

“Race in the College Classroom”

Welcome Comments

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Loyola University Maryland

Fall Teaching Enhancement Workshop

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Welcome

On behalf of Vice President Amy Wolfson and the Office of Academic Affairs, welcome. I am Brian Norman, Professor of English and Associate Vice President for Faculty Affairs and Diversity.

Today’s occasion

Loyola faculty have a wonderful tradition of launching each semester by coming together to think together about a pedagogical issue or key higher education question. And then to equip ourselves to bring the best of our profession into the classroom. Sometimes these conversations are difficult and challenge us to grow and adapt. Those are the best kind. Last fall, we gathered to think about Loyola’s diversifying student body and what that means for our work as faculty. Today we continue to think about what that means in very concrete ways for our own classrooms and the intellectual communities we create among intersecting identities. In this way, we are fulfilling the Jesuit tradition in at least two ways – (1) challenging ourselves to improve and achieve new levels of excellence as teachers committed to our students and our craft; (2) making sure that the kind of education we offer is responsive to the times.

National and Loyola context:

Today we are engaging a national conversation in progress.

BLM

The Black Lives Matter movement has raised important questions about the lives and experiences of people of color, especially black people, who disproportionately face violence, inequities, and indignity. There are particular questions and challenges for institutions of higher education and for our profession as faculty. On campuses across the nation there are calls for a more diverse faculty and curriculum and calls for us as faculty to commit to building classrooms that are attentive to the needs and experiences of a diverse student body.

Loyola

Every campus is having this conversation in its own way. At Loyola these past two years, I have tried to listen to students of color and hear the various needs. I often hear a great desire for courses to engage the world around us, to provide opportunities for intellectual spaces across disciplines to discuss and understand what is happening around the nation, including our own city. I also hear calls for faculty to set the example

of what it means to understand and make space for the voices, experiences, and needs of students of color.

Meanwhile, I know for a fact that many of my colleagues across disciplines have thought deeply about our own roles in times of unrest and turmoil and they are looking for ways to heed the call and to support our students. Last year, well over 200 colleagues signed a letter to students of color saying as much, thanks to leadership from the faculty Thinkspace on Race and Diversity. This Monday at New Faculty Orientation in a conversation about institutional mission I met colleagues excited to join an institution willing to ask difficult questions of itself. And last December, at our faculty assembly, we heard from colleagues of color for whom this is in no way a new conversation. Colleagues who have long shouldered the extra work – often invisible – of mentoring students of color or raising questions of inclusion in a predominantly white institution. What I heard was a call to the full faculty to take up that work, too. To shoulder some of the burden.

Old conversation

So, this is a national conversation happening right now and with some urgency. But in some ways it is a very old conversation. Our academic institutions and our profession have always evolved and adapted to serve more diverse populations of students.

For instance, in the 1978 essay “Taking Women Students Seriously,” the white feminist poet and thinker Adrienne Rich wrote about going to an elite university in an era when many private institutions were not yet coed. “From 1947 to 1951, when I graduated, I never saw a single woman on a lecture platform, or in front of a class, except when a woman graduate student gave a paper on a special topic. The ‘great men’ talked of other ‘great men,’ of the nature of Man, the history of Mankind, the future of Man: and never again was I to experience, from a teacher, the kind of prodding, the insistence that my best could be even better, that I had known in high school. Women students were simply not taken very seriously.” In 1978, the idea of taking women students seriously entailed thinking carefully about our individual classrooms, as well as larger questions of curriculum and institutional climate. I could say much the same about John Dewey a century earlier taking non-elite students seriously. And perhaps the Jesuits themselves and their radical idea of taking seriously the education of others.

Contemporary academy

Today, throughout the academy, we are weighing ideals of academic freedom and pedagogies of discomfort with equally pressing commitments to building inclusive classroom spaces responsive to a diverse student body, including the simple idea of valuing black life. This is happening at the University of Chicago, Mizzou, Yale, Ithaca, Georgetown, everywhere. Last year, in a New York Times op-ed on “The Seduction of Safety, on Campus and Beyond,” black feminist thinker Roxanne Gay wrote, “On college campuses, we are having continuing debates about safe spaces. As a teacher, I think carefully about the intellectual space I want to foster in my classroom – a space

where debate, dissent and even protest are encouraged. I want to challenge students and be challenged. I don't want to shape their opinions. I want to shape how they articulate and support those opinions." But she also writes, "Those who take safety for granted disparage safety because it is, like so many other rights, one that has always been inalienable to them."

And so today I hope that we think about the kinds of intellectual spaces we want to create. And who we are creating them for. Some of us may worry that we aren't sure-footed in class when having difficult conversations or addressing complicated identities. But here's the thing: None of us are. That's why we're here.

Gathering Today

Gathered in this room is a diverse set of colleagues: critical race studies scholars long immersed in these questions, colleagues deeply immersed in other fields who may feel they are being asked to do something new, faculty of color and their allies for whom this is an old conversation but perhaps a new moment, non-faculty thinking about their role outside the classroom. And we have colleagues from area institutions: Goucher, Stevenson, Coppin State, and members of the Baltimore Racial Justice Alliance. We all share a goal: our students' success.

Let me end by sharing my hopes for the questions we will ask today, of ourselves and each other:

1. How can we as faculty create classrooms where students of many backgrounds and commitments can succeed?
2. How can we as faculty anticipate and respond to student conflicts around complex social identities in the classroom? Including our own?
3. How can we as faculty create assignments and learning opportunities that allow us to engage the big questions of the world, from within our various disciplines?

Today's Program

To outline today's offerings and introduce the workshop, please welcome Maren Blohm, Associate Professor of Biology and Chair of Loyola's teaching enhancement committee.