EDUCATION

What does a professor look like?

Scholars offer tips and advice for helping college students think beyond stereotypes

By Ashley Huderson

began teaching as an adjunct professor at a local university in the fall of 2014. On my first day of class, I sat in the front row and waited for the 12 registered students to file in. As they arrived, whispers of “Where is the professor?” and “Does anyone know what he looks like?” began filling the air. After a few minutes, I stood up and introduced myself as the instructor and was met with apparent confusion. At the time, I was a 29-year-old Black woman with a recently minted PhD. Why, I asked, was everyone surprised to see me at the front of the class? “You don’t look like any professor I’ve ever had, and honestly, I didn’t think we did this type of work,” admitted one brave student. In that moment, I knew exactly what she meant.

Almost 70% of college professors are white (1). Even if my student had encountered any of the 49.8% of female professors, it is possible that she may not have been taught by any Black professors (7.2%), let alone a Black female professor (2.1%), or a professor under the age of 30 (13%). In a new collected volume, Picture a Professor, edited by historian Jessamyn Neuhaus, a diverse group of scholars from a variety of disciplines offer advice for educators seeking to help students think beyond the stereotypical image of a college professor.

Picture a Professor showcases stories and personal anecdotes, as well as evidenced-based insights and intersectional teaching strategies for navigating student preconceptions about identity and expertise. The volume goes beyond issues of gender and ethnicity, touching on age, ability and disability, and intersectional identities. In chapter 6, for example, dance professor Ken Kennedy draws on theories of queer pedagogy to cultivate trust in the classroom. The author describes using a collaboratively created rubric as one approach to facilitating authentic learning and creating a safe classroom environment for both students and faculty, queer and not. Meanwhile, in her chapter “Where’s the Professor? First-Day Active Learning for Navigating Students’ Perceptions of Young Professors,” musicology professor Rebekah Wisneski explores how facilitating active learning activities on the first day of class helps build trust and credibility with students, forcing them to look beyond their perceptions of “how old” a professor should be or look.

Each of the book’s contributors recognizes the pervasiveness of racialized, gendered, and other biases and recommends specific ways to respond to and interrupt such preconceptions—helping students, teachers, and others reenvision what they think of when they picture a professor. In the chapter “Rippling the Patterns of Power: Enacting Anti-Racist Pedagogy with Students as Co-teachers,” for example, Chanelle Wilson and Alison Cook-Sather recommend challenging assumptions and fostering critical analytical skills, developing students’ awareness of their social positions, centering authority in the classroom and making space for students to take responsibility for their learning, and empowering students to apply theory to practice. Meanwhile, in her chapter “Empowered Strategies for Women Faculty of Color Navigating Teaching Inequities in Higher Ed,” sociologist Chaelll Pittman encourages readers to know and internalize the research about the teaching efficacy of women faculty of color (WFOC), the broader benefits of WFOC’s teaching, and the teaching inequalities faced by WFOC.

The book’s chapters are organized into four sections: identifying strategies for starting the semester strong (part 1); making connections and building rapport with students (part 2); anti-racist pedagogies (part 3); and strategies for empowering professors to bring their whole selves to the classroom (part 4). Together, these sections cover every aspect of marginalized faculty life through anecdotal stories, lived experiences, and best practices.

Throughout the book, the contributors report being questioned, undermined, disempowered, and ignored as a result of various biases. Such stories and the strategies they inspire are unfortunately all too common, but they are not the only way forward. By shedding light on these harsh realities, Picture a Professor does a service to all who would prefer a different path, offering realistic strategies to engage students in undermining scholarly stereotypes with innovative course design, classroom activities, assessment techniques, and more.

REFERENCES AND NOTES
1. Zippia, College Professor Demographics and Statistics in the US. https://www.zippia.com/college-professor-jobs/demographics/.

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10.1126/science.add1091