The following narratives were compiled from interviews with undergraduate students from eight institutional members of the Consortium on High Achievement and Success. Fifty Black and Latino/a students responded to the invitation to talk anonymously with an interviewer. They each met individually for approximately one hour with Dr. Ruth Sinton.

All students signed an informed consent form, and were also given an opportunity to review and approve the narration as presented by Dr. Sinton. The students are quoted primarily, with descriptive information provided by Dr. Sinton to provide valuable context for each student.

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Josie, a Latina junior social science major from New York

Coming in, my issue was not being at the same level as other science students so recently I changed my major. Even though I took AP physics and biology, it just wasn’t enough preparation. The problem is that science students can’t do both HEOP and the pre-freshman research programs! That put me further behind the others. And I still have problems with writing and revising, and time management.

Also, I was the only black student in the introductory class, and sometimes I felt that the professor was staring at me. After a few weeks he asked if I ‘was in the right class’. The class was team-taught and the other faculty member was trying to encourage me. When I told my roommate—a white person—she said, ‘that didn’t sound right’. I wasn’t doing that well, so I thought maybe that’s why he asked. But later I discovered that I was doing better than some other students in class. That experience made me be more aware of how professors treat me, and made me self-conscious. Now I pay more attention to how I’m treated.

When I took genetics another professor told me she didn’t think I was suited ‘for the sciences’, and I had been working with her daily. I came from a New York City public school, and most of the others in the class were from prep schools. In the lab when I would ask ‘Should I be explaining this or doing this or this?’ she’d tell me something, but then I’d get my paper back and it was marked wrong. She said ‘Well everyone else got it!’ I changed my major because it wasn’t worth the hassle.

As a black woman it was difficult, and I only learned later that the black students in the sciences only took courses from certain professors. I wish I had known that before. I still like science, and I’m sorry I’m not still in it. I’m also more pessimistic now about my relationships with faculty, and don’t have high expectations. Little things, like the professor asked me my name, and when I told him he said ‘Oh, I thought it would be a little more exotic’. I continued to have problems because I would do my work and he would not call on me, but would call on another student who would impress us with the correct answer. We had a female from India in our class, and she went home for spring break and didn’t come back on the first day of class. And he said ‘Where is she, still in India?’ The way he said it the whole class started to laugh, as if she went back home and ‘wasn’t coming back’. I feel like students of color are given a hard time in the sciences. In sophomore year the grading is harder to weed out the weaker students. But the students of color—who come less prepared—are automatically weeded out, instead of giving them that extra help to keep them. One professor told a student ‘You’ll never
make it through med school so you should stop now’. The one professor I had who tried to mentor me is no longer here. She didn’t get tenure.

Faculty here seem invisible because they’re always in their offices. You will see a few faculty who come to everything, but most are not seen outside, except on rare occasions in the cafeteria. Plus, they need to learn more about people of color. There are so many conversations that we should be having consistently, and do not. Even sociology professors can be ignorant on important issues.

Reggie, a Puerto Rican American freshman from upstate New York

In a class where you’re the minority, my biggest challenge is trying to prove to other people that ‘I’m as intelligent as they are’. Especially in my government class where there are three minorities and the rest mostly white males. I like to speak out and give my opinion, but I notice that when I do my classmates say ‘Oh, there he goes again!’ Usually I love my classes here, and I love the college, but in that class I felt he didn’t think I had the authority to express myself that way or the understanding of the topic to represent myself the way I did.

I went to a high school where, yes, I was a minority, but people didn’t view me as one. I was ‘just another classmate’. Here it changed because people come from all over, and the college is good at making sure that underrepresented students feel welcome, like at orientation where they focus on ‘it’s OK to be diverse’. That’s why I like it here, because from the start they made it clear that ‘this is a diverse place and that you need to accept diverse people’. So in that class I kept speaking out, and now they see that I’m just one of them—that I’m intelligent, and know what I’m saying. This episode clicked in my mind and shocked me. My strategy is to understand that it happens, but just keep on going.

My professors are excellent. They view me as ‘a student, not a minority’. When I need help I go to office hours, and that’s when you get to know them. People who say that professors are invisible are people who refuse to go to office hours, and don’t want to give the professors a chance. They don’t eat with us, or go to our activities, but they care in other ways. I’ve gotten to know my psychology and Spanish professors. It makes you feel cool to know them on a personal level, and it motivates me to learn more. One of my high school teachers told me ‘it’s OK in college to ask professors for help’, to go to office hours, and I
kept that message in my head.

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Walt, a senior double major in science and the arts from the West Indies

It’s sometimes a problem being considered a representative of my race in a small setting with few blacks. When questions are presented about African Americans, everyone looks to me to see what I have to say 'because I must know everything about blacks!' It’s frustrating, but you take on that responsibility as a minority—having to teach people certain things, answer the questions and expunge what the media and our culture portray about minorities. I feel as if ‘I’m teaching the class much of the time,’ having to correct stereotypes, even on issues like abortion, that I’m not expert on. Everyone here will choose one side, but I’ll always say ‘You have to look at this;’ even if I don’t agree because I believe that in order to learn one point, you have to understand the other side as well. People are used to it by now—my immigrant, foreigner’s perspective.

Some of them don’t know things, so they don’t present the points from different perspectives that I would think of, whereas I am able to see all the handicaps against women and minorities. So I’ve become accustomed to looking for and noticing these patterns. With the students here it’s just like a light bulb coming on. ‘Wow, I never realized that women had this must disadvantage!’ So they harp on this issue, and don’t realize the broader spectrum.

This role I serve was fine for a while, but there are other people who understand these issues, and just don’t want to speak up. That’s my main concern: I know other people would like to talk about issues, but they just don’t because they’re not used to being the sole dissenter in class. It’s hard because oftentimes professors sit back and let these comments go on. They’re all about educating your peers. Last year I used this strategy, too mostly because I didn’t understand fully that we’re supposed to find our own way. I was thinking the professor knows. Because he says ‘Use the syllabus!’ he knows everything. They just sit there and watch the conversation unfold. Then I started to notice that they do that in every conversation—not just ones considering race or class or ageism. They sit back and let everyone make the most outlandish comments. And if no one corrects what’s been said, at the end of class the professor may say something, but usually they like to foster communication between the students so we’ll find our own way.

I have a few professors, mostly women and African Americans
me. The new professor took me in mid-semester and said if I had any problems ‘call me at home.’ But chemistry came easy to me in high school, and the faculty supported me here from the beginning. In the intro course, my professor knew there would be clear divide between the preparation of prep school and public school graduates. I struggled because I wasn’t used to this academic environment, and my professors sat down with me and helped me plan things out. If I needed a tutor, they’d get on it in a second—arrange everything before I could say ‘OK.’ I know that the sciences are sexist outside of college, but my African American girlfriend was one of the only female members of the department, and they went even farther out of their way for her. After she had an accident and had to leave for the semester, a professor was going to teach the class to her on his own time for free over the summer, so she could catch up.

