

# Responding to Cultural Diversity in the Classroom

“I feel like I have to leave my culture at the door to be taken seriously, to have a chance at being seen as intelligent. Trying to learn through someone else’s cultural lens makes getting my education even tougher”

African-American Graduate student

All students bring with them culturally influenced ways of learning and expectations about teaching. Faculty teaching behaviors and beliefs about student performance and success are moderated by their own cultural background as well. At predominantly white institutions like GVSU, it is common for the classroom to become a “white space” where white cultural perspectives are validated via course content, learning activities, teaching methods, grading, etc. Whether intentional or unintentional, not attending to the range of cultural backgrounds in the classroom leaves students who hold marginalized identities with a feeling of disconnect which negatively impacts their academic experience overall. Creating culturally responsive spaces involves a *deliberate effort* by faculty to foster a learning environment that attends to and supports the needs of students with a variety of backgrounds, learning interests, and abilities.

## What can I do in my classroom?

While there are many ways faculty can respond to cultural differences in their teaching, here are *a few suggestions to get started over the summer:*

- I. As faculty member, take time for cultural introspection:
  - What are some of your most distinctive cultural values and priorities related to teaching?
  - From where in your life and identities do these values and priorities originate?
  - How are these values and priorities reflected in your teaching materials and methods?
    - \*\*\*As a community building exercise, you might consider an early semester assignment asking students to write a learning autobiography which addresses these questions as well
  - How might a student with a dissimilar cultural background experience your course and what does this mean for student learning?
  - Deepen your cultural self-awareness through initiatives on campus or in the community which can help you become more culturally adaptive in the classroom

- Keep in mind that humility is key to developing greater cultural agility- it is okay to admit that we do not know something!
- II. Diversify course textbooks and reading materials.
    - For every topic covered in your course, try to incorporate references, resources and examples from a range of diverse authors, especially those who have been historically underrepresented in higher education.
    - In some academic disciplines, research or textbooks written by diverse faculty might be less available. Take a moment to raise student’s awareness of academic injustice and how it limits the kinds of learning materials available to them.  
\*\*\*Share ownership of knowledge by asking students to locate supplemental readings written by diverse authors which are of interest to them and share with class
  
  - III. Infuse diverse perspectives into your class by inviting guest speakers who are experts in your field involved in justice based work.  
\*\*\*Incorporate culturally diverse co-curricular events, field trips and volunteer hours which help students connect what they are learning in class to real-life and authentic problem solving experiences.
  
  - IV. Diversify how material is disseminated in class.  
\*\*\* Incorporate questions, case studies and authentic problems which illuminate greater social/cultural issues. Include images that include diverse places, spaces, authors, etc.
  
  - V. Revise the syllabus to reflect culturally responsive practices, methods, materials, and assessments.  
\*\*\*Empower students to be co-creators of the syllabus by having them set individual learning goals and determine learning assessments that are meaningful and relevant to them the first week of class.

Learn More

Not sure how this relates to your course? Schedule a confidential consultation with the Pew FTLC [munkd@gvsu.edu](mailto:munkd@gvsu.edu) or [ftlc@gvsu.edu](mailto:ftlc@gvsu.edu)

Culturally Responsive Course Design Resources

- Diversity and Motivation: Culturally Responsive Teaching in College, 2nd ed. (Margery B. Ginsberg and Raymond J. Wlodkowski, 2009.)

<https://www.higheredtoday.org/2018/05/16/motivational-framework-instructional-equity-higher-education/>

- Chavez & Beam (2016). Teaching Across Cultural Strengths, Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing

<https://library.catalog.gvsu.edu/search~S19?/tteaching+across+cultural+strengths/tteaching+across+cultural+strengths/1%2C1%2C3%2CB/frameset&FF=tteaching+across+cultural+strengths+a+guide+to+balancing+integrated+and+individuated+cultural+frameworks+in+college+teaching&2%2C%2C3>

- Culturally Responsive Classroom Development

<http://guides.library.pdx.edu/culturallyresponsivecurriculum>

- Syllabus example <https://www.latimes.com/books/la-et-jc-decolonize-syllabus-20181008-story.html>