited by the American Psychological Association are required to take a multicultural education course. But there's not a lot of research out there about teaching this subject at this level.

In a paper published earlier this year in *Teaching of Psychology*, a peer-refereed journal, [Melissa L. Morgan of the University of California Santa Barbara](#) and [NEPC Fellow Patricia Marin of Michigan State University](#) address this shortage with a [qualitative research study](#) that reveals the challenges and rewards of teaching graduate students about multiculturalism. Based on in-depth, hour-long interviews with 20 faculty members teaching graduate-level diversity courses to education and psychology students at four-year universities throughout the United States, the study offers insights into the ways in which instructors say these courses might be improved.

The following eight recommendations are based on the study's findings:

- 1. Instructors need unique training:** Previous research has found that instruction on multiculturalism entails specialized skills, "such as exploring one's own biases and worldviews, and the ability to moderate disagreements on sometimes very personal issues." For this reason, some study participants indicated that junior faculty were not permitted to teach this kind of course. However, even the more veteran instructors said they had had little to no training on teaching students about multiculturalism

and that this was a challenge. Coping techniques included teaching themselves about the pedagogy of multicultural education and drawing upon their personal experiences as minoritized individuals. Based on prior research, Morgan and Marin suggest that training might, among other things, provide opportunities for instructors to rehearse responses to microaggressions, conflicts, and other challenging situations frequently encountered in multicultural education courses.

- 2. Class size matters:** Multiple interviewees noted that their subject matter is best addressed with smaller classes so that everyone has a chance to participate and interact. However, class size was typically beyond their control. Study results suggest that administrators should consider faculty input when determining class size for this subject matter.
- 3. Class composition matters:** Instructors sometimes struggled to teach courses to students with very different levels of experience with multicultural education. For instance, one instructor said that a doctoral course in multicultural education had been the most challenging class she had ever taught because students with advanced knowledge and experience repeatedly grew offended by questions or comments from classmates who had grappled less extensively with these issues. While these reactions may be understandable, "their attitudes made it so that there was no room for anyone in the class to make any mistakes," the instructor lamented. While assigning graduate students to higher- and lower-level multicultural courses based on their prior knowledge and experience may not always be feasible, especially in smaller programs, instructors should at least have training in effectively differentiating instruction for students with stronger and weaker backgrounds in multiculturalism.
- 4. Equity and instructor identity:** Administrators should also ensure that the multicultural education courses—which tend to entail more emotional labor than other types of instruction—are not disproportionately assigned to any one group of instructors (e.g. women or BIPOC). Further, instructors expressed fear that they would be unfairly labelled (e.g., as "angry" or "troublemaking") in ways that would negatively impact their ability to earn tenure or keep their jobs as adjuncts. Administrators should also be on guard against this threat.
- 5. Student evaluations are a concern:** Done well, multicultural education can result in cognitive dissonance, as students struggle with different perspectives they may not have previously encountered or reflected upon. Further, some students may resent the very idea that they are required to take the course. Multiple instructors mentioned their concerns that students faced with these difficult emotions or reactions would give them negative evaluations that could have a detrimental impact on their careers. "I would ... say that some of the worst teaching evaluations I've ever received [came] from my multicultural counseling class," one interviewee said. Administrators should acknowledge these challenges when interpreting student evaluations of multicultural education classes.
- 6. Instructors need to be prepared to navigate the choppy waters of public opinion and current events:** More so than many other subjects, multicultural

education entails drawing connections to current events—even if only because students are likely to bring them up during class discussions. As a result, the topics an instructor addressed last year—or even developed the previous week—may suddenly lose relevance in the face of emerging events. This can be tricky for instructors new to this kind of work, especially in a nation where political polarization and conflict are increasingly the norm.

- 7. Instructors need networks of support:** Interviewees described carving out their own support networks by meeting fellow instructors at conferences, or reaching out to colleagues with expertise in one of the many areas that multicultural education touches upon. In the words of one interviewee:

I have my go to person for White privilege or my go to person for pronoun language, right? I need a go to a person for internalized ageism I'm suffering, self-inflicting a lot of pain around that. Also able-bodiedness, right? So there are people I can talk to who are accustomed to having these conversations and we have a good relationship and they can push me along.

Instructors also turned to support networks to deal with the emotional challenges associated with teaching this sensitive subject. Developing one's own support networks, however, takes time. Departmental and university administrators should consider introducing easily available or ready-made support structures.

- 8. A best practices list would help:** Morgan and Marin suggest researchers could help compile this list, which might address topics such as the ideal class size for a graduate multicultural education course or the most effective pedagogical approaches for introducing certain topics.

Despite the many challenges revealed by the study, participants tended to express passion for their subject matter, with some calling it a “labor of love.” In the words of one interviewee:

This is the best part of my job. It is what sustains me. When working amidst the pressures of higher education in a neo-liberal world, especially given our current political climate, I love working with doctoral students. And I love getting to talk about these issues with them. So personally, I feel empowered, enriched, and engaged by it.

NEPC Resources on Multilingual and/or Multicultural Education

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