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Reki, a junior psychology major from New York

One incident that really bothered me was when I asked my professor a question about the paper, and he said ‘You didn’t read the chapter, did you?’ I couldn’t understand why he did that. I see a lot of problems like that in my classes. In my class on race and education, it’s supposed to be controversial, but there were no radical white students to give the liberal perspective—only a few Asian students, me and one Latina. So I was the only one arguing the other side of the story, and it was hard. The others did not want to voice their opinions. The whites were saying ‘There’s no racism here, so I don’t see what the big deal is! I say Yes there is—it’s called covert racism.’

I talked to the professor a lot, but that class was a struggle. In other classes the issue of immigration comes up, and white students say ‘Why do they want to come here?’ and ‘Keep the colored people on their side!’ I try to give my point of view intelligently and calmly because if I flip out and scream at them, all they will see is an angry black person, and what I’m saying won’t affect them. I find myself much more effective when I’m calm. Probably this comes from my battles freshman year with the college Republicans. It wasn’t just my battle, but I call it that because I took it personally.

Another thing that has really concerned me is that my professor wrote an article that was published in the national press; and it said to me ‘that upper middle class students from the West Indies or rich upper class students belong here, but not me.’ At first I was angry at the thought that because I’m from a lower-income background, I’m not prepared for this college. I wanted to scream at them, and then I thought ‘Oh, so you want intellectual discourse?’ And I gave them just that: I’m taking his class anyway. It’s an in-your-face strategy, and I have an A average.
Karee, a senior psychology major from a mid-West city

I’m a scholar here and a student government leader. But my first semester here was very difficult, and I considered transferring because I didn’t feel anyone was like me. I just didn’t feel comfortable. The white students and professors didn’t seem to care whether or not I was here. When I raised my hand, I felt that my issues weren’t really addressed, or would be brushed over. I was invisible sometimes, which was pretty ironic because I was the only student of color in a white classroom! So if anything, I should have been the one everyone was looking at when certain issues got raised. My way of coping was negative; I was angry and frustrated. Instead of raising my hand I refused to participate in class, and as a result my grades dropped.

I took a different approach sophomore year. I said ‘I’m going to be heard whether you like it or not!’ I made sure I was on top of all my readings and everything so no one could say ‘She’s unintelligent’ or ‘She didn’t do her work.’ That was a more in-your-face approach to disprove the stereotype in class. It worked, because people were going to hear me whether or not they wanted to, and they started actually taking in what I had to say. They started asking more questions like ‘Based on the readings how did you come up with that?’ Well, I said, pages 30-35 say that this is what most people experience when they have to deal with these challenges.

I’ve heard over and over from friends ‘My professor isn’t helping me; I think he thinks I’m stupid; that I don’t get it. He assumes that because I come from a poor school in the city, my work shouldn’t be up to par.’ But for me after freshman year, professors thought I was kind of feisty, and said ‘Let me be careful what I say in front of her. She’s a spitfire.’ Plus, I was always taught that if you want something, you won’t get it unless you ask. So whenever I had a problem, I made sure to state the problem and to ask them to help me help myself. It made my experience here bearable.

The frustration came back junior year because things weren’t changing fast enough. I wanted the college not just to say they want diversity, but also to value it in practice. ‘Do you want to hear what we have to say in class? When we come to office hours, do you help your students?’ I stopped doing my part of getting out and meeting people to make sure I was actively engaged in making my experience as enjoyable as possible.

Professors need to learn how to take control of their classes better. Often they don’t know how to handle certain racial conversations. You may say something I take offense to, and people about it?

For things to change, I would force people to get to know other people. There’s the primary orientation for minorities, and then the general orientation when everyone comes. It could be good, but it seemed like the message was ‘OK guys, in a couple of days the rest of the students are going to come in and everything will change, so make your friends now, and be aware of white people.’ It turned out that a lot of the original bonds from that first orientation were formed then, but it also formed reverse racism. The people who made those tight bonds early didn’t want to open themselves up to the white students that were coming in.

Most of the entering freshmen are like a ball of clay you can mold. They’re up for anything. So you should have two orientations, but it would be better to have white students in the first orientation, to mix the groups up a little more and make it bigger, so that when you go into the larger orientation, the white students who participated will tell their white upper-class friends ‘It’s not that bad.’ You build friendships among the groups, and it spreads from small group to small group. The problem is that no one is trying, and a lot of people are pessimistic that the mixing of the groups will ever happen.

In the classroom faculty bend over backwards for the underrepresented students here. They have to go out of their way to make the environment the best it can be for us, and they do that. I come from a different world, and being the only one of color in the room is an advantage. In class discussions I would ask the class—who all share one view—to seriously think about the other side. Truthfully, though, if my skin color was different—darker—things would be different for me. A lot of white students here are afraid to interact with students not like themselves. It’s not their fault; it has to do with their upbringing. And because a lot of students here are very wealthy, they went to prep school. There are not a lot of minorities at private school, so their whole life is spent not interacting with this other class of people. So I would have had a lot more challenge of being socially accepted in the classroom because they don’t know any better, and because of the stereotype that ‘all black people have guns, and listen to rap music and do drugs.’ Freshman year I had to help a white guy, and he asked me where I was from, and was surprised that I was from the city because he didn’t know I was black. I told him my ethnicity and he said ‘Wow, you’re the first person of color he ever interacted with!’ It hurt me to know that.

I didn’t do well at first. I insisted on taking the upper-level class; and my advisor, instead of her saying ‘I told you so,’ switched
speech, but that’s about the limit.

Roger, a senior West Indian American science major from inner-city New England

If you’re a minority student here, you’re on financial aid and under the scrutiny of everybody. You have to do well, and that’s one of the biggest weights on our shoulders—that knowledge ‘of having to do well.’ In high school there’s no real pressure or outside influences, other than your parents, to make you nervous. But if you come here and screw up, there are always those students who say ‘My tax dollars are paying for you to be here! I have to pay full tuition and you don’t, so don’t mess up.’

This wealthy student and I were talking about affirmative action, and he thought it was a load of crap, and unfair. For a wealthy kid to say that ‘someone who comes from a poor public school doesn’t need a step up’ is ignorant, but you’ll hear that all the time. People should be more than happy that the minority class is trying to make some movement. They might be threatened that once I get my degree I may be able to get a job that they can’t. You can’t get mad at ignorant people, and you have to be ready to deal with them. In terms of life in general, I’ve met some of the most ignorant people ever here, and I feel bad for them. It’s to a point where I’m not even angry anymore; I just feel sad that they were raised in such a way that they can’t accept anything else besides what they already know. So coming with a mindset to stir things up a little is ‘really cool.’ Because that’s what you’re doing: you come here and you’re stirring things up. People are going to talk, and you have to be ready to make the biggest mark you can on this campus. A lot of minority students come here just to get their degree and leave. They find their couple of friends, and leave. But you have to be ready to stir things up.

