



RACIAL LITERACY



A **Critical Skill** for
Student Affairs Professionals

BY SHAUN R. HARPER

In his book, *Promoting Racial Literacy in Schools: Differences That Make a Difference* (Teachers College Press, 2014), Howard C. Stevenson, an education psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, acknowledges the stress that people of color and their white colleagues feel when they are confronted with seemingly explosive racial situations in K–12 school environments. His findings are consistent with those that have emerged in my studies of higher education professionals: People would rather not talk about race because they do not know how, they have not had sufficient opportunities for rehearsal, and they fear that doing so might produce professionally catastrophic outcomes. Fear of being misunderstood as naïve about racial issues, or even worse, appearing to be racist, compels many white people to remain silent on racial issues. Despite their commitments to diversity and social justice, too many of our colleagues lack what Stevenson terms racial literacy, which is the ability to speak comfortably and competently about race.

To help illustrate the importance of racial literacy in higher education, I describe in this article an activity used to stimulate productive conversations about race among large audiences of colleagues in student affairs divisions across the country; present key findings that have emerged in a five-year study of students in graduate preparation programs; and discuss one consistent finding from campus racial climate studies that researchers at the University of Pennsylvania Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education have conducted at nearly three dozen predominantly white institutions. This article concludes with an acknowledgment of some consequences of illiteracy and the presentation of eight ways colleagues can develop greater fluency on racial topics.

RACIAL TABOOS IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

I give dozens of talks on college campuses across the country each year, most of which focus on my race and equity research. Occasionally, I am invited to facilitate half-day or daylong professional development events for entire student affairs divisions. Colleagues often seem to appreciate what I say, but find it difficult to talk publicly with each other about the relevance of research findings in a local context. Their affirmative head nods and engagement throughout my presentations suggest I am speaking about trends and problems that exist on their campuses, yet few audience members seem comfortable talking about these issues during

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Q&A periods. Afterward, some colleagues have confessed to me that they want to speak, but do not know how because of their inexperience and the political risks associated with breaking their silence.

In response, I often have audience members anonymously write burning questions they have about racial situations on campus, but have not had the courage to ask colleagues. Each colleague writes one question on a notecard without including her or his name. I collect, shuffle, and distribute a handful of these cards to audience members who represent a range a racial/ethnic groups. Without assuming personal ownership for what is written on the card, colleagues read them, and I facilitate a conversation with everyone in the room about all of the questions.

To date, I have constructed a database with more than 3,000 seemingly taboo questions that colleagues have written on notecards. When I began this activity, I expected contentious and politically dangerous questions, and I was fully prepared to clean up the mess. But the questions have been consistently and surprisingly basic. Some examples of the

most commonly asked questions include: Why do we talk so little about race? Why do we focus so much on race relative to other diversity issues? Why are there no people of color in senior roles in the division? Why does the Black Cultural Center have only one full-time staff person? Why do we only see Latinos in landscaping and custodial positions? What can we do about our segregated student body?

On every campus I have led this activity, the conversations have gone refreshingly well. No fights have broken out. No yelling has occurred. No colleague has attacked another by screaming, “You’re racist!” To my knowledge, no one has been fired for contributing honestly to the conversation. Instead, vice presidents for student affairs (VPSAs) and others tell me these are the first times they have had frank conversations with coworkers about race. In addition to being afraid, many say they had previously avoided these topics because they never really learned how to productively engage one another.

THE MIS-EDUCATION OF ASPIRING STUDENT AFFAIRS LEADERS

A decade-long project funded by the NASPA Foundation, now in its fifth year, aims to improve how student affairs professionals are prepared to engage in substantive conversations about race and racism, work with racially diverse student populations, understand and address racial inequities, and foster inclusive campus racial climates. The

first five years were spent studying how, what, and where students learn about race in their graduate programs. To date, researchers from the University of Pennsylvania Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, including myself, have interviewed 84 second-year students enrolled in higher education and student affairs master’s degree programs at 14 research universities. Individual interviews have been conducted with new professionals who earned master’s degrees within the past three to five years and presently work in entry-level student affairs positions; advanced doctoral students who were on the market for tenure-track faculty positions in higher education graduate programs; and tenure-track assistant professors who earned doctorates in higher education or student affairs within the past three years and presently teach in graduate preparation programs.

One thing is consistent across all of the groups we have interviewed for this project: participants agree that too few opportunities to develop racial literacy exist in graduate preparation programs. Numerous participants have maintained that simply reading racial identity development theories in a student development course does not equip one with the skills needed to talk candidly about the effects of institutionalized racism on diverse populations. Reportedly, what to do when someone shouts a racial epithet at a student of color, strategically closing racialized student success and engagement gaps, and creating workplace cultures in which all racial groups feel included and have equitable opportunities for advancement to senior leadership roles



are topics that are rarely taught or learned in most graduate programs. Participants have also reported that professors tend to focus more on gaps between racial groups rather than discussing or skillfully addressing the underlying issues. Racial equity cannot be achieved if colleagues enter the profession without the ability to talk honestly with each other about the conditions, policies, programs, approaches, and systems that repeatedly reproduce inequities and sustain racially alienating campus climates.

