

Association of American Law Schools
Workshop for Pretenured Minority Law School Teachers
June 17-18, 2009
Washington, DC

10:45 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Teaching: Strategies to Success
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Program Materials

Workshop Description: There may be “born” teachers who are able to command the classroom and foster an environment that encourages student participation and trust without breaking a sweat. But for most of us, there are a variety of specific challenges to face in the classroom, particularly for minority and female colleagues. Often, minority teachers report more specialized challenges in the classroom stemming from classroom dynamics that are hard to spot and to know how to address. In this workshop, we identify and address particular issues that may be of concern for minority colleagues. How do I deal with difficult students? How do I ensure diverse participation in the classroom? How should I address the various differences among students-particularly racial or gender differences-and differences between students and myself? In this workshop, these teachers will offer some tips on how to plan and facilitate classroom teaching in both large and small venues, and to be a more effective teacher.

These brief materials are meant to provide some examples of the most common challenges to teaching for faculty of color and women. They serve as the basis for our discussion.

1. Contests for Authority:

A. Direct Challenges: Defend knowledge or opinion: (a) student challenge the basis for faculty analysis; (b) students demand that faculty provide support for analysis, conclusion, or fact statements; (c) student object that opinion has no connection to the subject of the course; (d) student argues that faculty is wrong because her statement is contradicted by something written by the casebook authors.

B. Indirect Challenges--Complaints to administration: Student, or group of students meet with the dean or the associate dean and complain about faculty member, suggesting that the faculty member is not suited to teaching the subject or the students because (a) lack of knowledge, (b) giving wrong answers, (c) unable to control class, (d) disrespectful to students; (e) does not follow the casebook, (f) add extraneous material (usually race, gender, class or other issues), (g) is not teaching law but is teaching ideology.

C. Indirect Challenges: Complaints to other faculty members similar to complaints to administration.

D. Indirect Challenges—Whisper Campaigns: students start rumors designed to cast faculty member in bad light.

2. Disrespect as Power Politics

A. Direct tactics: (a) talking in class; (b) arriving late; (c) leaving early; (d) non-responsive students (hasn't done the readings or can't answer the question).

B. Indirect tactics: (a) taunting classmates; (b) student displays of prejudice; (c) putting down other students in discussion. In effect the difficult student uses other students as proxies for attacks on faculty member.

3. Discussion as a Theatre of War

A. Offensive tactic: Cloaking hatred in open discussion.

B. Offensive Tactic: Bullying in class

C. Defensive Tactic: Silence.

Responses Good and Bad:

A. Insist on good manners.

B. Set and keep rules.

C. Don't be afraid to challenge back, but gently.

D. Diffuse and delay.

E. Keep your word.

F. Empower students of color in the classroom

G. Get feedback from your students.

H. Keep your temper.

I. Enlist mentors.

J. Give credit where credit is due (especially to students).

K. Avoid fear; laugh.

L. Protect the weak.

M. Confidence.

N. No fear of mistakes—making them or owning up to them.

O. Never be afraid to say: "stop" or "please see me after class."