People don’t always know that I’m black, so I hear things from both sides. A compulsory film was shown on Diversity Day, followed by a dinner and discussion. The administration thought ‘Let’s give them diversity day, and they’ll shut up. Let’s give them what they want, and make us look good!’ But the problem was that the students who really needed Diversity Day didn’t even show up. They were sleeping. So it was a joke because no one really wanted to do it. It also hurt a little to know the discussions were all one way. So even if you did have a view contrary to the mainstream minorities, you weren’t going to say it because you would have been crucified. It seemed like a witch hunt, and that’s what made it a joke. Is someone really not going to be racist because they saw a movie and talked with a bunch of it’s written all over my face, like ‘How dare you. That was so disrespectful!’ It’s not enough for the professor to say ‘I didn’t know what to do. I thought it would be good to encourage peer-to-peer conversation.’ We consider professors to be the authority, so they should step in and say ‘Your opinion is valid, and I can understand how you may think that black women in America abuse the welfare system, but you have to understand that there are other components to the issue.’ There are not a lot of us in class; and maybe we’re hypersensitive to everything so we think everything is racial. Whatever, that’s irrelevant. The fact that we’re on edge is what faculty should understand.

They need to learn more about the issues, and it’s not enough to say I don’t know about that. If you deal with a class where issues like this may come up, it’s your job to learn. I look to faculty not to make me feel comfortable, but to ensure I don’t feel attacked in the classroom, or that my race is being disrespected. I feel at times that I’ve been left hanging, especially on a topic where I obviously have experience. I would appreciate the professor who says ‘OK guys, you may be right; but look at it from her perspective. She may have a point.’ That’s how you learn different ways of thinking. What I think may be wrong, but ask me why I think what I do, or how I came to that conclusion. Ask me if my personal experience has shaped why I think what I think.

Sandra, a black senior major in African Studies from New York

One reason I switched my major from science was because you won’t find a lot of professors with experience dealing with students of color, or sensitive to our issues. My best friend stayed in science, but she is doing it on her own—she has no black mentor. Luckily her advisor, a white woman, is very helpful to her. She’s accessible, dependable and understanding, and gives her all the information you need, and the simple instructions that are important.

What’s key about her as an advisor is that she understands that college students aren’t just going to class. They’re growing—trying to figure things out. They’re stressed out with issues at home. They might not fit in here. They have all these obstacles, and sometimes academics aren’t on top of the list. While the advisor has to ensure that academics are raised in importance, they need to realize that five other things may really be affecting the student. I don’t know any other white professors in the sciences who are as supportive as she is.
Heidi, a sophomore science major from New York

I was in the top 10 in high school. I did well in English, but I came here under-prepared in sciences. I didn't know anything about labs, or how to write them up, and the TAs weren't that helpful. They gave me vague answers because they thought I knew what I was doing. It was hard asking for help from faculty or getting together for study groups with students—not in asserting myself, but with having a problem with pride and the inability to say 'I'm having trouble getting it.' I got the help from my roommate, a biology major who had all these courses at her boarding school.

I took two science courses my first semester, and two sciences and a math second semester. I know that in taking intro courses, the professors think we automatically know certain things when we don't. In chemistry and biology last year, I knew, maybe three weeks worth of information. That's it. So I have all these holes everywhere, and was always trying to catch up. But every time I caught up, it was too late. The difference was in where we had gone to school.

I wanted to go to med school, but I'm not sure anymore because it was way too hard. My professors told me 'Study, get a tutor, and come to review sessions.' The problem was that if I needed one on one with the professor, and if they had only two office hours in the week, and you couldn't make them, you had to find someone else to help you, and I don't do too well with tutors. I guess I wasn't talking to the right people. I don't know the right places to go—and if they're there, they're not publicized. I didn't know where to go to find out. I passed all my lab courses with Cs or C-minus across the board—no matter how much time or effort I put in. And everything from there went downhill. One professor shot down my dream. He said 'You can't write! Go to the Writing Center.' The problem was that I had already gone. So it was like 'what do I do now?' The writing center is run by students, and it wasn't helping me.

It's hard because in high school I made sure that I was doing everything I could to get good grades in the right courses. I excelled in math and sciences, and I came here with the dream of becoming a doctor. Now all these courses I'm supposed to be taking are just going down the drain. So all I have left is my strong ability to write. At least that's all I had.

The problem for first generation students here is the science and math deficiencies. My mentor, a dean, encouraged me to come back after I left first year. And she meant well to say 'Don't be a doctor,' but she should have helped me look for other schools when I wasn't making the grade here. I basically gave up. I a lot of people have problems staying in college. I don't think I could stay here four years. I'm different from other students because they would be happy getting good grades. But to me, it's putting me down. It's like saying 'I'm not even worth it.' It really bothers me knowing that I get special attention, but not in the right way. I'd rather have them give me a C on a paper that they know I did bad on, and say 'You're really off,' than an A on a paper that is horrible.

What's keeping me here is that I saved two years. And also some of my classes are very interesting. Some professors are outstanding; others are not. But the seminar classes are special. There is nowhere else that you will have six or eight people to one professor in a class. We also have a great library and great resources. However, the environment doesn't fit with me. These people are completely different, and not necessarily in a bad way, but they're completely separate. It's supposed to be a liberal school, but sometimes it's really not.

Fiona, a social science /Pre Med African sophomore African born

I wanted a small school where classes were small, and where the setting is intimate so you can get to know your professors fully, one on one. In my stats class, he walks around to each person to make sure you're not making an error. In a big school, I don't think my professor would be going from person to person, and I like that feeling.

But I'm used to being the only minority in class where, for some reason, when you're talking about minority issues, the whole class looks at you as an example. But it's not done intentionally. In French class yesterday, the conversation turned to 'what is discrimination and what is racism?' And people turned to me, but I didn't personally know about racism was until I was 12. I knew what it was like in South Africa because I'm African, and it affected all of us at the time. But I never really dealt with the fact this happens because of the color of your skin, or because of your sexuality or religion until I came here.

Faculty are kind of invisible here. In high school I knew so many of them, but here the faculty are only around when they have a class. You don't see them everyday, so they're not as accessible. You select your classes, and only see those four professors. Also, if a professor did support a student in a certain manner, people in his department would probably look at him differently, detracting from his professional standing. If they want to help they'll give a
people, and I thought ‘I’m her advisee and she never picked me!’ I can only smile about it now because I try not to hold that much anger inside. It’s not productive and I don’t feel like wasting a lot of energy on that. But I’ve made it. That summer I got into Duke I was the happiest person in the world.

