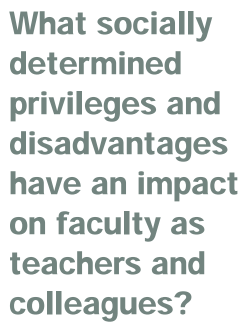
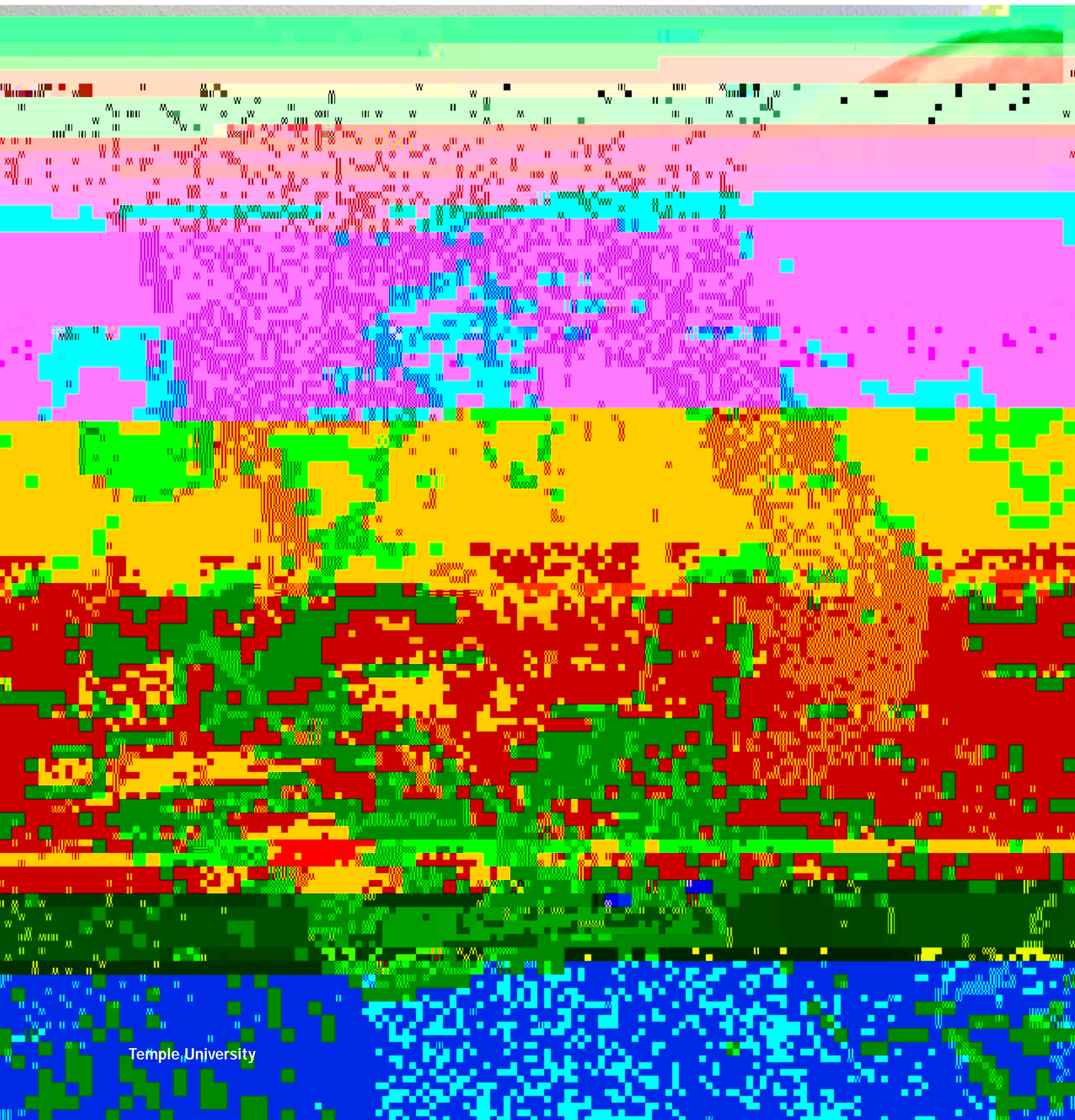
PERSPECTIVES

