

Case Study #1

Student Perspective

My professor wants everyone to buy this \$120 online homework system subscription on top of the textbook. He said “if you’re paying \$60,000 a year to come here surely another \$100 can’t hurt.” What he doesn’t understand is that I don’t have \$120 right now, and that’s like two weeks of work-study to earn it. Not everybody is paying \$60,000, I couldn’t be here without scholarships and loans and they’re not nearly enough to cover everything. What if my car breaks down or I have to go to the doctor?

Case Study #3

Student Perspective

I’m a Latina student from a public high school. I did really well in high school; I graduated in the 10% of my class. I took lots of science in high school -- biology, chemistry and physics, and pre-calc math. I really liked my physics class and like reading about the latest discoveries of dark energy and the new telescopes being built to study the cosmos. I applied to Bryn Mawr College in part because of its reputation in the sciences, and because I want to be a research scientist. I was so happy when the final aid package came through to make it possible. My parents were less excited, I think. They were first in their families to go to college, and they’ve always pushed us to work hard in school and get a degree. But they didn’t understand the whole scientist thing and were nervous about me going so far away and having to take out loans. They wanted me to stay home and pursue something practical like business or pharmacy school, and maybe they were right.

This first semester has been amazing in some ways, but also scary. My first physics exam wasn’t at all what I was expecting; it was nothing like tests in high school. And I got a C! I’ve never gotten a grade below a B, but I’m starting to think maybe my high school was just really easy, and that’s why I did well. We certainly didn’t cover anywhere near as much as in college physics. My hall-mates are also freaking out about exams, but I think they’re just saying it to make me feel better. I’m the only Latina on the floor and probably the only public-school student, too, so they are all probably better prepared than me. We’re not supposed to talk about grades anyway because of the honor code, and this doesn’t seem like the kind of thing I should ask my professor about. I don’t want him to think I’m grade-grubbing or something, I wouldn’t want a good grade if I didn’t deserve it.

Case Study #2

Student Perspective

The inner-city environment is completely different from campus, because whether you are wealthy or non-wealthy there is a code that everyone has to abide by. For the most part this code is not understood by students who live outside of inner-city areas or outside of the United States. A lot of students and faculty don’t understand the transition that inner-city students of color face when they return back home and when they come to campus. They have to change a huge aspect of their identity, and during the transition they find themselves questioning who they are, in relation to both spaces. Some come to the conclusion that they are living to the expectations of the Other. This of course causes conflict between students of color, and division within students of color. This division is silenced by the white space that we are part of when we come to campus. It is silenced, because the one thing that as students of color we all understand is, no matter what our socioeconomic class is and where we are from, there is a greater outside force that we have to deal with and that’s the white space.

Case Study #4

Student Perspective

I’m so glad I didn’t drop my physics class earlier this semester. Yes it’s hard, but I once I started to get to know people in class I realized it was hard for everybody, and now that we’ve started working on problem sets and studying together it’s getting better. Sarah has been a big help – her dad is a professor and had great advice on how to study for exams. And working with Elizabeth’s been fun too, she doesn’t care at all about grades, but she’s great to talk about cool physics ideas for hours with.

Still I don’t feel like I really fit in or anyone really understands what it is like here for me. Professor Hans is always telling stories about things that got him interested in physics. For example, the time on vacation in Italy when they went to see Foucault’s pendulum, the time at space camp in Florida where he got to experience simulated free-fall, or building his first computer with his Dad. I saw other students nodding, but I had no idea what he was talking about I mean, it’s not like I grew up in “the barrio” or anything, but still, do normal kids really do all of these things? My high school was mostly Latino, but we weren’t poor – our parents had good, middle-class jobs. But no one I went high school with went to space camp or to Europe or anything like that.

Case Study #2

Faculty Perspective

Last week we were talking about addressing white privilege inside an inner city classroom and only two students spoke. I am not really sure why students didn't speak. Maybe it was discomfort, fear, or lack of interest. How does a professor or teacher deal with silence and differentiate between the silences? If it was discomfort, will this discomfort stop, once they begin writing their journals for one another? Or will the journals just make people feel more uncomfortable or silenced?

Case Study #4

Faculty Perspective

In my physics class this semester, I have started to share more about how I became a scientist and what experiences inspired me, in the hopes of inspiring my students. Most of my students seem to enjoy this, and some have even said so and shared experiences of their own. However, when I look around the room, I feel like I'm not reaching the students of color specifically. They don't make eye contact with me; they look out the window, or at friends, or stare down at their notebooks. I've also noticed that these students are less likely to show up at my office hours, and they always seem to sit with each other. Am I just being paranoid? I really want to connect with all of my students, and I worry that I am saying or doing something that offends some of them without realizing it. On the other hand, I don't want to offend anyone by singling them out and asking them what's going on. What if I am just imagining all of this?

Case Study #1

Faculty Perspective

My college recently started a community college bridge program that allows high-achieving students to transfer credits here and complete a bachelor's degree. I worry that these students are underprepared to succeed here. I'm only one person – how can I teach the same material to students with radically different levels of preparation? One of my colleagues suggested I use an online homework system to give additional assignments to students who need more review so maybe I will try that.

Case Study #3

Faculty Perspective

Today I handed back the first graded exams of the semester. To me, this exam is a great way for students to begin to understand how to apply the information they learned in class and show me their thinking process and problem solving skills. Most students receive grades lower than 80% because it's a difficult exam, but I give many opportunities to improve their grades throughout the semester. I know that many students are overly concerned with their grades, so I'm always surprised that no one comes to my office hours. Maybe I should change the time or something?