And I must say that if they’re looking strictly at test scores and grades, they probably wouldn’t pick me because I’m not a straight-A student. But once I know something I know it. It’s more or less about the grades because you need that foundation. But it’s also about the person. There are people here who can automatically take any test, but you wouldn’t want them as a professional at your bedside. I can directly relate to people, and have a genuine desire to help them. That’s important. Working at the hospital and having people there look at me as someone they want to see, I think is special. I was one of 14 students last summer in a program that received over 600 applications. I definitely had the grades to get into these programs, so you have to look at more than just grades. And I’ve been lucky that they have.

Anna, a senior African American psychology major from New York

Right now I’m applying to social work school and for fellowship opportunities. I came here at age 17 as a college junior, and am now graduating at 19 years old. I’m a work study as an administrative assistant.

College should be a great experience, but aside from academics, there are so many things that need fixing here. The #1 issue is the need for the campus to become more diverse; that’s why students don’t stay and graduate. With that comes curriculum and faculty. Recruit more minorities. In high school I was very involved in organizations. Now I do my work and go home. Students think I’m dumb because of misconceptions they were raised with in their home environment.

I had a difficult first semester. In classes I felt I wasn’t being taken seriously. People would make side remarks, or their physical posture would be ‘Not her again!’ I felt that the faculty were patronizing me, in a sense. I would hand in work that wasn’t the best, and I would receive good grades that I knew I didn’t deserve. I approached several professors and asked ‘Is this because I graduated from the college high school, so you don’t expect much from me? Or is this something deeper, having to do with race maybe?’ So it was very difficult, and I can see why finally found a professor, a woman in my woman and gender class who reached out to me at the same time I was reaching out to her. We’ve gone to lunch and dinner. Now I come to speak with her, and she has given me good advice. The faculty here make it easy to contact them, so they try, but sometimes they don’t understand why I’m having difficulty. They don’t understand where I come from. They’re trying here, but some things just aren’t working.

Isiah, a senior social science major from inner-city New England

“It’s noticeable that you’re the only minority in the classroom—just the fact that your views are different. And people are stunned when you give your input because they have never had that take on an issue, or maybe they never thought that would be a valid take. It’s an advantage, though, because I have eyes nobody else does. I make sure that my voice is heard, that my stance is valid. If I didn’t have this mentality, I would never have come here.

With professors, however they direct the reaction to what is said in class determines how students feel about an issue because students believe that the professor is the authority. So whatever he or she says, students respond with ‘Oh, so that’s what I’m supposed to be thinking!’ If the professor is always disagreeing with someone in particular, that has an effect on that person, and on how the class thinks in general. I have a paranoia in class, often thinking ‘Oh, he’s against me,’ although sometimes I know it’s just a different view, not that he’s against me.

Still, I feel isolated in class because I’m black and everyone else is white. And even if I had known it would be like that, I would never have known what affect it would have on me until I actually experienced it. But I’m open to any challenge! For what they’re paying me to come here, I’ll have challenges to face, and I’ll face them if they’ll make me a better person. You’re the figure in the classroom who will be speaking for different populations that are not present, and which the others in the class have not been immersed in. So the students of color often use the mechanism of staying quiet, assuming no one cares. That’s the problem: when students internalize things, sit there and do nothing. They’ll witness something said in the classroom that really disturbs them, or that feels inappropriate, but they don’t deal with it then, but rather after class with their own friends. And that’s not effective.
The professor who taught the basic freshman class here was excellent as to how she helped the two or three black minority students in class. She left this year. The questions she posed helped us recognize we had something to say. And we decided to speak up because she made it comfortable for us to speak. Sociology majors typically have liberal-minded professors, and their experiences here have been very positive because of this.

Arlene, a multiracial undecided sophomore from the South

My first-year advisor who teaches about power and the lasting effects of colonialism made me more aware of why sometimes I’m almost overly-motivated to prove that I’m here for a reason, and not just here. There are so few of us, it feels like we have to show why we’re here. It’s so hard to get in— that should be enough proof that you’re supposed to be here. But people question it all the time—not with statements, but just with looks and in how they approach you. A few black girls here were in the parking lot, and a freshman came up and asked them ‘Are you guys on a field trip?’ It’s not vicious, just clueless—oblivious. If it were a group of white girls, people would assume they go here; but a group of students of color, they figure we must just be visiting—that we don’t really belong.

New students should be aware that in the classroom you will probably be the only person of color. But don’t feel intimidated. Sure, it’s a bit jarring to sit and notice that no one looks like you. It hurts a little, but it’s not intimidating. Unless you go to an HBCU, you have to expect that. You just really have to understand yourself to a degree. At such a young age, you can’t know everything, but you need to know what you want from the class, and have motivation. Without it you can get caught up and feel overwhelmed, like I’m the only one. This can’t rest on my shoulders! It’s a heavy burden. It’s not just that you feel this way, but that other people treat you this way. Like whenever there’s a question about black people, they look at you and say ‘Don’t you know about that?’ And I think ‘I don’t know everything!’ I’m only one black person, and can’t represent all blacks. It’s silly but people expect you to anyway.

The faculty don’t want to make the distinctions even though they know it’s silly to act as if we’re all the same. If I were a faculty member I would acknowledge these differences, and not just gloss over them. They need to be real about things, and not try to keep everything cool so everyone is happy, because that doesn’t work. If we’re having a discussion about race, they need you had been in the room you would have heard me say, ‘That’s none of your business!’ After break we spoke again, and she asked me ‘What have you decided? Maybe you should take an African American studies class?’ I’m mostly very poised and in control, and don’t usually lose my patience, but I said ‘Do I look like I’m interested in taking African American studies this semester?’ And then, very frankly: ‘Dr. So and So, are you trying to discourage me from my studies as a pre-med student?’ And she said ‘Why no; why would I do that?’ I said ‘I don’t know why you would do that. Do you know why you would do that?’ Then she said she’d approve any program I wanted.

I was also a bit intimidated seeing professors hand pick the students they want to work with. That’s a reality in all colleges; and the fact that no one had hand picked me was obvious. It’s like a rite of passage for us black women. What’s sad is that my friend, who was also going to be pre-med, isn’t anymore after having that same experience. I have to admit that it is hard to go to a predominantly white school, and find professors who exactly click with you. It’s hard to find mentors, and I’m still looking, although I still talk to my mentor from high school.

When I realized the professors weren’t choosing me, I definitely didn’t let that hold me down, and instead sought out other opportunities at other universities, like an internship at Duke Medical School during my sophomore year, and a research project at Johns Hopkins Medical School last summer. I also work at a hospital in the city during the academic year. I’ve always been one of only two black women in the department. That experience helped us recognize we had something to say. And we decided—very frankly: ‘Dr. So and So, are you trying to discourage me from my studies as a pre-med student?’ And she said ‘Why no; why would I do that?’ I said ‘I don’t know why you would do that. Do you know why you would do that?’ Then she said she’d approve any program I wanted.

