Suggestions for Improving the Classroom Experiences of All Students

In the mid 1990's, the Committee for the Support of Teaching co-sponsored a series of meetings for faculty and students to discuss the role of faculty in creating a welcoming environment, in and out of the classroom, for students of color, adult students, gay and lesbian students, students with disabilities, international, and other “minority” students. The following suggestions, prepared by undergraduates who earlier told of their experiences as students out of the mainstream, were then reviewed by faculty, staff, and undergraduate and graduate student participants in “Creating a Welcoming Campus Environment for All Students” meetings. These participants agree that the classroom dynamic created by faculty can greatly influence other student interactions out of the classroom. The following are suggestions for improving classroom experiences for all students.

1. Instructors should make an effort to learn the names of their students. (Some professors have students write their names on large cards, which are placed before the students at each class to help both instructor and students learn one another’s names.) Professors should also invite students to visit with them during office hours and should inform students that they wish to create a classroom environment in which all members of the class feel encouraged to participate.

2. At the beginning of the semester, instructors may wish to distribute questionnaires to learn more about their students’ academic interests and backgrounds.

3. If students in small classes are required to meet with their professor at least once a semester, they are more likely to feel involved in the course and more comfortable about participating in class and utilizing faculty office hours.

4. Small group work, in diverse groups (gender, major, ethnicity, class, etc.) formed by the instructor, helps break down barriers between students and contributes both to students’ learning and the development of the ability to work with people from different backgrounds.

5. Instructors may wish to distribute a mid-semester questionnaire/evaluation that asks for feedback regarding classroom dynamics, topics not yet addressed, and texts that might be considered in future versions of the course.

6. In courses which utilize TAs, the TAs should be encouraged to become involved in the students’ learning though discussion sections, outreach efforts, etc.