**Title:** Inclusive Classrooms and the Long-Term Value of Diversifying the Academy: An Interactive Roundtable of Faculty and Students

**Type of session and length of time:** Roundtable Discussion, 60 minutes

**Three Key-Words:** Inclusive Classroom, Faculty of Color, Students of Color

**Abstract:** Enhancing the career playing field for all future academics requires an increased acumen for effectively engaging both diverse students and Faculty of Color. This roundtable will focus on the component of the learning environment that every instructor can control and arguably has an impact on the diverse faculty in the academy’s pipeline –our classroom. This roundtable also invites instructors and students to explore culturally relevant classroom practices to ensure that the best and the brightest students stay engaged while maximizing the value of diverse stakeholders throughout higher education. Finally, this roundtable will bring together a diverse range of student and instructor voices that represent various genders, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and religions.

**Introduction**

In 2018, the United States Department of Education released the demographics of higher education faculty throughout the United States confirming the gap in Faculty of Color and across gender lines. Cumulatively, the nationwide total of White Instructors (across all titles) is 75%, of which 40% identify as male. If you disaggregate the data and focus in on Full Professors, 80% identify as White with over 50% of this number identified as male (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). This focus on Full Professorships is important in many institutions because these roles represent the most tenure, decision making faculty roles in our departments. These disparate statistics between Faculty of Color and their White colleagues can be followed upstream in the Academy by viewing the disparity between Students of Color and White Students throughout the entire higher educational journey, from acceptance and attendance in college, to graduation rates. Research consistently documents this gap experienced in a student’s journey from freshman year to defending their doctorate dissertation (Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi, & Richards, 2004*; Indicator 23: Postsecondary Graduation Rates*, 2019). Recommendations to Higher Education are to address these issues and to increase recruitment and retention of Faculty of Color by looking at the institutional and systemic barriers in the hiring process, including job descriptions, composition of search committees, flexibility, and academic experience (Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi, & Richards, 2004). Nevertheless, as a starting point, the purpose of this roundtable is to: share best practices that each of us can use in the classroom as part of our faculty responsibility; create and encourage a learning environment; and, to ensure that students do not leave the academy due to lack of support, mentorship, or unfair discrimination based on race or gender. Furthermore, the purpose of this roundtable session is to explore our roles as educators on creating classroom environments that are beneficial to all students, in an effort to increase the success rate of underrepresented students who are on the instructor track in the academy.

**Academic Experiences of Students of Color**

It is the dream of every educator to have students in class who are psychologically, intellectually, socially, and academically invested in their own learning. Unfortunately, disparities in academic performance is an ongoing issue that has plagued the higher education system in the United States, despite many efforts to equip learners with the necessary knowledge and skills needed to thrive (Nganga, 2019). The difference is more palpable amongst learners of color who witness challenging learning conditions under trying circumstances (Darling-Hammond, 2010). For example, the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that in a 6-year graduation rate for an undergraduate or bachelor’s degree, besides Asian-identified students, White-identified students out-graduate all other racial identities at 64%. The two lowest graduation rates are Black-identified students at 40% and Native American/American Indians at 39% (*Indicator 23: Postsecondary Graduation Rates,* 2019)*.* Additionally,of the students who dropout (i.e., were admitted to a program but did not complete the program) a majority identify as students of color (*College Dropout Rates, 2021*).

Most concerning is recent research that indicates that, even if students of color are among the majority, they often take more time to complete a degree, or do not complete it at all, compared to their White counterparts (Moores, 2017). It is this research that drives us to want to create a roundtable that discusses the classroom and instructor environment. The classroom environment, Students of Color, and Faculty of Color have a symbiotic relationship that positively impacts the outcomes of success in academia. Research indicates that students fare better in a classroom with a teacher of color based on the increased usage of culturally relevant pedagogy (Fairlie, Hoffman, & Oreoloupous, 2014) and application of their real-world experiences to the classroom content.

In researching Students of Color, they consistently indicate that the quality of their relationships with their professors correlate to their success in classrooms and in institutions. And although students indicate that this can be race agnostic, more often than not, Faculty of Color are more accessible to students (Neville, 2017). Madyun, Williams, McGee, and Milner’s research indicates that Faculty of Color more consistently and effectively execute inclusive classrooms for their students (2013).

These findings are important for all faculty who want to create an environment that is worthwhile for students. Diversity in the classroom by race, ethnicity, gender, and other individual identities will continue in the forthcoming future. Our classrooms are mandated to help close the equity gap and represent meaningful learning containers inspiring all students to retain their path on the academic track and instill support or sense of belonging.

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

The demographics of our students is in a constant state of flux and as a result we are witnessing a much more diverse classroom in the 21st century. This intensifies the need for a culturally responsive pedagogy (Richards et al., 2007). Such a pedagogical approach which is student-centered at its core identifies, nurtures, and supports the achievement of all students. Geneva Gay (2002), whose work in this realm is prominently known defines culturally responsive pedagogy as, “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). Therefore, a culturally responsive pedagogy will embrace teaching practices and concepts that encompass values, traditions, language, communication, learning styles, and relationship norms (Gay, 2002; Rychly & Graves, 2012). Additionally, it may also include looking at content, room set-up, methods of teaching, and modes of learning acquisition measurement. Research indicates that an inclusive classroom which follows a culturally responsive pedagogy can benefit “first generation college students, students of color, and women, as a sense of belonging and the creation of a sense of community within a class may prevent attrition” (Penner, 2018, p. A269).

**Session Description**

This interactive session will provide instructors and students the opportunity to reflect on their inclusive classroom experiences and the impact they can have on long-term goals of entering the academy as faculty. After a brief introduction, attendees can decide which of three groups they would like to attend to have deeper dialogue and discussion about their experiences diversifying the academy. The goal of the small groups is to create community, debate ideas, and brainstorm best practices. The larger group will return and a debrief on all sessions will occur. The goals are to bring forward the benefits and challenges of learning and creating an inclusive classroom.

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| **Session Timeline** | |
| **Time** | **Activity** |
| 10 minutes | **Welcome & Introductions** |
| 5 minutes | **Background Overview** |
| 20 minutes | **Small Group Discussions (3 Different Break-out Rooms)**   1. **Student** Discussion:   What has been your best/worst inclusive classroom experience?  As you think about your educational journey towards academic success, which classroom pedagogy prepared you well for the transition? How did they invite your unique cultural lens and included you in the discussion?  What techniques/tactics/advice has been the most beneficial for you as you prepare for a role in higher education?   1. **Faculty of Color** Discussion:   What can your institutions offer to better support you?  How do you design an inclusive classroom?  What are some of the challenges that you face, including strategies for self-care?  What have been your best inclusive/ worst exclusive classroom experiences?  How did your own lived experience help you with designing an inclusive classroom?   1. **White Faculty** Discussion:   What have been your best inclusive/worst exclusive classroom experiences?  How can/should White faculty support Faculty of Color as colleagues?  What learning tactics to build diversity competency are available to faculty on your campus? Are they required or voluntary?  How can/should White faculty share the load for DEI work on campuses? |
| 20 minutes | **Debrief in Large Group**   * Review key learnings from small group discussions. * Brainstorm a list of best practices to share with participants. |
| 5 minutes | **Wrap-up** |

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