

Columbia University's Teachers College Maps the Path to Diversity for Future Educators

By Alice Pettway

College graduates are facing a changing world. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2044, no single racial or ethnic group will constitute a majority of the U.S. population. Future educators, especially, will be faced with working in K-12 schools where students of color are the majority.

At the same time, teachers of color remain a small minority — only 8 percent, according to National Center for Education Statistics data — making it increasingly important to improve future educators' knowledge and understanding of racial and ethnic groups.

Ernest Morrell, PhD — director of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College (TC), the graduate school of education affiliated with Columbia University in New York City — is intensely aware of the responsibility these statistics place on faculty to prepare students to thrive in diverse environments. "If we're going to be relevant to their lives ... as [future] education leaders, we're going to have to think differently about the coursework," he says.

Amy Stuart Wells, professor of sociology and education at the college, agrees. In 2014, she formed a small team of graduate students to determine the role that race and ethnicity played in TC coursework at the time and to examine options for optimizing the college's approach. Last December, the team released the

Race, Ethnicity, and Inter-Cultural Understanding Curriculum Map — a comprehensive list of TC courses focused on race and ethnicity.

Wells' team surveyed more than 500 TC students, and according to Lauren Fox, a student on Wells' team, the responses overwhelmingly conveyed three sentiments: We want classes that examine race and ethnicity, we think these classes are important, and we don't know where to find them.

TC offers more than 60 classes focused primarily on race and ethnicity, but because the courses are spread across departments and are offered only during certain semesters, both students and faculty advisers were having a tough time finding them, says Wells.

Her team hoped to make these classes more accessible by identifying them by department and course number. They then categorized them under four themes: Policy, History, and Social Context; Social Theory, Socio-Cultural Understandings, and Language/Linguistics; Teaching and Learning; and Health and Well-Being.

Classes included in the curriculum map span all TC departments and can



Amy Stuart Wells

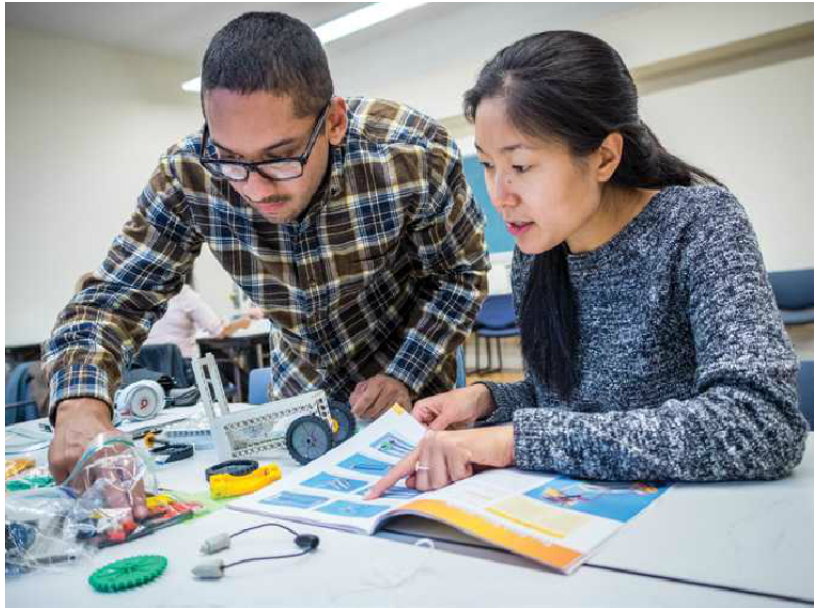
be taken by any Columbia University graduate student.

Engaging Diversity

Providing an easy access point for students who want to take classes that examine race and ethnicity is a great first step toward ensuring that TC graduates are prepared to take on leadership roles in diverse communities, says Daniel Harris, another student who was on Wells' team; he is now a PhD student studying higher education and organizational change at the University of California, Los Angeles.



Ernest Morrell



Two graduate students work on a science project at Teachers College.

Harris emphasizes the importance of making sure all TC graduates are well versed on issues around race and ethnicity. “When you have a teacher in front of the classroom,” he says, “they should be able to connect with [students] not just on a teacher-student

they were learning a lot about themselves and each other — and that was really our goal.”

Teaching future education leaders how to serve diverse communities is essential at TC. However, because both faculty and students are

the needs of its diverse students.

According to Morrell, a large part of the process focused on culture. “You want to create a culture where people are having these conversations, and you want to create a space for people who want to continue these conversations to know where they can go,” he says.

That is already starting to happen. Wells says she’s spoken with many faculty members who are excited to incorporate discussions on race and ethnicity into all of their courses, not just those that are featured in the Race, Ethnicity, and Inter-Cultural Understanding Curriculum Map. In addition, TC will hold an institute this summer focused on teaching and learning in diverse schools.

As more students enroll in classes made accessible by the map, Morrell says it’s important to create an environment in which everyone feels they can be part of the solution. “[We must be] unapologetic about looking into our past,” he says, “not to inspire guilt — but to illuminate possibilities.” ●

Alice Pettway is a contributing writer for *INSIGHT Into Diversity*.

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level, but on a human level.”

Fox, who was also a teacher’s assistant for Wells’ Race, Ethnicity, and U.S. Education Policy course, says she believes that classes focused on race and ethnicity are also crucial for engaging students with their own identities and experiences.

“It was really powerful to have a class where students were opening up, examining their own backgrounds and histories related to inequality or privilege,” she says. “For a lot of [students], it was transformative;

disproportionately white, Harris says it’s equally important to make sure TC students of color feel like they belong.

Many minority students who entered the college intending to study race and ethnicity, but had trouble finding such classes, will now have easier access to these courses via the curriculum map. And Harris hopes that because the process of creating the map was collaborative — faculty across all TC departments were involved — it will spark broader discussions about how the college can most effectively address