A

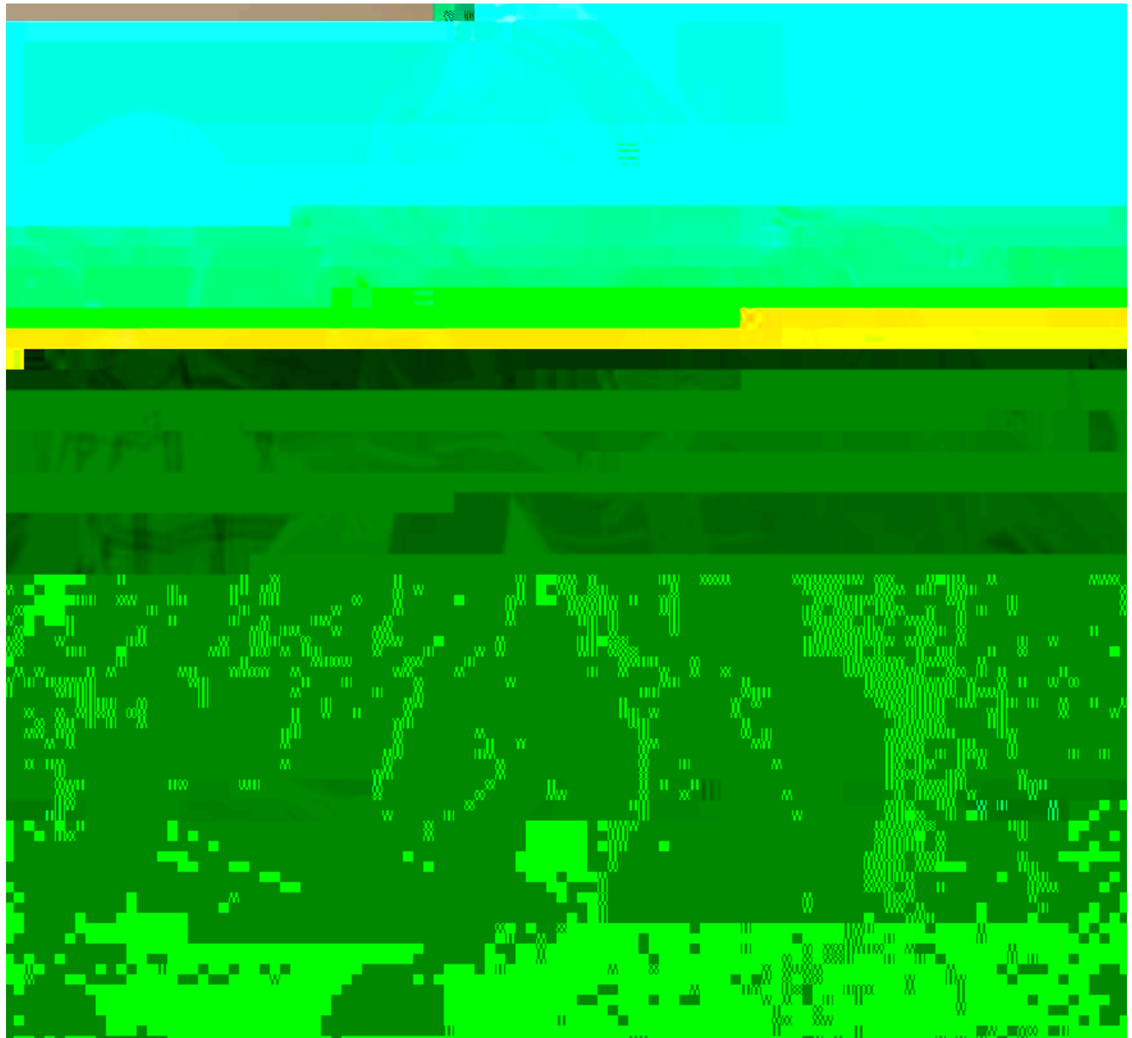


What socially determined privileges and disadvantages have an impact on faculty as teachers and colleagues?

PAMELA E. BARNETT *is associate vice provost and director of the Teaching and Learning Center at Temple University.*


Temple University

Temple University



in any social context without fearing rebuff. Her children are given texts that implicitly support her kind of family unit. McIntosh's list of privileges demonstrates the way some can "count on" social reactions and cultural systems that meet our needs or confirm our legitimacy or existence, while others cannot.

