

Sharing Experiences and Taking Responsibility: White Faculty and Staff Working Toward Racial Justice

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Abstract

Frustrated at the lack of response among White faculty and staff to racism on their Cincinnati campus, the authors of this piece draw from their own experiences and assert that it is possible—and necessary—for White faculty and staff to learn from these experiences and take responsibility in fighting racism. In support of this assertion, we draw on Kolb's (1984) *“What? So what? Now what?”* model of experiential learning to address two specific goals within this article: increase accountability among White faculty and staff through the examination of localized instances of racial violence, and articulate concrete action steps that can be taken in response to racism. Beginning with an examination of racist violence on their own campus as well as the rhetoric surrounding these incidents, the authors demonstrate that each campus can be viewed as a microcosm in which systemic racism is enacted at the local level. The goal of this examination is not mere identification, but to cultivate a sense of personal accountability among White faculty and staff. We conclude with a series of practical steps as well as a call to action.

We began working on this piece not long after the shooting death of 18-year old Michael Brown Jr. at the hands of a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014. In the years that have passed since, the details of this incident, and many others that followed, have been replayed over and over in the national media. For us—current and former White faculty and staff at the University of Cincinnati—this incident was an important one to engage with for a few reasons. First, Michael Brown Jr. was a

student. He was just two days shy of starting at Vatterott College, a technical school in the area. The similarities between him and our many students of color could not be ignored. Second, we believe that acts of violence against people of color are not isolated circumstances perpetrated by singularly racist individuals. These acts are symptoms of a culture that systemically perpetuates violence against communities of color, where violence, according to Dr. King, is “anything that denies human integrity and leads to

helplessness or hopelessness” (Brown, 2015). Third, we observed an unfortunate tendency among the members of our local community (especially those who are White) to treat the issue of racist violence as something that happens “over there,” in some other place, construed as being both geographically and culturally removed from our own city and our own university. We could not have known at the time we made these observations that we would be faced with a case of racial violence at our own university, where, like in the Mike Brown case, the criminal justice system failed to indict the officer responsible for a Black man’s death and has struggled to make any meaningful movement toward amends or reform.

Both the belief that racist violence is perpetrated by bad apples and this act of distancing oneself from the issue serve as absolution—a permission to do nothing. In short, we see the silence of White people, including ourselves, as collusion, and feel the need to disrupt this silence by challenging White people to stop doing nothing when such racial violence invariably arises.

To be sure, these observations are not new or unique. They have been made by activists and scholars the world over, many of whom are people of color who have lived experiences of racist violence. For us, the value in making these observations lies not only in their assertion, but in the process of taking these arguments off the page and determining what White staff and faculty members at universities all across the country can do to address this culture of racism. Many career education and professional development faculty and staff working in experiential learning know the value of moving from theory to practice and that the best real world problem solving will not be accomplished without asking the important question, “Now what?” To

that end, there are two goals within this article: increase accountability among White faculty and staff through the examination of localized instances of racial violence, and articulate concrete action steps that can be taken in response.

WHAT?—THE CASE OF CINCINNATI AS A MICROCOSM

We believe that examining local instances of racist violence—both material and ideological—can serve as an entry point for why White anti-racist activism must be continually sustained. Acknowledging that racial violence is happening everywhere—not just in highly publicized cases conveniently located a safe distance away—is critical to understanding and dismantling privilege. This has certainly been true in each of our experiences at the University of Cincinnati (UC), a microcosm of systemic assaults on communities of color happening throughout the USA. Within the past several years, there have been too many violent incidents to support this assertion, some physical, some ideological; some well-publicized, others barely noted.

EXAMPLES FROM CINCINNATI

In September 2013, fliers featuring a racist political cartoon were posted on campus. The cartoon criticized two upper-level African American administrators in the McMicken College of Arts and Sciences, Carol Tonge-Mack, an Assistant Dean, and Dr. Ronald Jackson, the college’s first—and the university’s only—African American Dean, also an alumnus of UC. The cartoon depicted the two as ruthless rulers, and included derogatory, racist mischaracterizations. In an open letter addressing the incident, Dr. Jackson described the cartoon as “reprehensible” and “racist” (Wegener, 2013). The response to the incident included public statements, calls for dialogue, and public demonstration, all

of which were organized and implemented predominately by people of color at UC.