Some of my professors here have been surprised to learn what I’ve done, but most of them don’t know, and they may not know until I come back as an alum. Then they’ll say ‘Oh, wasn’t that the girl who...’ They’ve always encouraged me to come to office hours, but they didn’t offer me the opportunity to work with them. My advisor was one of the professors who get to hand pick
Aimee, a Pre-Med senior Latina from New York

I was on top of my game in high school, but I felt lost in the transition to college. It was so hard staying focused that first year. As a senior looking back now, I see that I overestimated my abilities and underestimated the process of settling in. Being black and female made it even harder. Here I am—a Haitian-American from New York, and I had to realize I am not the majority anymore. Even though my high school A.P. classes were with mostly white students, I had to confront the fact that here I'm not only a minority as an individual, but also within the field that I'm trying to pursue. I'm on State scholarship, and in high school always trying to be the best, the let down in college was a little scary. I finally realized that I may not be the best, and my pre-med goals are going to be challenged. ‘Do I want to be a doctor or not?’ All the challenges and choices in selecting classes, and trying to come into your own—trying not to mess up—were hard.

That first year I didn’t know how to study. You had your groove in high school—you knew what to expect. Here you’re dealing with different professors and different personalities. ‘Do you read the whole book or not?’ But seeing other students in class who were having the same troubles made it much easier. You kind of giggled in the extra-help sessions when the questions you were wondering about got asked. Coming into a classroom now I can automatically gauge whether it will be lecture-based or more book-based, but I couldn’t do it at first. I had to talk to people to figure it out; and rely on my own skill of ‘being a quick learner.’ But I was confused for a long time.

For the most part the professors are very supportive, too; but early on I had a horrible experience. My advisor in the first two years didn’t seem to want me to go into the sciences. She was a department head, and every semester she would tell me to ‘take a class outside of the sciences,’ and not really encourage me to pursue my interest. At first I didn’t catch on because at a liberal arts college, you’re supposed to take a variety of courses. But sophomore year when I told her I wanted to major in chemistry, she asked why? and I said ‘I like chemistry.’ And she said, ‘I don’t think that’s a good idea because it’s only going to get harder.’ If

Helen, a biracial freshman from the South

One overall challenge for a lot of women of color here is overcoming the idea of ‘being the militant one in the classroom.’ It’s a general fear that if you speak up in class about something racial, or as a feminist about feminism, people will remember you as militant or radical, and you get ignored. So in class you hold back what you want to say In the struggle for voice, people don’t listen to you because they think you’re nuts.

I spend lots of time trying to reword what I’m trying to say; and it’s very hard to be honest when you know the other students don’t want to hear it. The faculty could be better at facilitating if they were more aware that we hold back because we worry that people won’t listen to us. Faculty could help open the dialogue; and I am optimistic about their interest in doing that because a lot of them come from the same base of thought as me—even if I’m more left. We both have a general understanding of the movement towards equality.

I knew this school was really white, but it’s also one of the most progressive schools, which is one reason I decided to come. I intend to go to med school, and I’m totally relaxed here—not nearly as high-strung as in boarding school in New England where I had to get all As. Here it’s relaxing not have to memorize everything, and I have no real problems with my academics.
Janel, an undecided African American freshman from a Mid-Atlantic state

We haven’t had the same U.S. history in high school, so most of us from the inner city know things that the others here don’t, and it can try your patience. We were talking about the Great Migration the other day, a basic part of our education. But a lot of people didn’t know what that was.

Faculty of color don’t necessarily need to know you, but on their way to their car, they’ll stop you and ask ‘Who are you? What year are you? Where are you from?’ Or ‘You might be interested in this. I’m teaching this class next year.’ Or ‘There is this junior you may want to talk to.’ But most faculty don’t do that. And since you don’t necessarily have the incentive to go to their building to meet them, it’s nice when they go out of their way to meet you.

Jasmine, a Latina freshman from the West, considering transfer

My fear is of getting in here by affirmative action because I lack basic facts. My high school wasn’t good, and I feel inadequate and wonder if I should even be here. I feel I need to work ten times harder than the others. And I don’t participate in class because I’m afraid of being considered stupid.

I’m still adjusting to the workload, and it’s hard. Professors and students have said things that bothered me. One made a joke about the State of Georgia being in the Middle Ages, and everyone laughed. I took offense because I can imagine what he must think of Texas!

Over all, though, the faculty have been very understanding of everyone. They meet you at your needs. I haven’t felt patronized or condescended to. I came here not even knowing the registration process, and my academic advisor was super-supportive. His patience impressed me. Other faculty, too—although it feels like they’re not really here because we only have classes three times a week, and that’s the only time we see them. I’d feel more comfortable with them around more because it would be better to talk about my work more than once a week. I don’t like going to their offices because I don’t want them to think that I’m incapable of doing the work, or less capable than the other students.

What’s special is the rigorous academic curriculum here. But
Unfortunately, the faculty of color can’t be so helpful because they’re so over-burdened, so I go where the help is. My advisor, a white man, is very helpful. If you can get beyond color and gender, and just try to see what the professors are about, they might be very enthusiastic and helpful. But don’t expect too much. You need to take some responsibility in picking and choosing. Some people use faculty like therapists and babysitters or mommies, and that’s not fair.

Angel, a senior science major from South America and New York

I went to a very competitive and diverse high school, and I came to college with a bit too much confidence. So in my first semester the schedule seemed easy. My over-confidence made me constantly participate in class. I’m a Type A personality, so it seemed like I thought I had all the answers; and sometimes the professors stopped calling on me, which is understandable. But really, I didn’t want my professors to know that my grades were slipping. Also, I’d see them around campus, and say hello, but they wouldn’t say hello back, probably not hearing me. Even so, I felt ignored.

The work snuck up on me, though. My perception was that anything outside of the city seemed beneath me intellectually. I felt under-worked—like I was coasting. Plus, I had known how to deal with stress and tons of work in high school when I was an athlete and taking ten classes straight. But here I thought I was sitting on my brain—until finals came up. By mid-semester everything started piling up, and I didn’t know how to deal with it. I tried to work it out on my own because I’m fiercely independent, and also I was scared of the faculty. I’m not used to going to office hours. At the time I felt that the professors favored other students over me; but now that I think I about it, I realize that was a poor excuse for not going to see them.

My roommate would sleep around, and I’d have a chemistry exam the next morning, and couldn’t get into the room. I thought I’d go crazy. I saw it coming and finally said, ‘This is not as easy as I thought it was going to be.’ One of the ways I got myself out of that ambivalent state that first semester was to move out of my room into a single. The rooms are small to begin with, but when you’re alone you’re able to come to terms with what your priorities are—what you have to get done—and you’re able to think more clearly. During that first difficult month on campus, I didn’t talk to any of the faculty, and I still have trouble doing

Zakia, an African American junior science major from a Western city

I had serious challenges in the academic setting, and strategies to deal with them. The first issue was just dealing with the fact of being accepted. I knew I belonged but I didn’t know they knew I belonged! I was recruited to play ball; but the admissions office knew I didn’t perform well on SATs. So it felt like I ‘was given a free pass,’ and felt I’d always be under a watch; or ‘that I was a test run.’

