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# If They're So Smart, What am I Doing in Front of the Classroom? A Latina's Journey for Respect

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# **If They're So Smart, What am I Doing in Front of the Classroom? A Latina's Journey for Respect**

## **Abstract**

*This session focuses on one graduate teaching assistant's experience with student group resistance. It sheds light on one of the many possible challenges faculty of color may experience in higher education when teaching courses where the ethnic makeup of students is predominantly white.*

## **Sandra L. Foster**

Graduate Student, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Arizona State University

In this presentation I would like to discuss an incident that occurred in the fall semester of 2000 and almost occurred in the spring semester of 2001. This particular graduate teaching assistant taught her own class of 35 undergraduate students who were preparing to become future teachers. The ethnic makeup of the class in the fall of 2000 consisted of 2 students of color and the remaining 33 students were white. Most of the students were juniors and seniors and two of the white students were ages 53 and 55. These two students were seen as the patriarch and matriarch figures of the group and instigated the first incident and from that first incident; it snowballed into something the teaching assistant never fathomed. Topics such as racism, forced assimilation, stripping away of cultures, eurocentric education, social reproduction theory, classism, sorting and selecting, inequity, cultural capital, unequal education, institutional racism, etc. are just some of the topics that are discussed in this class. For many of these students who come from middle and upper class backgrounds the information from this class clashes with their ideology, paradigms and everything they have ever been taught or told from their schooling experiences and their parents. The students question and challenge the teaching assistant's credibility and authority by accusing the teaching assistant to be an angry and resentful Latina feeding "lies" to them about the American educational system. In addition, they attempt to report that the class is a "white bashing" course. Assumptions and judgments made on no previous information about the teaching assistant causes more tension in the class. What happens next? Does the Latina become discouraged? If so, how does she bounce back? When the spring semester begins a new group of white students hear from previous students how they "can get the teaching assistant in trouble." This time things are approached differently than the fall semester. In this presentation I will discuss the difference between the two semesters, the class makeup and the outcome at the end of the semester. I will share words that were exchanged, letters that were written and journal excerpts from the teaching assistant. I hope that members of the audience who are veterans in a higher education setting will add their expertise to the discussion. For graduate students of color who plan on teaching in a higher education setting and in a classrooms where the ethnic makeup may be predominantly white, this presentation may offer some insight on the reality of teaching in such settings, as well as how some people of color choose to

deal with student group resistance. Since this presentation/discussion is based on real experiences from a real person it may shed light for those who may not understand one of many challenges and obstacles scholars of color may face as they enter academia. It is extremely important to understand that graduate students of color who do not have any teaching or classroom experience in higher education and who experience situations such as student group resistance may become discouraged. In order to recruit faculty members of color it is crucial that campuses across the country implement some type of educational programs that focus on diversity and awareness to the campus community including students and faculty. This could be one of many steps implemented to help prepare future faculty and most importantly to help retain faculty of color.

### **Presenter**

**Sandra L. Foster** is in her third year of doctoral studies in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona. In the fall of 2001, Sandra was awarded and holds the distinguished title of "Gates Millennium Scholar." She also participated in the Preparing Future Faculty program and is entering her second year of participation and now holds the title of a "PFF Fellow." Sandra hopes to teach in higher education as well as conduct research in K-16 settings. Her research interests include but are not limited to educational policy, teacher education, opportunity to learn, equality and equity, urban education, high stakes testing, program evaluation and social issues dealing with students of color, poor students, students with disabilities and access to higher education for these groups.