Several weeks later, Samuel Burbanks, a Black male doctoral student in the College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services, was the target of a racist, threatening letter mailed to the university's Graduate School. Burbanks (2014) discussed the letter in a public statement published by the school's student newspaper, which read in part, "The letter I received is a form of racial harassment and part of the psychic violence that has been all too frequent at the University of Cincinnati." The silence in response to this incident from the UC community and university leadership was deafening.

As if these incidents of bigotry were not reprehensible enough, UC has also been the site of deadly, racially-motivated violence on more than one occasion. In August 2011, Everette Howard—another young, African American male—died after a campus police officer used a Taser on him at a campus dormitory. Most recently, in July 2015—nearly a year after the death of Michael Brown Jr.—a UC police officer shot and killed Samuel Dubose, a Cincinnati resident, during a traffic stop. In July 2017, following two mistrials, a judge dropped all charges against the officer responsible for Dubose's death.

Most recently, under threat of a lawsuit and the guise of free speech, the University accepted a request from well-known neo-Nazi and White nationalist leader Richard Spencer to speak on campus sometime in 2018. The University's efforts to avoid a lawsuit backfired when Cameron Padgett, the Georgia State University student who initiated the speaking request on behalf of Spencer, filed a lawsuit against UC alleging that

his right to free speech was violated when the University charged Padgett and his team with security costs for the pending event.

The similarity of the circumstances in all of these examples—along with the many, many deaths of people of color at the hands of police officers—serves as a tragically apt example of how violence against individuals and communities of color is systemic. The environment within the University of Cincinnati is but one microcosm within the broader context of violence. But you would not know this if you read the public statements issued by university leadership in response to these events.

SO WHAT?—RHETORIC OF RESPONDING TO RACIST INCIDENTS

The University continues to call incidents like these "teaching moments." The common refrain is one that characterizes these incidents as departures from the norm or as violations of shared community standards. For example, a public statement on civility in response to the racist cartoon stated, "Please join us in reaffirming our collective commitment to civil discourse and respectful behavior by extending to everyone in this community the same respect, cooperation and caring that we, ourselves, expect" (Ono, 2013). Years later, when the University was embroiled in controversy yet again over its acceptance of Richard Spencer to campus, University President Neville Pinto appeared alongside campus leaders, faculty, staff, and students in a video response titled, "#1UC." In the video, participants share a message of hope to an ostensibly unified campus, saying things like, "Be assured that your broader community stands with you," and, "We are one UC. We choose love."

The subtext of these public statements is one of brash assumptions: that everyone within the community is treated with respect and care, that the members of this collective community buy into these notions, and that these concepts have been previously affirmed and upheld. “This doesn’t define us,” President Ono said, “but we must grow from this” (Sparling, 2015). In other words, statements such as these imply we usually get this post-racial society right. This isn’t like us. But it is often also these calls for peace that silence the folks who begin to question White supremacy as the underlying problem. For example, in the video response to the Spencer controversy—a decision reportedly made at least in part in the spirit of free speech—one video participant recites the line, “If we become divided, he wins.” This statement, which presupposes a unified campus community, puts any who would publicly question the University’s stance in the role of “divider” and potentially discourages dialogue, especially from those marginalized by the University’s choice. Christina Brown, a leader with Cincinnati Black Lives Matter, has rightfully called out this kind of rhetoric as a strategy for further silencing Black activism.

How many people of color have to die before we acknowledge a pattern, before we admit that these incidents do define us? How many lives lost? How many racist cartoons have to be posted? How many threatening letters penned? At what point do we understand that these issues are in fact woven into the fabric of our institution? That these are not bumps in the road—but the road itself? If we ask our students to be self-aware, reflective thinkers, to learn from their actions and experiences, should we not also be practicing what we preach?