Worse, I had no real clues in classroom, which I know was my own issue. Still, I felt intimidated, and I just recently got over that, after being away and coming back. I realized that it was all in my head and that the students here aren’t any smarter than I am. Once I got over the language differences, and learned to ‘decipher that language,’ I recognized that the concepts they were using didn’t make them smarter. In fact some of what they were saying was nonsense.

Also, I wouldn’t go to office hours because I felt I didn’t need a handout. I had a good advisor in the dean. But I thought she knew that I was here under false pretenses, so I didn’t listen to anything. I felt I had to prove my worth by doing everything on my own. I learned the hard way. I’m doing really well now.

Barbara, an African American freshman arts major from the South

The transition moving here from home in Georgia was surprisingly hard, although I have been in predominantly white settings before. Here there are five variations on a course on art, but only one on African American woman anything! It would be comforting to learn more about one’s culture and other ethnic groups. Plus there are no black men in my class.

They encourage independent thinking, but there is definitely a liberal rhetoric that exists here which says ‘Yeah, we’re all color-blind, but not really. I’m liberal and voted for Kerry, and I really like your bandana, but I can’t wear one because I’m not black.’ They think that because you’re for gay rights or you have a Kerry sticker, it excludes you from examining your own presumptions and prejudices about race and about ‘the other’.

In the classroom, I sometimes let a comment go because I don’t want to get into it. But I don’t plan to always let it roll off my back. I believe in picking your battles. ‘You don’t have to be
black to wear a bandana, if you want to. Feel free.’ It’s a personal choice, not a thing about color. That girl went to a predominantly black high school in California. It’s a type of ignorance that if I’m around black people, I can comment.

The faculty are somewhat of an absent presence, and I don’t know any yet. When they’re here they’re supportive, but you don’t really see them outside of their offices or classes. You’ll see them walking to class, and they’ll go to certain major student events. But they have their own separate eating area where the students are not permitted to go. They’re good teachers, though. And it would be nice if you could feel comfortable going to see an advisor you weren’t assigned to. Or that they would come to activities like the hip-hop symposium, or lectures on race; or see the showing of ‘The City of God.’

Dawn, a senior Native American social science major from the Midwest

Because everyone here is well educated, and worked so hard to get here, many people in the first semester are intimidated and doubt themselves, and say ‘I don’t know if I’m supposed to be here.’ That’s something I’ve never felt. I know I belong here, and that I work just as hard as anyone, and can achieve as well as anyone.

But what did bother me was some of the cultural differences. In my first-year seminar I was shocked and offended because the students seemed disrespectful to the professor. That’s the first time I’d seen people my age interrupt an elder, especially so educated. The body language was disrespectful. At home you’re not supposed to make eye contact with an elder talking to you. You just listen, and you’re saying a lot just by the way you look. The students in the classes assumed a lot of authority in the way they looked at the professors, and in their body language—gestures that I couldn’t comprehend because they were so jarring. I had been exposed to this type of student behavior slowly over the years, in the National Honor Society, and playing basketball. But here it was a whole other level. Consequently, I didn’t speak up as much as everyone else. Also I had to deal with the fact that thirty percent of the grade is based on class participation, and had a hard time balancing that requirement out with how I was brought up. It took me a few years.

Sophomore year I talked to some of my professors, but it felt so rude to fight for talk time; to interrupt people, and it was hard for me. The definitions of a leader at home aren’t necessarily

As for the white professors, I can’t feel or notice their presence. They’re not as relevant in this area. But I can think of a few of them who are well respected on campus. And students would listen to them if they put themselves out there and spoke out against these things. But they haven’t. One white male professor did come out with a few lectures on free speech versus hate speech after the last racial incident. That was better than nothing.

Sonya, a Mexican-American senior in American Studies from a western city

This is the best financial package and the best school that accepted me, so of course I’m glad about that. But people in my situation have experienced problems with paying, and not having enough help from financial services. The biggest concern I hear is about having to constantly ‘keep an eye on the financial situation.’ You’re given a certain package when you get here, and it’s usually pretty good if you need it; but as the years go on, some of it disappears. They say ‘you made this amount of money, etc.’ And a good group of students, whose parents don’t speak English as a first language, don’t understand these forms. My mom doesn’t understand them and she works in an office. They’re confusing, and if you mess them up, six months later they get fixed, but in the meantime you’re left stranded. Sometimes ‘I think I’m going crazy! Are we the only students with these problems?’ One thousand dollars is due next week or you get kicked out; and a lot of students don’t know that ‘they can’t just kick you out like that.’

I hate to say this, but sometimes I feel ungrateful for not getting enough money, whereas most people are just happy to get any. My philosophy is ‘I wouldn’t be here at all if you didn’t pay for it.’ For me or my mom to pay even this small amount you ask of me is a lot of money for us. I think this kind of education should be free to everyone because you can’t just float by with a high school education. We all need a solid college experience to make a future for ourselves.

In the classroom I’m more politically minded now, and my politics have changed. At first I was in that role of ‘being the race person.’ I was supposed to be the authority on slave ships, for example, and I’d say ‘I don’t know what that was like!’ My classes taught me ‘to challenge the authoritative voice,’ and to be critical of what I read—to put an issue in context. Now I see that things are tied together in a more organic ways than the way we all separate them. The professors are very good at teaching us about that.
would give extra points to students who had misunderstood the question. It’s one of those things that you can’t really say ‘it’s our color’ or ‘our level of knowledge.’ From that I just learned to work harder.

Maise, a senior Latina from the West, majoring in political studies

My main issue in the classroom is the lack of your typical white male students in ethnic studies classes. Their absence hinders conversation and the discourse of race relations outside of class, too. You’ll have a great discussion about awareness and discrimination, but beyond the classroom, the only students who talk about race relations are Hispanic or black. It’s not something that white students necessarily connect to or want to talk about. You’re preaching to the choir who all see the inequities. It’s the place of only minority students to talk about it. And in a weird sense, I get a lot of questions from professors at office hours like ‘Why are you interested in Latin American politics?’ I’m a lighter skinned person, and it’s the idea of passing. I look white, and am white in a lot of ways. The feeling is that only the minority students can talk about it, and only those who appear to have the darker skin are allowed to have the discourse about ‘how I feel disconnected with the campus,’ or ‘I feel like the minority in so many ways that other students.’ Recently there was another explosion of homophbic dialogue which brings in a whole different aspect of what the majority is allowed to say to the minority. These issues are about power relations.