Social privilege and higher education

For the past few years, within the context of higher education, I've been leading dialogues about McIntosh's foundational work. What socially determined privileges and disadvantages have an impact on faculty as teachers and colleagues? Not all our social identities are obvious, but students and colleagues attribute various identities to us—including identities based on gender, race, class, nationality, ability, and sexual orientation. How they perceive us shapes their expectations of us, their interactions with us, and our experience of academic community. I routinely mentor faculty of color, women in STEM fields, those who speak English as a second language, and physically disabled educators who must make sense of, and respond to, aspects of the professorial role that do not come automatically—classroom authority and legitimacy, supportive academic community, mentoring. I've also had conversations with faculty who wish their students would question them more, rather than defer to the socially conferred authority of maleness or whiteness.

For faculty from groups that have been historically underrepresented in higher education, an awareness of the effects of socially conferred privilege—and, with it, the knowledge that their experiences are likely not unique to them or caused by them—can be especially helpful. Such awareness is also a call to those of us who enjoy social privileges to recognize the contingent nature of such privileges, and to be more informed colleagues and supportive mentors to those

who face different challenges working in the university. Institutional leaders should consider designing faculty development or mentoring programs that explicitly address social privilege.

So what exactly are the privileges? Over the years, several colleagues and I have read McIntosh's work together, and then we've rewritten her lists from our own perspectives as university educators. I share the collective insights here, using McIntosh's template, which states privileges in the first person.[1] To introduce the issues efficiently, I organize the lists below according to single identity categories (e.g., maleness, whiteness). It is worth noting, however, that black and feminist theorists especially have elucidated how social identities interact with each other in complex ways that can compound advantage or disadvantage (Weber 1989; Collins 1991; Crenshaw 1989). Individual experience depends on the particular confluence of social identities as well as the context of action. Not every white teacher can count on every white privilege on my list, and neither can every male teacher count on every male privilege listed. The experience of the male instructor who speaks English as second language or who is disabled may be determined more by his nationality and physical status than by his gender. And context matters. The male instructor's gender identity may be more salient when he's teaching a gender studies course, and speaking English as a second language may matter more when he's delivering a lecture to a large audience. Even as we consider the privileges that accrue to a particular identity, we should be mindful that other intersecting identities may either compound or counteract them.

The able-bodied instructor

My colleague Tiffenia Archie always begins with the "able-bodied" category when teaching the concept of privilege, because the items on this list may be more immediately obvious. Brainstorming about the different ways mobility, speech, or sensory apprehension is constrained or unconstrained prepares students to consider the less physical, more socially constituted manifestations of privilege, such as those enjoyed by males and whites. With a firmer cognitive grasp of the concept, students are less likely to feel guilty or defensive. They can comprehend the broader social argument and their individual responsibility for understanding and responding to social systems without feeling individually liable for social inequality. This approach recognizes that students can be distressed by the idea that they personally benefit from structures of inequality and that they can be uncomfortable with the argument that social identity can be an asset, contributing to success as surely as personality, skill, or experience.

In the case of the disabled professor, students might have respect for what they perceive as obstacles overcome. My colleague Carol Marfisi, who teaches from a wheelchair, read the list presented below and said she didn't recognize herself in it. She experiences her life as a norm and, like any good teacher, intentionally decides when her identity can be an asset for learning. Necessity can be the mother of invention; in a recent class, she asked students for their bodies in order to help demonstrate a point, enabling them to learn from kinesthetic engagement with an idea. She also argued that disability is a fluid social identity: most people will experience it in some form, at some point. Though not insurmountable, there are still unique challenges for the disabled academic.

Following is a list of privileges enjoyed by the able-bodied teacher:

- I can get to any classroom that is assigned to me.
- I can schedule classes or meetings back to back, because I can get across campus easily.
- I can reach and move all the equipment in all lab spaces.
- I can reach, see, and use the podiums, as well as instructional technology, in all classrooms.
- All documents, websites, and classroom management software are accessible to me, without accommodation.
- Students can submit their assignments to me in any paper or electronic format.
- I can stand up or move about the room in order to capture my students' attention, convey emphasis, or assert my authority.
- I can project my voice in order to capture my students' attention, convey emphasis, or assert my authority.
- I can circulate about the room whe

- My mental ability is never questioned because of my physical appearance or qualities.
- I am never asked to def ne or explain my "able-bodiedness."
- I do not rely primarily on online forums to discuss the particular challenges I face; many colleagues are similarly situated and can reflect on institutional experience with me.
- I never wonder whether my positive student evaluations could reflect pity.
- I get honest feedback; there is no association between my physical vulnerability and my emotional vulnerability.
- I am not considered or called "an inspiration" for doing my job.

