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# Student Diversity and Theological Education

## Introduction

This three-part article offers three observations on racial/ethnic student diversity in theological education. The first essay, by Barbara Leung Lai of Tyndale Seminary, provides a personal reflection by a racial/ethnic member of the faculty on diversity as an educational tool in which practice reinforces theory. The second essay, by Ruth Vuong of Fuller Theological Seminary, reports the voices of students, their experiences of ethnic diversity in their theological studies, and some of their hopes and concerns. The final essay, by Francis A. Lonsway of the ATS staff, presents data drawn from two statistical resources of the Association: the *Fact Book on Theological Education* and the Student Information Project.

## A Reflection from an Ethnic Member of the Faculty

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*ABSTRACT: The views shared below are not my response to specific work on the subject of student diversity and theological education. They are, rather, self-engaging reflections through years of involvement in theological education. To illustrate my window of perception, I first present briefly my career path as a minority person in the profession. This is followed by a student diversity profile of my institution—Tyndale Seminary. From this specific institutional context, I then reflect on three focused areas: (1) diversity as a mutual educational tool for students and instructors; (2) knowing and being a culturally sensitive instructor and administrator; and (3) meeting the needs of a racially and culturally diverse student body: strategies and examples. The examples cited in my reflection are meant to demonstrate that “practice reinforces theory.” It is my hope that through an intentional look at the current state of the diversity issue at Tyndale, I can generate more interest and more engaging dialogues within academe and the community of theological schools.*

## Personally Speaking

The career path of a minority faculty member shapes the way in which she or he looks at the profession and at the practices within the profession. My shaping began when I was an M.Div. student studying at Fuller Theological Seminary in the early 1970s. As a woman student from Asia, I was the minority among minorities (considering the ecclesiastical climate thirty years ago). This

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minority status had its privileges and disadvantages, and I witnessed both realities through my long student days in the States, Canada, and England. While I enjoyed being treated kindly and with much consideration by most professors, I suffered the inevitable outcome of marginalization. Realizing that I was part of the West's stereotyping construction of the minority student in theology,<sup>1</sup> I tried to break the cultural barrier and sought hard to conform—in retrospect, the most damaging move in my academic life. It has taken me a number of years, until later in my career, to break away from this "conformity" driven-ness. Feeling at home with my own culture, I can truly grasp the art of celebrating diversity within any given institutional/communal context. This belated transformation was the result of my teaching and equipping experience over the past ten years, both internationally and cross-culturally.<sup>2</sup> One needs to respect and value the culture that one is nurtured in before becoming a truly culturally sensitive person. A culturally sensitive theological educator will dare to risk, to step out of her or his comfort zone in seeking to understand another, unfamiliar culture—responding to the call for the globalization of theological education.

### **A Student Diversity Profile of Tyndale Seminary**

Tyndale Seminary (formerly Ontario Theological Seminary) is the oldest and largest seminary in Canada. Located in the multicultural city of Toronto, it is a trans-denominational theological institution with the majority of students being part-time.<sup>3</sup> In a student body of 760,<sup>4</sup> women constitute 43% and men 57% of the student population. The figures below provide a more precise profile of student diversity at Tyndale.

<b>Winter 2001: Enrollment Summary by Ethnic Origin</b>	
White (non-Hispanic)	381
Chinese	206
Korean	72
Black	51
Middle Eastern	14
Asian Other	8
Philippines	6
Hispanic	4
North American Native	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>744</b>
Not Recorded	6
Non-Declared	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>760</b>

### ***A Brief Analysis***

- Nine ethnic groups are represented in the student body.
- Non-white students constitute nearly half (49%) of the student population.
- 79% of the non-white students are Asian and the Asian group constitutes 38% of the nine ethnic groups.
- Chinese students are by far the largest Asian group (28%), with Korean students being next (10%).
- Black students are the largest non-Asian ethnic group (7%).

### ***Intriguing Observations and Issues***

Within a supposedly predominantly white theological institution in the West (as with the majority of non-ethnic-specific ATS schools), non-white students make up nearly half of the student population. This may lead one to ask: which group is the majority, and who are the minorities?

With the two largest racial and ethnic groups being white non-Hispanic (49%) and Asian (38%), I believe Tyndale stands out as a unique example of a nontraditional profile of the learner-audience at ATS schools. While English is the common medium of instruction, these two racially and culturally diverse groups are potentially worlds apart in terms of value systems (e.g., the evaluation and assessment of an educational experience) as well as learning patterns.

This profile sets the stage and the specific institutional context for my reflection in three areas.