Recently, the school has become more aware of what type of faculty members they choose to teach here, and it’s making a difference, a slow difference. But it is working. This is a good place. It offers a highly challenging academic environment. The classroom dynamic allows students to speak out and swap ideas, and think out loud with the professor. But most of these discussions are in classes directed at African Diaspora studies, where the professor knows a lot. Even last semester, in classes not so directed, when the racial incidents were increasing, professors thought it was necessary to have those conversations. In a Spanish literature class, my professor said ‘I think it’s important that we talk about what’s going on right now.’ There were campus-wide meetings, and she said ‘You guys need to go!’ So there have been situations where professors stepped into the role of community facilitator. One black professor pushes these buttons on both sides to create these discussions. He’s done it effectively, and I am glad he was here. It would have been handled differently if he wasn’t. That’s when the good conversations happened.

The relationships I established here with adults are stronger outside the classroom, like HEOP. Where the faculty eat has a little divider, so they don’t eat with the students, but I never expected to have a close relationship with a professor. It’s mostly students’ lack of initiative to go see them that is the major barrier to having a relationship. Students can be intimidated by professors, and I was too for a long time. But when I heard other students talking about how it helped when they did go to see them, I began to do it, too.

Sue, an African American sophomore social science major from the Midwest

If you’re the only student of color in the class, to be asked continually to be the authority and ‘speak for your race’ is problematic because it assumes one black identity or experience. And I think people feel the need to simplify something that’s not simple. Also it reinforces the notion of second-class citizenship: one black kid is the same as another. I refuse to be an authority or a representative. I’m more interested in being treated as an individual student than ‘the token black.’

And there is a larger concern: we need more students of color here. But the next thing that follows from a lot of students and faculty is: ‘We don’t have enough money for that!’ They’re under the assumption that all students of color here are not as wealthy, and may go so far as to assume that students of color ‘don’t meet the standard.’ Nothing is ever said straight out, though. We talk about diversity, but instead we get hung up on ‘how can we afford this?’ Some students have never been forced to question their assumptions; black students come here and expect to. We have a small endowment, but we find the money to pay for lots of things, including buying up property and fixing buildings. But we can’t afford merit-based scholarships.

I have a well-known professor. I’m interested in the course and we shared other interest, so he was made my academic advisor. We were supposed to be like peanut butter and jelly, but it’s just not the case. I was having financial aid issues and was crying in his office. Yet not once did he offer to make a phone call. A friend said ‘Why didn’t you ask him?’ And I said ‘He’s my advisor; should I really have to ask him?’ In that type of situation where
you feel you’re not being helped, you’re’ wondering why,’ and I think that affects your attitude. People are interested in snapping my picture for the admissions brochure, but not enough to help me with my financial aid situation or give me an advisor who actually cares.

Lisa, a Mexican-American sophomore from the West interested in philosophy

I was intimidated at first because everybody had gone to prep schools and knew exactly what to say in class. They had all the right answers, and faculty responded very well to their regurgitation because it made their job a lot easier. So it was really difficult for me at first. Of course it changed as my professors changed, but I found myself facing this challenge all the time. And because of this I didn’t feel like I connected to anyone, or could connect to anyone. I didn’t feel that people respected my opinion.

At first when I walk into a classroom, ‘people think I’m white,’ so they don’t care about me; they think I’m like them. Then they hear my name, and become more interested in what I have to say, more critical, more judgmental. My comments are already strange because I’m not coming from where they are; and they’re strange because they’re Mexican comments. They’re just like ‘This girl is different, and she is less than me so I’m not going to take her comment seriously.’ I felt that a lot in my classes. You say something in class and expect people to respond, and usually they do; but when I say something no one responds. Not even the professor. I don’t know if the comments were strange, but a lot of it had to do with my own insecurities, and I was frightened. I was never surrounded by so many white people, and I couldn’t handle it.

The white people in the West are white, but not really white. That is, everyone at my high school goes to grad school, and are surrounded by people of color. You don’t have a choice. You’re threatened by them, but you’re also friends with them. And you live near ghettos. That’s how you live. You become a little more color-blind, but I know that’s impossible to really be. In a way it’s not that important; or they at least understand what it’s like to be a person of color. White people here have no sense of what it means to be a person of color. ‘So people here think I’m not actually a person of color—like it was some kind of accident.’ Being able to pass makes me always want to tell people: This has been hard for me! And although I don’t want people to feel sorry for me, I do want them to know—and I feel like just telling them. But by my name they’re already aware that I’m having

assignment was something different. I ended up with an A in the class, so I don’t think what I wrote affected me adversely, but he definitely knew how we felt about what he had done.

If I were looking for something to happen on this campus it would be for professors to know how to deal with situations when race and other issues come up. Definitely. How do you negotiate these conflicts? Many of them just keep silent. This is supposed to be a free marketplace of ideas, which doesn’t really exist, because there is always the point where the minority does not feel free to speak. There needs to be some way for professors to negotiate the class discussion when that conversation arises. To let you know when a viewpoint is not acceptable. Even at a university where speech is supposed to be paramount, there are certain standards that we must uphold as a community for all of us to feel safe and to actively engage in intellectual discourse. There’s a difference between intellectual discourse and hate.

There is a group of black students who hate it here because of subtle things, like Jewish writers will qualify as a general requirement, but black women writers won’t. Or the black women’s writers’ class is cancelled every other semester because they can’t find some one to teach it. And self selection explains why most black students will not be in your class, if ‘the syllabus is all white people.’ If you’re a faculty you self-select when you only go to the College Democrats meeting, but you haven’t been to the black student organization ever! It’s about ‘choosing what you want to know.’ Professors tend to believe that there are more black people here than there really are because haven’t looked at the statistics for the college.

Hilda, a Latina sophomore psychology major from New York

Faculty make students of color feel ‘both comfortable and not.’ I say this because when I’ve taken a class with a professor of color, and I felt he was being harder on the students of color because he expected more from us. He expected us to contribute more to the class setting because we would have more personal experiences to share. It’s one of those issues that’s hard to talk about. Another math professor was treating my friend and I differently, but it wasn’t because we were of color. He just didn’t think we could do the work. I know he graded us differently because when I brought up some test issues with him, like the confusing way he worded items, he said he worded it very clearly. But then when another student brought the same issue up, he said ‘You’re right,’ and announced to the class that he
Yolanda, an African American senior social science major from New York

I’m trying to graduate early, but it makes it difficult to write this final paper when you’re trying to convince your professor of the legitimacy of the topic at the same time you’re trying to forge an argument. Doing both those things has been a harrowing experience for me. It’s not an open discussion of ‘I don’t think you should write about this.’ It’s just a strain I get whenever I try to put forward an issue. When I first told him of the topic, he said ‘Well, it’s OK, but you may want to talk about equal protection law more in general, and not so specific to black women.’ Black women have a strange position of invisibility in our society anyway, and I saw this as a valid struggle in the civil rights movements and feminist movements. And he says ‘I’m not sure there’s that much to talk about black women.’ But you can count on one hand the people who have written about black women and on two fingers about black women and equal protection or constitutional law specifically in an academic and intellectual way. So it is new ground, and I could see if his criticism was more that ‘I wouldn’t have a lot of sources, and that I’d have to do a lot of raw digging and forging my own material.’ But it was more ‘I’m not sure this is a group that is worth discussing.’ He’s admitted recently—now that I’ve written 60 pages—that he ‘doesn’t know much about this issue,’ but I wish he would have said it from the outset because I was open about my need and desire to write about black women. He could have said ‘I’ll be your advisor if you need one because I’m the only one who doesn’t have a full load, but I intend to consult X, Y and Z in the process, and maybe you can talk to them directly.’