The native English–speaking instructor

National identity and native language also affect the academic experience. There can be advantages to international identity. Students may assume that an international faculty member has sophisticated knowledge of global issues and is more qualified to teach international topics or foreign languages. International instructors are often highly valued members of diverse academic communities. Yet, there is a variety of advantages that come with speaking English as a first language in a US college or university. A telling series of experiments conducted by Donald L. Rubin (1992) arguably demonstrates that undergraduates "tune out" foreign-born instructors. His research team gathered American undergraduates inside a classroom and then played a taped lecture that was delivered in the voice of a

because of my merit, not because of affirmative action.
- My male colleagues and I are paid competitive salaries (AAUP 2010).

The white instructor

Over the years, I and others have found that white Americans are more likely to resist the idea of white privilege than the other types of privileges addressed thus far. As I noted, it can be disorienting, even painful, to recognize the unearned asset of whiteness as a "bonus" that compounds the impact of our intelligence, skill, or hard work. We may also feel guilty about these advantages we never asked for, yet nevertheless enjoy. Those from ethnic groups that have experienced historical discrimination and devaluation (e.g., Jews or Italians) or who have a working-class background may argue that they are "less white." This argument has some basis; whiteness is not a simple matter of skin tone, but is a social construction whose content is, by and large, about the privileges that define it. Historians have written about how the Irish, Jews, Italians, and even Asians and Latinos have "become white" (Ignativev 1996; Brodkin 1998; Roediger 2005; Yancey 2003). But more often than not, we cannot opt out of the white identity conferred upon us.

As a Jewish and Italian woman, I know that my grandparents' experience was different from mine. Yet, after two generations of upward social mobility for Jews and Italians, as well as an influx of "new" immigrant groups with lower social status, I now experience most or all the privileges on the list below. It is also possible, in many cases, for ethnic, working-class, or gay whites to pass as middle-class, white, or heterosexual, if they so choose. An individual may identify more strongly with an ethnic or sexual identity than with whiteness, but the critical factor here is how *others* perceive us—and this is socially overdetermined.

I believe that one can more easily recognize and work against white privilege by finding a way past personal guilt. Years ago, when I was working as the sole white professor in an African American studies program, I had a conversation about white guilt with a black colleague. While she appreciated it when whites recognized white privilege, she noted that guilt did not help solve the problem. Instead of feeling guilty, she suggested, whites should align with her by being "outraged and resistant." We could use awareness in productive ways; for example, if we were in a faculty meeting together and her comment was ignored, but then somehow heard when it was articulated by me or another white colleague, I could speak up. Arguably, writing this article is a use of my compounded privilege. As a white, middle-class, able-bodied, straight woman, I can write this argument without most of you, my readers, thinking that I am oversensitive about racial issues, self-interested, or radical.

Following is a list of privileges enjoyed by white instructors:

- Students are not surprised that I am their instructor; I am what they expect for most classes.
- Students do not question my expertise in fields that are not race studies.
- I can speak passionately about racial inequality or injustice without being perceived as "angry," "oversensitive," or "radical."
- I can teach courses in African American, Latino, or Asian American studies without students or colleagues viewing me as self-interested rather than scholarly.
- Curricula in my discipline have always testified to the contributions of my race.
- I never question whether my student evaluations are affected by my race.[2]
- Students and colleagues assume I was hired on the basis of merit, not because of affirmative action.
- I am not repeatedly photographed for university publications because I diversify the public face of the institution.
- I will not be overwhelmed with service requests because I am one of the few faculty members who can diversify committees.
- I will not be in danger of being denied tenure because of the service burden I carry.[3]
- I can count on having departmental colleagues of my racial identity.[4]
- When searching for positions, I don't have to consider whether I would be one of few people of my race in my new town, if hired.
- It is easy to find mentors who share my social identity and understand the particular challenges I face.
- My tenure file will most likely be reviewed by colleagues having the same racial identity as mine.
- If someone says I'm articulate, it is an uncomplicated compliment.
- I assume that my voice will be heard in meetings; I may even repeat comments made by [illegible]

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.