Of all places, America’s universities should be the places where we can have an open, productive, truth-seeking dialogue around these issues. And yet it doesn’t happen. The denial is insulting at best, deadly at worst. As Ronald Jackson (2013) wrote in his resignation letter (submitted two months after the defamatory cartoon was posted), “I find this not only unfortunate but also indignifying for anyone, but this is especially hurtful and shameful in an educational environ designed to trained [sic] the next generation of industry and civic leaders to be good citizens.”

Because all young students of color are valuable members of our college communities, we cannot afford to think of these issues as unrelated to us in higher education. In the wake of these occurrences, it is clear to us that the problem of racism (at UC and elsewhere) is not one that will be solved without members of the White racial majority exploring the ways that we can engage in anti-racist work. After witnessing the burden that this culture of discrimination and “psychic violence” (Burbanks, 2014) has been on our colleagues of color, we believe that responsibility is on the White community to speak up and out on issues of racial inequity.

NOW WHAT?—SPEAKING OUT, TAKING STEPS

In the interest of taking action on this belief, we came together to reflect on some of the effective practices of learning by doing that we have used in our lives and in our work to address these issues, as a teacher educator, student affairs staff, and experiential learning faculty member. Of the many lessons learned through this process, most important is connecting with like-minded people doing like-minded work who care about the effects of racism. Sharing creative strategies

for anti-racist action can push White people to be more explicit in addressing issues of bias and discrimination in their personal and professional settings. Through our dialogue, we identified three areas of focus for our anti-racist daily practice: educating and identifying the self, interacting with students (e.g. teaching, advising), and advocating among colleagues and supervisors.

EDUCATION AND IDENTIFICATION

An important initial step we all recognized in our reflections on doing anti-racist work as White people was our continual self-education and self-identification. In general, we came to know our own racial privilege through examining the intersectionality of our identities and in finding our own voices. Understanding our own oppressions based on gender, sexuality, and/or class provided a critical lens through which to view oppressive cultural structures more generally, and helped us to develop a desire to cultivate empathy and to acknowledge privilege within ourselves. It is critically important for us to be mindful of our own access to privilege as White academics and how we have enacted—consciously or not—our privilege over others. For example, following the postings of the cartoons, we enacted our racial privilege to choose whether to respond and when to do so. Our colleagues of color did not have this same choice. Situations like this demonstrate that, as White people, we need to consistently engage in a process of self-actualization by examining our values, beliefs, and actions as they come to fruition in the face of bias and discrimination. Educating the self is also about familiarizing oneself with what is going on around you, what is available in terms of resources, and who is in your community or organization. In many cases, this means actively seeking out information

about equity issues such as statistics on minority enrollment and persistence at a university, even if those facts are not part of your institution's or department's typical talking points.

Mindful, active self-identification was also a critical point for us as White people seeking to address racism. Specifically, we believe that identification as White allies or White anti-racists can sometimes serve as a label to denote enlightenment or self-congratulation (or, in today's parlance, "wokeness") as opposed to a dedication to continuous work. The label of ally or anti-racist should never imply that our anti-racist work is complete, nor that we are not implicated in the problem. These identifications do not cancel out our continued access to White privilege. We believe that the focus should not be on how people identify, but what they are doing.

CONFRONTING RACISM IN OUR INTERACTIONS

To be sure, balancing a university job and activism can be risky (June, 2015). However, White academics can actively address structural racism in our work culture. In terms of White responsibility, we believe that using our privilege to commit to anti-racist acts can have an effect on individuals and systems alike. We see this play out in our daily lives as teachers, colleagues, advocates, and advisers.

Although we acknowledge that it is a challenge, we believe that it is possible to use one's privilege to draw attention to incidents of racial violence and to the often-observed and ignored experiences of those who are oppressed. This might mean challenging someone who says something subtly or overtly racist; raising the question of racial dynamics when contributing to a dialogue on funding, hiring, or policy deci-

sions; promoting and celebrating the work of our students and colleagues of color; or showing up to public protests of racial violence or injustice. We can also start conversations and empower other White people to act. Ultimately, our activism can help our students, and is therefore worth the risk.

