

## Teaching note: Communicating in groups

This exercise helps students become aware of their own multiple identities and how being in the minority vs. the majority in a particular context can affect their own perceptions, assumptions, experiences and behaviors. As the pre-class assignment indicates, students will be assigned to think of a situation in which they were in the minority in a nontrivial way and a situation in which they were a majority in a nontrivial way. They will write responses to the same three questions from the perspective of their experience as a minority group member and as a majority group member.

At the beginning of the class, the instructor should have students divide into small groups of four or five classmates. Random assignment into groups can be advantageous in creating diverse groups. Provide the small groups the instructions below, and give students 20 to 25 minutes to complete the small group discussions:

### IN SMALL GROUPS:

- Prior to the small group discussions, participants should commit to ground rules of confidentiality; nevertheless, students should disguise or omit names of organizations and of individuals.
- Go around the circle and talk about the situation in which you were a minority group member. Each person should share their responses to the questions about the impact of their minority identity on their early behaviors, on their perceptions of others and on what they thought were others' perceptions of them. As you listen, reflect on the similarities, differences and potential generalizations you see.
- Then go around the circle and talk about the situation in which you were a majority group member. Each person should share their responses to the questions about the impact of the majority identity on their early behaviors, on their perceptions of others and on what they thought were others' perceptions of them. As you listen, reflect on the similarities, differences and potential generalizations that they see.
- After all group members have talked about both types of situations, share any themes or generalizations that you observe.

### IN THE LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION:

- Instructors can first ask students to share any general reactions to their discussions in the small groups. For example, students often share that their memories of the times when they were in the minority were much more vivid and salient than their memories of the times when they were in the majority.
- The instructor can then write the topics of the questions ("early behaviors," "others' perceptions of you," "your perceptions of others") as headings across the top of a white board horizontally and the labels "minority" and "majority" vertically down the side. The instructor can then lead a discussion of students' observations and insights based on their small group discussion, starting with the questions about being in the minority.

Students often make distinctions between types of group identities (such as cultural, racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, social, functional, socio-economic; high status vs. low status minorities; visible vs. invisible minority status). However, general themes often emerge. For example, people who are in the minority often feel less confident and less secure in expressing their ideas freely than people who are in the majority. Students may begin talking about their experience as a minority in a less sensitive category and then move to expressing their experiences in more sensitive minority categories. For example, a student who was the only African American in a class began by talking about his feelings as the only student who did not drink alcohol in a study group in which everyone else drank alcohol and wanted to have their group meetings in a bar. Later in the session, he described his experiences as the only African American in the class. Typically, students recognize that everyone at times has minority status and may feel less accepted and affirmed than majority group members. Often, students state their resolve to be more aware of and more inclusive of others who have minority status when they are in the majority.