### **Diversity as a Mutual Educational Tool for Students and Instructors**

Racial and cultural diversity should be regarded as a valued educational tool for both the instructor and students. On the one hand, a successful and rewarding teacher-student relationship should be culturally mandated. On the other hand, a mutually enriching learning and teaching experience calls for the willingness of both parties (student and instructor) to step outside one's own familiar culture and to get to know the other's culture. In the institutional and cultural contexts of Tyndale, this means for the instructor intentionally to learn from the different cultures represented in class and for the students to break away from the constraints of the culturally shaped expectations of an educational experience with more openness. Ignorance in understanding differing cultural traits and values may lead to a clash in cultural assumptions, or more severely, to blocking the channels of teaching and learning. For example, students brought up in the Western culture will highly regard an instructor's performance in lectures. While effective com-

munication and charisma are important factors for a rewarding learning experience, there are still other means of educational tools, such as the empowering of the mind and will to do reflection and exercise discernment, perseverance in the pursuit of knowledge, etc. These impacts on students often extend beyond classroom instruction.

Teaching-learning should be a two-way street. For the instructor, cultural sensitivity means prizing this diversity among students and seeing it as a true asset to meaningful and effective instruction.<sup>5</sup> This “prizing” requires more than a mind-set. One should view the process of teaching and learning as an educational spiral. The more one engages in teaching a culturally diverse learner-audience, the more effective one becomes in teaching such a group. For an educator in theological education, it entails an intentional seeking of one’s horizon to be continually enriched and enlarged through the teaching experience.

### **Diversity Yes, Preference NO: Knowing and Being a Culturally Sensitive Instructor and Administrator**

Awareness of the cultural diversity of students is one thing, but being a culturally sensitive instructor is another. In a multicultural, global village like Toronto, an average person would be expected to have a certain degree of cultural sensitivity. Given the predominance of white instructors teaching in traditional disciplines (in theology), many of us lack the sufficient repertoire to view the value of things beyond the traditional norms and regularities, which we had learned so well since our student days.<sup>6</sup> Moving away or stepping outside the homogeneous comfort zone and readjusting our teaching strategies to accommodate the needs of the diverse ethnic student body is often frustrating. It demands additional efforts on the part of the instructor and it calls for commitment beyond the four walls of the classroom—in developing relationships. In reality, for many of us, we welcome the diverse cultural make-up of the student body, but unless we truly prize this diversity as a rewarding educational opportunity for the enrichment of our own teaching, and we are determined to make it work, we cannot afford such a preference. Simply put in practical terms: diversity yes, but preference no.

### **Meeting the Needs of a Racially and Culturally Diverse Student Body: Strategies and Examples**

Tyndale takes pride in drawing a multicultural student body, a true reflection of the diverse population in Greater Toronto.<sup>7</sup> In response to the needs of the Chinese faith community and with the prominent presence of the ethnic Chinese student body, a well-developed Chinese ministry program has

been in place for almost fourteen years. A Korean Ministry Program is also in preparation. There have been discussions about implementing a Black History Studies program at Tyndale for some time now. Before fall of 2001, I was the only ethnic full-time teaching member of the faculty. As of this writing, two other ethnic persons have joined the faculty, encouraging progress in promoting faculty diversity in a multicultural theological institution.

Ethnic-specific extracurricular activities have been implemented in the past five years to address the needs of the Black, Korean, and Chinese students. Annual cultural events are held to cultivate and celebrate the diversity among us. Mentorship programs for the incoming Chinese students are in place as well as peer-support and study groups. A counseling service for represented cultural groups is provided on campus. The student council also provides writing tutorials for students whose first language is not English. In spite of all these good efforts, there are existing tensions on the institutional, or macro, level:

- We ask whether we are institutionalizing multiculturalism or merely managing differences through the implementation of strategies.
- The ethnic-specific programs, such as the Chinese Ministry Program, still remain marginalized. I would like to see theological schools be able to break through the mind-set of placing the ethnic programs (e.g., Korean Ministry Program, multicultural programs, etc.) on the margin. Theological educators and administrators should regard them and intentionally develop them as a core part of the school's curriculum.
- We face the pressing need for faculty development among ethnic members of the faculty. There is an absolute vacuum in terms of post-hire support. Here at Tyndale, the visible presence of ethnic faculty teaching in non-ethnic-specific programs and disciplines is, in itself, a powerful witness to promoting cultural diversity in theological education. The working-out of this strategy is, in turn, an enriching teaching-learning experience for both instructor and students.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. For example, that Asian students are very hard-working, but not sufficiently reflective or innovative.
2. During the past decade, I have engaged in formal and informal teaching in the States, England, South and Central America, China, Russia, and South East Asia.
3. Those taking fewer than three (4 units) courses are considered as part-time students.

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4. This is the winter 2001 enrollment figure.
5. Gary C. Powell, "On Being A Culturally Sensitive Instructional Designer and Educator," *Educational Technology* (1997) 14.
6. Ibid, 7.
7. Of note is the fact that more than 90% of Tyndale's students are from the Greater Toronto area.