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Race Relations on College Campuses: Challenges and Responsibilities for White Persons

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Thinking and talking about race in the United States is something that is usually reserved for people of color; it's not White people who usually think about race, talk about race, or even initiate discussions about race (Frankenberg, 1993; Helms, 1992, 1993; Segrest, 1994; Terry, 1975). White people frequently wait for people of color to raise issues of race. Yet, a thesis of this article is that White persons consider more carefully and take actions regarding racial issues. At the heart of this discussion is that White people need to consider themselves as racial beings.

The 21st century is only a few years away, and demographers are saying that the racial composition of the United States will be dramatically different in the next century, even by the end of this century (American Council on Education and Education Commission of the States [ACE/ECS], 1988). Thus, professional practice in student affairs, leadership for the 21st century, and citizenship and personal integrity must include being more attentive to, more responsive to, and more inclusive of persons of color. Some of these changes will come about simply because the composition of society is changing. Others must come about, however, through intentional efforts to change the structures and institutions of society. This work must be done by many who are White, privileged, educated, and collectively hold power. It is incumbent upon White student affairs professionals to consider ways in which student affairs practice, higher education, and personal integrity can and should be transformed as we approach the 21st century.

There are many reasons why White persons should think and talk about race. First, race relations in this country are, at best, volatile and tenuous, and, at worst, bad and hateful. A current and powerful reminder of the state of race relations is the April 19, 1995, Oklahoma City bombing. One early hypothesis asserted that the bombing was domestic rather than international activity related to White supremacist efforts. This tragic event has the potential to cause White people and people of color to examine race relations in this country. Second, racial violence and harassment are increasing. Daily reports on television, in newspapers, and on college campuses describe incidents which have at their base issues surrounding race. Numerous

numbers of Asian students, formation of White student unions, and, overall, a general lack of understanding of how excellence and diversity can exist side-by-side. A third reason to talk about race is that it is the right thing to do. Value and dignity of all peoples should be our ultimate aspiration. Andres Hacker, author of *Two Nations, Black and White, Separate, Hostile, and Unequal*, said White America "has a lot to face about itself . . . on moral grounds" (Duke, 1992, p. B4). Robert Terry (1975), author of a small but insightful and compelling book entitled *For Whites Only*, said that "what is at stake for White America today is not what Black people and other people of color want and do but what White people stand for and do" (p. 15). A fourth reason to address issues of race is that all people, including White people, have much to gain. By acknowledging race and the privilege connected to it, White people can become less threatened by race, less immobilized by guilt, and take action to do something about racism (Frankenberg, 1993; Helms, 1992).

One way to begin to acknowledge race and its complexities is for White people to begin to read, think, talk, and reflect about race and about themselves as racial beings (Helms, 1992). Following, I have identified four specific challenges and some particular implications for White persons in their journey to understanding themselves as persons with a race and to developing a positive, nonracist White identity (Helms, 1992, 1993).

Four Challenges about Race

White people, in struggling with the issue of race, face at least four major challenges surrounding race and race relations in this country and on college campuses. These challenges include the changing demographics of this country, White persons' discomfort with race, White people's lack of knowledge about race and about racism, and understanding who we are as White people and as persons with privilege.

The first challenge concerns racial and ethnic demographics, which are changing dramatically in the United States. By the year 2000 one-third of school-age children in the United States will be members of visible racial/ethnic groups (ACE/ECS, 1988). Latinos, Native Americans, and persons of Asian descent are the fastest growing racial and ethnic groups (Hacker, 1992). Already some cities and a few college campuses have a majority of people from racial/ethnic groups probably still described as "minorities." White persons are becoming the minority in many cities, and White students on a few college campuses are in the minority. United States

society is changing more quickly than most people can realize. The rapidly changing demographics represent an extraordinary challenge for all persons in U.S. society, but especially for White persons, to participate in the creation of a new society that we don't know and understand and, further, to transform student affairs and higher education to be more responsive and inclusive of the new students who are entering our college doors.

The second challenge for White persons concerns our discomfort with race. Most White people do not want to talk about race, probably because it makes us uncomfortable. Beverly Tatum (1992) has suggested that race is generally viewed as a taboo topic, especially among White persons. Although many White persons may be interested in the topic of race, most White persons are more interested in hearing other people talk about it, but afraid to break the taboo themselves, afraid to break the "conspiracy of silence." Most White people are afraid of race, of what we might say, of being racist, or of not being "politically correct." Just because White people don't talk about race, however, doesn't mean that they are not aware of race and race issues. In a student organization, an academic course, or a student affairs division with only a few individuals of color, it is likely that most, if not all, are keenly conscious of the presence of a few persons of color in a predominantly White group. However, most individuals are likely to avoid or circumvent anything that relates to the racial composition of the group due to fear of what might be said or done. If race is addressed, it is likely raised by one of the persons of color. In addition to discomfort with race, White people, in dealing with race issues often experience many other feelings, such as guilt, curiosity, and depression (Helms, 1992).

