

INCLUSIVE TEACHING RESOURCE

PROBLEMATIC ASSUMPTIONS

A self-reflection to increase awareness

This resource is part of the **Inclusive Teaching Toolkit** which is designed to assist faculty in understanding the concepts of inclusive teaching and incorporating these ideas into your classroom. This toolkit is part of the [GWSPH DEI Initiative](#) that is being developed to respond to a societal call for social justice by changing the way GWSPH works to integrate DEI into every sphere of our work. This initiative encompasses Academics, Research, Practice, and Operations. The **Inclusive Teaching Toolkit** is one of many aspects of the Academic branch of the initiative

BACKGROUND

Fostering an inclusive teaching environment requires each of us to raise our awareness of issues that are multicultural and how they might manifest themselves in classrooms. As you read each of the problematic assumptions about students' learning behaviors and capacities, try to think of examples you've experienced, are familiar with, and/or have observed. As you reflect, stop to think about your own assumptions before reading the alternative narrative.

Assumption 1: Students will seek help when they are struggling with a class.

Alternative Narrative: For a number of reasons, students do not always feel comfortable asking for help. For example, they may feel intimidated by professors (generally, not you personally) or think it makes them look dumb if they do not understand something. In order to address this issue, the inclusive approach is to set an expectation at the beginning of class that students will seek help when they have problems. Additionally, you can request meetings with students as problems arise or make office hour meetings part of the course requirement (e.g., each student will meet with you if they receive an unsatisfactory grade on the first assignment). The latter is ideal because it ensures you meet with every student and removes any stigma attached to going to office hours.

Assumption 2: Students who are affiliated with a particular group (gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) are experts on issues related to that group and feel *comfortable* being seen as information sources to the rest of the class and the instructor who are not members of that group.

Alternative Narrative: One way to effectively deal with this set of assumptions is to pose questions about particular groups to the entire class rather than presuming that members of a certain group are the only ones who can reply. For example, questions could be phrased so that students could share experiences of their friends or comments that they've heard as well as their own experiences. It would be best to let the class know that if any individual has experiences or information that could be beneficial to the class, they should share such experiences or information. If you would like to hear from a particular student on a specific issue that relates to group membership, you should speak with the student privately instead of calling on the student when the issue arises in class. In this way, you can find out the students' ability to comment on the issue and willingness to do so publicly. This avoids putting the student in an awkward position, particularly if the student lacks knowledge about questions related to his or her group. Some professors may "check in" with students after putting them on the

spot in class, but students may not feel comfortable telling a professor they did not prefer to be called on in class to represent their group.

Assumption 3: Students who miss class or assignment deadlines simply are not prioritizing your class or respecting you as an instructor.

Alternative Narrative: If students are absent or missing deadlines, show concern by asking if things are all right instead of making assumptions about their behavior. You may find that a student is struggling because they have onerous family or work obligations that are difficult to balance with school. If there are repeated absence or missed deadlines, request a meeting to discuss the situation and go into the meeting open-minded. While students need to meet class expectations, it will help the student succeed if their professor is understanding and open to working with them to find solutions instead of placing blame or making assumptions about the student's motivations.

Assumption 4: Students from certain backgrounds (e.g., students from urban or rural areas, students who speak with an accent, students from specific racial or ethnic groups) are poor writers and/or poor writing suggests limited intellectual ability.

Alternative Narrative: While the degree of writing preparation varies across school systems and regional backgrounds, group memberships do not serve as an accurate predictor of the degree of preparation they received. Be sensitive to cultural differences in writing styles and recognize that many standards apply to the evaluation of good writing. If a specific type of writing is expected for a given class, assign a short, ungraded assignment early in the term to identify students who may need additional assistance in meeting that particular writing standard. You have a responsibility to be explicit about what is expected; consider sharing examples of good writing (with the approval of former students). Include resources to assist students in the syllabus. Alert students as early as possible of their need to improve their writing and suggest resources. Find more information on international students [here](#).

Assumption 5: Students from certain groups are more likely to: be argumentative during class discussions OR not participate in class discussions OR bring a more radical agenda to discussions.

*Alternative Narrative: Participation levels vary across all students, with some students more comfortable in listening roles and others more comfortable taking the lead in class discussions. While these discussion styles may be influenced by students' past experiences, families of origin, and cultural reference points, it is important that you encourage participation among all students while also respecting the differences among students that will emerge. Address your participation expectations early and often – include specifics in the syllabus. Use the **Discussion Ground Rules** from the *Inclusive Classroom Toolkit*. Additionally, more equitable discussions can be created by utilizing various strategies (e.g., prefacing the discussion with a writing exercise that provides the opportunity to clarify their thoughts, using the think, pair, share process). Online, use the chat feature and give enough time for people to think through – and edit – their input. It is also useful to remember that students' participation levels evolve over the course of a term as they become more comfortable with the course, their classmates, and the instructor.*