

Dr. Willis

Dr. Willis is a new assistant professor in psychology and is teaching a junior-senior level course on community mental health at Midwestern State University—a large, research one institution. His previous job was teaching at a small historically black college back East. All but two of the students in his community mental health class of 25 are European American/White; the only two minority students in the class are African American/Black. So far, everything has been going smoothly. However, he notices that the students want to call him by his first name, George. He has never introduced himself that way, but his first name is on his door and on his syllabus. Dr. Willis has attempted to manage the situation by either ignoring it or correcting students. In turn, the students have either ignored his corrections or have made some benign snide remarks under their breath (e.g., “Boy, he’s so formal and disconnected!”). A few students have been responsive to his request and have started calling him Dr. Willis. He would not have made an issue out of it, but he has observed that the students call most of his European American/White colleagues Dr. XXX. When he has made the observation to his European American colleagues, they have either told him that he is too sensitive or that the situation will improve over time. However, he finds that his European American colleagues refer to him by his first name when talking with students. He is troubled by the entire atmosphere but doesn’t know what to do. Since he is new, he has decided to keep quiet about it.

However, during one of his class lectures, the discussion turns to societal mistrust and why some people may appear more mistrustful than others. Bill, one of the African American students in the class, comments that he is suspicious of the police, and he gives several examples from his own experience. Heather, a European American student, tells Bill that African Americans who are mistrustful of the police should not be so paranoid and hypersensitive. Before Dr. Willis can respond, some of the male European American students in the class start to laugh and tease Bill. These students seem to be friends of Bill’s. He laughs sheepishly, but he feels ganged up on at the time. So he gets quiet. However, he checks to see the reaction of the professor and the other African American student, whose name is Dwayne. Dwayne won’t look him in the eye and seems embarrassed. Dr. Willis pauses as if about to respond, but then he returns to lecturing the class about the current topic.

After class, Bill approaches Dr. Willis to get his reaction to the classroom incident as well as to seek advice about handling the situation. Dr. Willis listens to Bill, but doesn’t offer much assistance. He tells Bill that he has got to get used to comments like that and to ignore these kinds of antics. Bill says okay, but is feeling very disappointed. He thought Dr. Willis would understand because of his race.

In classes after the incident, Bill is quiet and doesn’t offer his opinion anymore. He is occasionally teased by a couple of European American students about his comments regarding the police. In addition, Bill has become more disrespectful to Dr. Willis. Dr. Willis is puzzled and doesn’t understand Bill’s response. He wonders whether he should say something to Bill. Dr. Willis has admitted to himself that he didn’t like what had happened in class and wanted to intervene, but he was worried whether his students would gang up against him, and he would receive negative teaching evaluations from them.

Questions about Dr. Willis's Case

1. What are the issues that Dr. Willis is facing?
2. What issues are the African American student facing? The European American students?
3. Did Dr. Willis handle the situations poorly? If so, how?
4. Did Dr. Willis handle the situations well? If so, how?
5. How does Dr. Willis tackle the issues he is facing?