There are other classroom experiences that need addressing. In one situation the professor would consistently call the Indian woman at the back of the class Pujo, even though that was not her name. And he’d say to the woman who sits next to her ‘Hi, my Greek friend, and now pass that along to your friend from the sub-continent.’ He’d make offhand comments like ‘All people that were brought to America on slave ships were savages and beasts.’ That class had 100 people, and my black friend and I—sitting in the front row—walked out. I sent him an email later, and went to his office hours. Unfortunately, there were a million other problems on campus that were occupying my time, so I didn’t do anything further.

I remember freshman year when the professor went around the room asking people their names, he skipped over ‘the only two people of color in the room’—me and another woman. Later he had us do a writing exercise, and we both wrote about that particular experience of being overlooked, even though the more difficulty than they are.

What affected my studies more than even that in the first semester, really, was that I had no idea how to write a paper. I wrote papers in high school, but not like this, so I was bombarded with all this work, and had no idea what was going on. I did it, and got good grades. That’s what motivated me: coming from a place where I didn’t have the advantages of prep school, and still I got good grades.

You go to professors’ office hours, and they try to be helpful, but they say ‘What are you writing about? What is this? I don’t understand! You’re going into this diatribe! You just have to focus on the argument. Blah, blah, blah!’ It wasn’t ‘I see that you’re having difficulty. I know that you haven’t had much experience writing papers, and your idea is good.’ Instead—immediately from the get-go it’s ‘You’re doing this wrong! Please conform to what we need you to conform to because you’re here and we don’t want to have to deal with this achievement gap.’

One night a group of us hung out and started talking about how bad we felt here, and how we never felt this way at home. Never had I felt singled out for ‘being Mexican,’ and my best friend for ‘being black.’ Of course in our very personal, deep darkest places in ourselves we have, but never so publicly. My friend thought that people would immediately think she was stupid—her professors, her classmates would think she was stupid, and they would never give her a chance. So she never spoke in class. She just had no chance. They just didn’t respect her opinion at all.

In my classes the discussion is always geared around this assumption of what is right, and it always seems that ‘what is right is a white opinion about things.’ Everyone has similar opinions, because without widespread diversity in the classes, the discussion tends to be narrow.

I believe that the professors here care very little about the students of color and of lower social class and how it’s difficult for them to be taught—seeing us as people, as human beings with problems that go beyond ‘I am anorexic and my girlfriend hates me.’ I have a societal impediment. ‘You white professor are an oppressor to me, and I need you to see that—to be especially sensitive to the fact that you are my authoritarian. I hate you, sort of.’ And they’re totally unaware.

I can just pretend to my professors that I’m just white and upper class because it’s easier. They don’t want to be made uncomfortable. They talk about the music of the Doors, and ‘how
cool it is.’ They don’t know that we don’t just listen to white music, or do white things. You have to address that! It’s irritating when you feel that your professors are talking to a group of your peers, and you are singled out because they are all white, from the same background, and all their parents went to Harvard, too. It’s frightening. You’re in this strange pool of pre-professionals who will rule the world soon, and you somehow ended up here. And you’re getting a first-hand account, and want to warn everyone: ‘Look what’s going on. All these white people are conspiring against all of us.’

So often I’ll be in a group of white girls here talking in class, and in their conversation—not knowing I’m not white—they say something racist. If a black girl is in the class, they’ll be really sensitive to it, and that’s equally annoying. But what’s really disturbing is being in a class without a black person, and the students will be really relieved because then they don’t have to discuss these issues. So I’ve learned how to speak in class without ‘sounding rash,’ without making people feel uncomfortable. I’m vocal, but I say things ‘in the white way’ so people were able to swallow it, and that gives me more confidence. Everything changed for me when I was able to speak in class, and when I realized that in writing papers, the form matters most. I felt very confident, and feel that my ideas are actually better formed and better developed than some of theirs.

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Joe, a sophomore technology major from New York

“My parents enrolled me in every after-school science enrichment program, but I was never part of POSSE. I came here after going to all black schools. because I wanted to meet other kinds of people.

It was a big transition from public high school to private college, and I’m still going through it now, especially since the courses get progressively harder. I’m not sure how to solve the problem of being under-prepared because even with all the help, I haven’t learned the proper study habits, and other things I need to succeed. My faculty advisor and the deans try to help, but it’s hard to implement changes because I’m not used to setting aside three hours a day to study for a class. It’s also the personal issue of not being used to pushing myself, and I’m not sure how to solve that. It took me a while to find the time management dean here. I had heard her name, but at first I didn’t know what they were talking about. Me, a guy in the top ten percent of my high school class.”

CLAUDIA, A SENIOR PANAMANIAN-AMERICAN ECONOMICS MAJOR FROM A MID-ATLANTIC STATE

As a woman of color, it’s difficult to separate the challenges of being a woman and being of color because for each it’s necessary to ‘prove yourself above and beyond.’ The bar set at the level to prove my worth is higher than it might be for another student. I don’t know if it’s a gender thing, or a race thing. When it comes to assigning roles in group settings, I have to go above and beyond to prove I am worthy of responsibility—of being taken seriously. This also has a lot to do with my approach and strategy to dealing with the group. I’ll usually sit back, and not say ‘You do this and you do that.’ As a result the good work I do doesn’t usually come out until much later, when people realize I was integral to the project’s outcome.

As to gender and race playing a part here, I don’t like to put that label on people. But it’s always a surprise to me when men or other women are immediately given the chance to handle a job instead of me. The highest level being designated is never given to me. It’s a very subtle thing; and may have to do with their personal relationship with the professor. But I’m not the type to stand up and say ‘That’s not fair! Why did you overlook me?’

Being Hispanic, gender has played more of a role than race in my understanding of myself as Latina. It has a lot to do with ‘machismo,’ and with women who are docile and subservient. What’s special about being here is that the professors make a conscious effort to bring race and gender into play in classroom conversations. I really appreciate the ones who are aware of cultural differences and are willing to pose those challenges to us, and validate our concerns about these issues. They are willing to bring race and gender to the table, even when it doesn’t seem obvious from the surface. ‘If this is an example of job discrimination, how can we tease out any other problems that might exist? Can we use these particular cases to be applied to other instances or people, and does it matter?’ How you look at these issues, and turn them over and over, make us more cognizant of the fact that the world is not black and white. There is no one answer to how people live or experience things. To be well-rounded means accepting differences and being willing to work with that.

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