A third challenge for White persons is their relative lack of knowledge about race and about racism. Many persons, including student affairs professionals, do not know the literature, the history, or the arts of other cultures, especially non-European cultures; they frequently aren't aware of the cultural norms and behaviors of the social groups of which they are a part, including the cultural bases of their offices, their institutions, and the student affairs profession. Many persons in the United States do not even have an accurate picture of the history of this country (Takaki, 1993; Zinn, 1980). In addition, White people know little about racism and its definition and implications.

Defining racism and being able to identify practices and behaviors which are racist is at the core of understanding race (Helms, 1993). Racism has three important aspects. First, racism may be defined as the combination of power

and prejudice (Katz, 1978; Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993). Racism is prejudice reflected by persons with power, by persons in control, by persons with privilege, toward persons who are not in control and do not have power. Thus, racism is the potent effects of prejudice of persons with power upon persons who lack power. Second, racism involves consequences, not just intentions. In other words, the salient issue is not the intent of one's actions and behaviors but the consequences of one's actions and behaviors, or those of an institution. Third, racism can be words or acts by individuals, policies and procedures of institutions, or practices of cultures and societies. Racism also can be both overt and covert (Helms, 1992).

Let me offer a couple of examples. First, if a variety of nominations are strongly encouraged for a campus leadership award, yet the criteria favor more traditional campus student activities in which students of color are not as likely to participate, then this is a case of racism because the consequences of the action discriminate against students of color. A second example is that, if a student organization commits to the selection of a particular speaker representing diversity who isn't able to accept the invitation, and then resorts to a White speaker because members can't identify another person of color, that too is a form of racism. The intent was good, but the outcome still was not inclusive of persons of color. If a college adds an Asian Studies Department yet does not permit any courses in that department to satisfy the literature or history requirements of a certain major, then racism again is at play. The importance of racism and understanding what it means is that, as White people, we cannot understand ourselves, our intentions, persons of other cultures and races, and racial issues in this country without the backdrop of understanding racism and its meaning.

A fourth challenge for White persons is to understand who we are as White people and as persons with privilege. Collectively, White people are in positions of power, as the dominant racial group (Helms, 1993). According to Helms (1993), "one of the concomitants of being a White person in the United States is that one is a member of a numerical majority as well as the socioeconomically and politically dominant group" (p. 54). Further, White persons have many privileges (Frankenberg, 1993) but are often unaware of them, and may even deny having them.

The notion of privilege refers to benefits, often unearned, that come to White persons solely by virtue of the color of their skin -- and, of course, the lack of these same privileges to others simply because of the color of their skin. Peggy McIntosh (1995) has written eloquently about this idea in a paper on

White privilege and male privilege. McIntosh wrote:

I have come to see White privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks. (pp. 76-77)

She also articulated 46 special circumstances and conditions that she experiences which she "did not earn but which she has been made to feel are hers by birth, by citizenship, and by virtue of being a conscientious law-abiding 'normal person' of good will" (p. 78). Five illustrations of privilege which McIntosh identified are as follows:

- As a White person, I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time...
- If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live...
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race...
- I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race, and;
- I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race. (pp. 79-81)

I have identified several specific examples which apply to me:

1. I can reasonably expect that my race will not be a factor in issues of promotion or merit raise.
2. I can walk in my neighborhood without concern about racial overtones being directed at me.
3. As a White person, I can speak about race and racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking. (McIntosh, 1995, p. 80)

What are some of the privileges of White student affairs professionals? Some examples might be: (1) White student affairs professionals can be considered for a position without concern that someone on the selection committee will consider their race and not their credentials as a factor in their selection; (2) White students planning to enroll in a student affairs graduate program know that there will be others of their race in the program and can expect that faculty and assistantship supervisors will not be unresponsive to them because of their race; (3) White student affairs professionals can have difficulty

dealing with a particular situation in their position without concern that their supervisor or their peers will attribute their difficulties to race or their background; and (4) White persons can participate in discussion about race relations without someone saying, "Oh, that person always uses her [or his] race as an excuse."

Why is privilege important? It is important that White people be aware of the privileges they have that they often do not think about. It is important to be aware of the privileges that others often do not have because of their background and skin color. It is also important to know about privilege because it is precisely some of those privileges and comforts that many persons may have to give up as college campuses, the United States, and our world become increasingly diverse and White people are less frequently in the majority. It is also some of these same privileges that White persons will have to give up as they move toward deeper understanding and actions regarding race. As a faculty member in a graduate program in student affairs, I teach about different racial, ethnic and cultural groups of which I am not a part. I have to give up my comfort in teaching what was taught to me, my personal knowledge of being part of that group, and, what is often so important for a teacher, that "authority" that comes from knowing. I give it up because I teach about that which I know not so well. Thus, White persons need to focus on both their privileges and what they have to give up.

