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Dear Colleague:

Institutional racism takes a number of forms, one of which causes--by subtle and not-so-subtle means--a lowering of the expectations of the targeted group. Teachers in schools have been known to expect less of black students than of white students. A white student may ask to be put into a difficult physics course, and he will be given a pat on the back for showing ambition. A black student making the same request may be told, with an air of paternal concern, "Why not try machine shop? You will be with more people like yourself, and you will pick up a useful skill."

We at the University, of course, abominate this form of racism. How to avoid it is a difficult matter, for much of it may be unknown to the perpetrators themselves. Old liberals play it safe by sticking to the rule of strict equality and color blindness. This won't do now, as we all know. But alternatives have dangers of their own in lowering both individual and group self-esteem in the long run, if not in the short run. I was struck by a front-page item in Wisconsin Week (Dec 2, 1992). It is a success story of two African-American students from Racine, who shared a dorm, majored in pharmacy, and graduated with the help of the University's Academic Advancement Program. The part that made me sit up was that both students asked for and got an African-American roommate. To an old liberal like me, the request sounded racist. Dr. Martin Luther King would surely be surprised that this could occur on a great liberal campus. Suppose a white student were to demand a white roommate, won't she be told, "Young woman, we consider you an adult with the maturity to explore the multicultural richness of the University, and you may as well start right now by sharing a room with a student of a different color. You must start sometime to become a citizen of the world, at ease staring cheek-by-jowl down an electron microscope with a Nigerian or Thai scientist, so why not start now? If not now, then when? When your hair turns gray? Won't your prejudice by then be too ingrained to change?"

I am trying to articulate here an expectation, and it is a high one for all white students. The University expects all white students to rise to a challenge; they are all being groomed for the world stage, even if the grooming hurts or makes them feel initially uncomfortable. Sad to say, the same expectation doesn't seem to apply to minority students. Sadder still to say, by the time they come to the University, their expectations of themselves have dropped to the point that they themselves now insist on living in a smaller world.

Best wishes,

