

WOMEN

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Presumed Incompetent: Women of Color on Campus

After nine months teaching, **Angela Mae Kupenda** looked forward to a summer for the scholarly work she would need to get tenure. Instead her white dean insisted she spend the summer teaching struggling students. "We need you to teach all summer . . . because you are black, you are a woman, you are a great teacher, and you nurture, mother, feed, and nurse all the students," he told her.

She repeated his words back to him. "You just described a mammy," she said. "I guess I will have to be a mammy for you nine months a year, but . . . three months a year I must try to be a scholar."

For **Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo**, the corporatization of the university heightens student assumptions of white privilege. A white male student asked her to cancel a class session because he didn't feel like attending and his parents paid her salary. She told him she was his professor, not his prostitute.

Higher education prizes an objective search for truth but there is no such thing. Values determine which courses get offered and which research gets funded and rewarded. Universities are part of the larger society and reproduce societal bias.

Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia (University Press of Colorado 2012) offers dozens of personal accounts, essays and studies of academic women of color and others. While quantitative data confirms patterns of inequity and unconscious bias, editors **Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs**, **Yolanda Flores Niemann**, **Carmen G. Gonzalez**, and **Angela P. Harris** chose to emphasize the emotional, psychic and spiritual wounds to the authors and their strategies for survival.

Stereotypes perpetuated by movies and TV set expectations of women overall as emotional rather than rational, African American women as mammies, Latinas as sizzling hot and Asian American woman as quiet and subservient. Failure to fit expectations draws complaints from students and colleagues. Knowledge and competence are the stereotypical preserve of white men.

Students and allies

Presumed Incompetent has five parts: campus climate, faculty-student relations, networks of allies, social class and tenure/promotion. Challenges of climate are subtle and ingrained. **Linda Trinh Vo** describes serving on search committees that shrugged off a man's weaknesses as things he

could learn while belittling the strengths in a woman's file. "As administrators and faculty, it takes courage and finesse to bring about meaningful, foundational transformation," she writes.

Especially in the sciences, many women students of color say faculty appear to hold lower expectations for them and question their commitment, **Deirdre Bowen** reports. Latina and African American women students describe faculty treating them as exceptions, paying compliments as though surprised that they can do the work. **Cerise L. Glenn** quotes a student who left science after too many professors asked whether she was in the wrong room or whether she had come to fix the projector.

As a northern black TA in the Deep South, **Serena Easton** found that her students challenged her to prove herself in ways her white peers didn't face. One student said openly in class that Easton was probably there because of affirmative action and thus not qualified to teach.

Student evaluations carry increasing weight in rating how well faculty teach, though they tell more about charisma and likeability than student learning. **Sylvia R. Lazos** questions how student evaluations affect women and minorities.

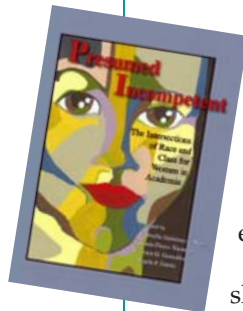
Unconscious bias, stereotypes and assumptions shape the ways students view their professors. From the moment they enter the classroom, students assume women and minority professors are unqualified. Faculty who strive to show their competence rise on that scale in student evaluations but fall in likeability.

Unconscious bias also complicates forming alliances across racial lines. White women who generalize their experiences to all women don't get it. Lesbian **Kari Lerum**, heartbroken when professed feminists failed to support her amid attacks on her sexuality, draws her answer from bell hooks: Embrace love as a mediating force.

Upward mobility

Social class compounds issues of race on campus, where cultural norms are middle and upper-middle class. **Francisca de la Riva-Holly** writes that her credentials and skills are erased in Latin American social circles; "I will always be the daughter of the woman who might have cleaned their relatives' houses." Her colleagues in the Spanish department mocked her clothes and spread her confidential information.

American myths of meritocracy and upward mobil-



ity—rags to riches—persist even though the U.S. has less upward mobility than most developed countries. Subjective collegiality is key for evaluating college faculty, penalizing women for defying unclear social class rules.

Over the Internet she connected with other “non-collegial” women research scholars. They encouraged her to reframe herself as a woman warrior, document everything, keep publishing and teaching and never feel sorry for herself. What she was experiencing was real and they were all in it together. They made “non-collegial” a synonym for excellence, achievement, merit and vision.

Being an academic from the working class is something of an oxymoron, **Constance G. Anthony** writes. A liberal arts college faculty challenged her to be subtle and indirect; in her home community people said what they meant. Over time

one learns the middle-class ways, but she thinks it’s important to be true to your identity. If you turn your back on it for career success, you pass up a chance to change the world and the “you” that succeeds is not your authentic self.

Prospects for tenure and promotion reflect all the issues in these and other chapters, from bias in student evaluations and collegiality ratings to expectations that punish women for acting like scholars or for failing to do so.

Presumed Incompetent closes with numerous recommendations gleaned from the chapters, some directed to administrators and some to women of color and their allies. This book is for people of any race or gender who want to make campus a richer, healthier, more equitable place for all. ■

—SGC

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Editor and Publisher: Mary Dee Wenniger

Associate Publisher: Elizabeth Leigh Farrington

Contributors: Sarah Gibbard Cook, Diane Grypp, Mary Lou Santovec

Graphic Artist: Lisa Imhoff, Grey Horse Studio

Career Connections: Mary Helen Conroy

Social Media: P.F. Zenke

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