In practical terms, what does all this discussion about racism and race privilege mean? For me personally, it means being willing to challenge my graduate students, especially my White graduate students, who may evaluate research and writings by persons of color as lacking because the scholarship may not look like work traditionally produced by White male scholars. It also means being willing to challenge myself to look at my own racist thoughts and actions in how and what I teach, in whom I mentor, in how I evaluate applicants to my academic program.

What does all this mean for student affairs professionals, both personally and in their work? Hand-in-hand with these challenges are the responsibilities of White people, including those in student affairs, to engage in learning, reflection, and action about race. Following I suggest several specific responsibilities and implications for White people who are willing to commit, or to commit further, to their personal journeys toward understanding and taking action about race.

Responsibilities and Implications

I believe White student affairs professionals have two major responsibilities in addressing the issue of race. The first obligation is to educate oneself and to reflect on one's learnings. We are the framework through which we understand others; thus, it is important to begin with understanding oneself. The second obligation is to consider issues of race within one's work and within student affairs practice; this consideration and subsequent actions should be based on the personal education and reflection in which one continually engages. Specific suggestions follow.

Personal Education and Reflection

1. Educate yourself about being a White person. One of the best single sources is Helms' (1993) book *A Race is a Nice Thing to Have*. Read other works about being White, for example, McIntosh (1995), Frankenberg (1993), and Terry (1975). Read autobiographies about White persons' struggles with race, such as Segrest (1994) and McLaurin (1987). Pay attention to your thoughts, feelings, and understandings about race and about persons of other races and cultures.

2. Learn about the history of the United States and of the world from other viewpoints and perspectives. Excellent sources are Ronald Takaki's (1993) book *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* and Howard Zinn's (1980) *A People's History of the United States*. Both of these books offer perspectives and stories often not reported in U.S. history books and present a history which portrays White people and capitalism in more honest ways.

3. Educate yourself about other cultures. Expand your reading repertoire—read both nonfiction and fiction about other races and cultures. Raise questions with yourself, take or audit classes in African-American studies, Latino studies, Asian studies, Native American studies, cross-cultural studies, or women's studies (women's studies because it is a discipline that generally models true multiculturalism in its course, its literature, and its teaching).

4. Attend race relations programs, participate in race awareness groups, involve yourself in campus and community events and programs that focus on other races and cultures as well as any that focus on better understandings of being White.

Assessment and Change Within Your Work Setting

1. Evaluate the norms of both the office and the institution within which you work. Consider the racial and cultural values implicit in the office, the division, and the university or college, and their various activities and functions. How might those activities and values fit for some members of different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds? What is the experience within the office, division, and institution of persons of color? How do they feel? Does your office affirm the values and traditions of persons of color who work there or who interact with your office? How is that accomplished? If those persons of color do not participate in the way you expect, have you reflected on why that might be so? Are there ways your office and the institution can change that would be more inclusive of different values and beliefs? How should the assumptions of your office be altered to embrace everyone, not just White people?

2. How might you and your office provide leadership fostering inclusivity and working toward enhancing race relations? How might diversity efforts be made central to the purposes and goals of your office?

3. Model to others what you believe and expect in regard to diversity. As student affairs professionals we often expect students to accept and honor diversity, then get angry when they don't. Yet, we often have a difficult time ourselves with race and diversity, and we often do not model what we want students to do and understand and how we want them to behave. Assist students and colleagues with whom you work by identifying resources -- kinds of people, publications, videotapes, etc. -- and by setting goals, objectives, and agendas regarding diversity.

4. Who is available to you and your office to assist you with these challenges? Are there White persons who have developed expertise on racial issues, are there organizations that might serve as models for your office? Perhaps faculty and administrators of color would be willing to work with you (but not do your work for you). After you have done your own work, seek out consultants -- other White persons or perhaps persons of color -- who can help you with transforming your work and your office.

Implications

White people need to be involved and engaged in race relations work. White people can also make a difference. However, White persons may have to give up feeling comfortable. Learning about race is new for many people, especially White people. White student affairs professionals have a

responsibility to learn but also to take action. Other people, especially people of color, should not be expected to do White people's work in regard to race.

A significant challenge is to learn, to reflect, to communicate, and to act about issues of race. Ultimately, the goal is to provide visionary leadership for the 21st century by transforming ourselves, our work, and our profession. Addressing and embracing racial issues is not only our challenge, but also our ethical, academic, and human responsibility.

A quotation, from a clergy member and survivor of a Nazi death camp eloquently summarizes the imperative to understand ourselves as White persons and make a personal commitment to ending racism:

In Germany they first came for the Communists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. They came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me -- and by that time no one was left to speak up. (Niemoller, cited in Obear, 1991, p. 64)

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