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Chicana, Indian and Sudanese Perspectives of Teaching in the Academy: Three Levels of Experience in the Teaching-Learning and Social Environment

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“Women of color from any culture or country face additional barriers in predominantly white institutions. This panel presents perspectives and experiences of three women from three cultures and three different levels of academia—a Chicana Latino visiting professor, a graduate teaching assistant from India, and a Sudanese graduate research assistant.”

Women generally face barriers in educational institutions by virtue of their gender and society's structure and practices. Women of color from any culture or country face additional barriers in predominantly white institutions. This panel presents perspectives and experiences of three women from three cultures and three different levels of academia—a Chicana Latino visiting assistant professor, a graduate teaching assistant from India and a Sudanese graduate research assistant. Each woman is a product of their own culture and has adapted to the local teaching behaviors and practices of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Panelists discuss cultural differences in social behavior and expectations in an educational setting from their own experiences as students and teachers. Everyday social behavior and the special social dynamics of teacher-learner are explored. The difference of the level of academic status is also discussed.

Chicana (Americans of Mexican descent) perspectives on predominantly white campuses include experiences from the earliest educational years, even in locations with more numerous minority populations. This is because racism is pervasive in the United States, and social! economic inequality is evident in funding and staffing of public institutions through the highest levels. A student of color faces not only the usual academic stresses, but also the social barriers that stem from being "minority", and therefore "different", including "inferior".

Latinos are a diverse continuum, from many countries, with social, economic, political and other differences. Latinos can be of any race, color or religion. Latinos born and raised in the United States also exhibit differences. Those of Mexican descent, Chicanos, can be from different economic backgrounds and may have different experiences. Most, however, have learned to make an "automatic adjustment" to being in a predominantly white environment because of the shared characteristic of being considered and treated as

a minority.

Sudanese Muslim women have a very distinct culture of their own. In predominantly white campuses it does not only include new experience in teaching and learning behavior but also strong differences in cultural background. Being a minority woman with a different background makes things very difficult. The culture shock and the university system are not helpful in making the transition easier. There is no room for another culture. It is a struggle to understand this new culture, to overcome the academic stresses and to modify the social and cultural barriers.

Students from India usually do not have a language barrier because most of them learn English from a very young age. However, the culture of teaching and learning is widely different. A graduate teaching assistant is a teacher as well as a student. It is necessary for them to maintain a balance between the two responsibilities. In a predominant white setting there is always a feeling of being "unwanted." All international students have to go through teacher's training courses which American teaching assistants do not need to attend though they have never had any teaching experience. Considerable amounts of extra effort are necessary to establish oneself compared to a white student in the same place.

Panelists share their own experiences in Nebraska and compare that with their cultures. They also try to analyze the reasons and find ways to overcome these barriers.

PRESENTERS

Emilia Gonzalez-Clements is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She is a doctoral candidate in Social Applied Anthropology at the University of Kentucky and President of Development Systems/Applications International, Inc., a consulting firm specializing in Third World Development, cross-cultural training and public issues gathering. Gonzalez-Clements is the university Co-chair of the Culture and Diversity Action Team of Nebraska Network 21, a Kellogg initiative to implement systematic change in land grant institutions. She recently completed a multi disciplinary team evaluation of a federal program aimed at providing economic transition assistance to displaced sugar workers in Hawaii. A current endeavor involves a sustainable mountain development project in rural Mexico. Gonzalez-Clements serves as a consultant to Cooperative Extension in community action programs with local communities and recent Latino immigrants.

Bidisha Nag is a Graduate student from India working on her Ph.D. in the Department of Geography at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She has an M.A. degree in Geography from Visva Bharati, India and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Bidisha has been a Graduate Teaching Assistant for three years in the department and is currently a part time faculty at Southeast Community College, Lincoln campus. Bidisha also works as a Research Assistant for Development Systems/Applications International, Inc. and a Graduate Assistant for Women's Studies Program at UNL. She is coordinating with Emilia Gonzalez-Clements in the Department of Anthropology in preparing a course on Women's Movements Around the World.

Mona Mohamed is a native of Sudan and an attorney with a special interest in human/women's rights. She was active in Sudan in efforts to raise awareness of the side effects of female genital mutilation. Mona, who has a law degree from the University of Cairo and practiced criminal, family and Shari'ya law in Sudan, just completed an internship with the Nebraska Commission on the Status of Women, doing policy research for various projects, including the Seneca Conference and local integration of Muslim women.