Potential “Blind Spots” Concerning Student Identity in Discussion Leadership
Implications for Teaching and Learning

Student diversity enhances learning and can present both challenges and opportunities for discussion leadership. Some of these challenges/opportunities relate to identities that may be visible (e.g., gender, race) or invisible (e.g., sexual orientation, socio-economic status, political and religious affiliation, physical or mental disability, veteran status). This document addresses some “blind spots” that students and faculty have observed in various classroom environments.

**Blind Spot 1: Generalizing about students based on their group membership**
(e.g., using differential call patterns or making comments that suggest that students with military experience are tough or that engineering students like to do numbers)

*Suggestion:* Drawing on student experiences can greatly enrich the class discussion, as long as instructors avoid making generalizations about students based on those experiences.

**Blind Spot 2: Asking a student to speak for an entire demographic group**
(e.g., calling on a French student for the French or European perspective on an issue)

*Suggestions:* Include in the conversation students from both within and outside of the demographic group under discussion, with an explicit understanding that none of these students’ perspectives are necessarily representative of their entire demographic group. If faced with multiple instances in which specific demographic groups are being discussed, use varied approaches to calling patterns (e.g., don’t always begin by calling on a member of the demographic group in question). In discussions of sensitive topics, you may wish to call more than once on students showing passion. It may be, for example, that during discussions of race, you may wish to call more than once on students of color who have their hands up multiple times.

**Blind Spot 3: Unintentionally marginalizing students with invisible identities**
(e.g., using language that implicitly holds as a norm heterosexuality, Democratic Party affiliation, high socioeconomic status, or heavy drinking during social events)

*Suggestions:* Use neutral references (e.g., “partner,” “spouse”), avoid in-group/out-group comments (e.g., “those people” or “people like us”). Avoid partisan political comments.

**Blind Spot 4: Challenging students differentially based on their demographic group**
(e.g., disproportionately calling on male students to perform quantitative analyses or female students to discuss work-life balance or shopping)

*Suggestions:* Probe student comments, engage students in tough role plays, pose difficult questions to all students, irrespective of gender, race, or ESL status, to provide them with equal opportunity for development.
**Blind Spot 5: Using US-centric (or sports) references**  
(e.g., referencing baseball to illustrate a point)

*Suggestions:* Use analogies that are broadly accessible to make all students feel included in the discussion. Include references to non-US contexts.

**Blind Spot 6: Assuming that students are comfortable revealing their invisible identities in the classroom**  
(e.g., students may reveal their sexual orientation, a history of mental or physical disability, veteran status, political or religious affiliation to an instructor or a few sectionmates but not to the entire class)

*Suggestions:* Be mindful of unintentionally disclosing private information about students. If a student raises his/her hand during a class discussion relevant to such private information—and you call on that student—do not specify the reason for doing so.

**Blind Spot 7: Assuming that a student belongs to a particular demographic group based on the student’s appearance**  
(e.g., inferring that a student grew up in Asia because the student looks Asian or assuming that an Asian student is from China)

*Suggestions:* Ask whether anyone with the experience in a particular area would like to share it with the class. Use information on classcards to learn about student backgrounds.

**Blind Spot 8: Mispronouncing student names**  
(e.g., mispronouncing or avoiding the use of students’ names when calling on them to participate or when referring to their comments)

*Suggestions:* Carefully review pronunciations by clicking on the speaker icon on each student classcard. If necessary, ask your Section Chair for guidance on identifying or pronouncing challenging names. Announce on the first day of class that you want to make sure to pronounce everyone’s name correctly and encourage students to let you know if you are mispronouncing their name. Reach out directly to students whose names you find difficult to pronounce and ask for guidance.

**Blind Spot 9: Reserving discussions of issues related to diversity primarily to female and/or minority protagonists**  
(e.g., only using a case with a female protagonist to discuss gender discrimination at work or work/life challenges, which may signal that these issues are relevant only to women or minorities and/or reduce the protagonist to a single identity)

*Suggestion:* Discuss issues related to identities across cases, regardless of the protagonist’s demographic group (e.g., “Would the protagonist’s actions be perceived differently if he were a woman or a racial or sexual-orientation minority?” Note: Ask such questions only if you are able to allocate sufficient time to discuss them.)