ANTI-RACIST ADVOCACY WITH STUDENTS

One of the most important ways we can have a positive impact is through interactions with our students. For example, in our classrooms, we talk about racist ideologies or systems, such as racially disparate disciplinary practices in schools (where Black students, especially young black men, face more and harsher discipline than their White counterparts). We can also engage in critical reflections on experiential placements so that diverse opportunities do not reinforce students' stereotypes, but instead they start to see the more systemic nature of racism. These dialogues can result in the recognition that racism is pervasive. This action breaks the polite silence so that such acts of racial violence in schools can be brought to the attention of the administration or community organizations by a diverse group of voices. Here, individual actions become part of a chain of events addressing these acts of violence from the individual level to the organizational level and higher.

This same logic follows when working with students outside of the classroom. Through advising or co-curricular work, we can share resources on supportive communities and organizations with students of color and White anti-racist students. For example, during service-learning experiences, program leaders can not only support critical dialogue with the students about their experiences, but also position themselves as a person open to discussing the racialized

experiences of culture shock or discrimination. At UC, we make a point to promote our Racial Awareness Program (RAPP) among students we serve. RAPP is an initiative that uses intensive development programs and outreach to educate students and staff on social justice issues and fighting oppression. By encouraging students to engage with such organizations, we help them learn effective responses to bias, violence, and racism, both locally and around the world. Through our students, our impact can span space and time.

ANTI-RACIST ADVOCACY WITH COWORKERS

In addition to our work with students, it is also important to maintain anti-racist advocacy among our colleagues and supervisors. For example, we can make it a point to utilize minority-owned businesses as vendors. While sitting on hiring committees, we can make sure that the committee has diverse representation and reaches out to a diverse range of potential candidates as soon as the posting is available. Furthermore, White professionals should be intentional about networking with colleagues of color to ensure equal access to the advancement opportunities that professional networks provide. In other words, we must be intentional about ensuring that professional development and advancement opportunities are consistently available to and comprised of our colleagues of color.

Finally, we can encourage this dialogue in our campus community at large. To do this at UC, we organized a panel for our annual Diversity Conference titled, "White Privilege & Responsibility: Showing Up to Discuss Racism on UC's Campus." During this panel, we discussed our explorations of our racial identities as White women, acknowledgements of White privilege,

and the ways we have enacted anti-racist daily practices. White accountability like this conference presentation is critical. Yet, we know that as White people, we should never dominate the dialogue. Listening to the experiences of people of color (without expecting them to teach us) will always remain paramount.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

We believe in the transformative power of individual actions. However, we acknowledge the reality of White hesitation (Holt Shannon, 2001). Frequently, well-meaning White faculty or staff members may be hesitant to speak out about racism on their respective campuses. This hesitation could be a fear of possible missteps, a feeling that the privileged White voice can't speak truth to experiences of discrimination, or even a legitimate fear of reprisal in the form of professional consequences. We understand those hesitations. We have felt them, and know that they do not compare to the economic, social, and spiritual consequences of racism that people and communities of color experience. In truth, we realize that writing this article is easier than almost any of the action steps that we have suggested.

In spite of our empathy for White hesitation, we stop short of believing that these fears are a legitimate reason for inaction. This is especially pertinent to those in higher education, who are privileged to have access to information to know better, show up and do better, and be better. The level of privilege experienced by White faculty and staff members at universities is not only one of race, but also one of socioeconomic status, access to education, and therefore, access to power. This racial privilege is that which our colleagues and students of color do not experience in this country. We understand the fears

and hesitations associated with the dialogue around race and racism in academia. But we also argue that these fears are not a reasonable excuse to opt out of the dialogue.

It is time to disrupt the status quo of "loud, pronounced, egregious," cultural silence and "lackluster" responses around racism at universities in a time of a public relations crisis (R. Jackson, personal communication, November 25, 2014). Addressing the level of violence endured by communities of color in this nation is a moral imperative for leaders in academia, especially if they are White. It is time that White academics exercise critical self-reflection and accountability on this issue. There remains much work left to do, and we are motivated by the dialogue and calls to action with like-minded community members.

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