RACIAL AVOIDANCE AS A CULTURAL NORM

College presidents, provosts, VPSAs, and other institutional leaders frequently hire researchers from the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education to spend multiple days on their campuses conducting racial climate assessments. At some institutions, we are asked to focus on racial/ethnic differences in faculty and staff members' feelings of inclusion, respectability, and opportunities for fair and equitable professional advancement, as well as on racial tensions in workplace settings. But on most campuses, executives ask us to assess the racial climate for student feelings of inclusion and belongingness across racial/ethnic groups, the extent to which students interact substantively across differences, where and what students learn about race, appraisals of institutional commitments to fostering inclusive environments, and characterizations of the supportiveness of classrooms and other spaces. These studies have been conducted at more than 30 campuses across geographic regions and institution types, ranging from Portland Community College to Princeton University.

Participants in these climate studies voice several common themes. Many acknowledge the avoidance of talking openly and honestly about race and obvious racial problems on campus. Students, faculty, and administrators alike describe racial avoidance as a cultural norm. "We just don't go there," is an often-used phrase. Even when there are racial eruptions (or learnable moments), crisis management prevails. Avoiding bad press, protecting free speech, and restoring normalcy as quickly as possible seem to be the highest priorities. Consequently, many members of the campus community adhere to the firmly established "we don't have real talk about race" cultural norms.

CONSEQUENCES OF ILLITERACY AND AVOIDANCE

When student affairs professionals and other educators avoid talking about race, they contribute to mission breach. Thousands of colleges, universities, and student affairs divisions have language in their mission statements about diversity, equity, or creating inclusive environments where everyone feels respected and affirmed. Yet too many students, faculty members, and administrators of color who participated in racial climate studies tell us they have been persistently and painfully marginalized, microaggressed, and publicly humiliated. A large number also report being excluded from the curriculum, programs hosted in residence halls and sponsored by student activities offices, and senior leadership roles. Failing to acknowledge these experiences and engage in deep, prolonged discussions about them makes mission actualization impossible.

Illiteracy and avoidance can also lead to misinterpretations about why students of color are comparatively less engaged inside and outside the classroom, why their academic performance is comparatively lower than that of their white peers, and why they drop out at disproportionately higher rates. Likewise, silence might lead white student affairs professionals to attribute the lack of diversity in the division and higher rates of attrition among colleagues of color to factors that have nothing to do with the division's reputation for being racist or the racially alienating cultural environment that pushes people of color out of the institution.

Recent protests at the University of Missouri, Ithaca College, Yale University, Claremont McKenna College, and several dozen other institutions across the United States were mostly about administrators' unresponsiveness to students' constant confrontations with racism on their campuses. Ultimately, avoidance and illiteracy led to the resignations of some presidents and other senior leaders. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to effectively respond to issues that are not well understood or openly discussed. This recent wave of student activism clearly suggests that students of color and their supporters expect campus leaders and professors to be more skilled at talking about and strategically responding to what, in many instances, are long-standing racial problems.



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BECOMING LITERATE AND CONVERSANT ON RACE

It would be ideal if graduate preparation programs did a better job of teaching master’s and doctoral students how to talk about race and confront racial issues. The next five years of the NASPA Foundation-funded project will focus on helping faculty colleagues in graduate programs across the nation more substantively integrate racial topics across the curriculum and develop students’ racial literacies.

Beyond graduate programs, here are eight action items for student affairs professionals to become more racially literate:

- 1 Read great books.** Racial literacy demands actual literacy. Texts like *Race Matters in College* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), *Engaging the Race Question* (Teachers College Press, 2015), *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence* (Wiley, 2015), *Asian American Students in Higher Education* (Routledge, 2014), and *Microaggressions in Everyday Life* (Wiley, 2010) are exceptionally useful conversation starters. Colleagues should read these and other books, and discuss the relevance and implications for their campus contexts.
- 2 Engage what happens elsewhere.** In addition to reading books, colleagues should read and discuss articles published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* about racial situations that occur at colleges and universities across the nation. Colleagues should be asked to come to weekly office or monthly division meetings prepared to talk about articles they have read and implications for their campuses.

- 3 Participate in a Penn Equity institute.** The University of Pennsylvania Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education offers five-week virtual education experiences (penninstitutes.org) for a campus cohort of 20 professionals in a student affairs division or across departments. Through a series of ten 90-minute modules, participants learn to talk more comfortably and honestly about race with their colleagues, foster racially inclusive campus environments, and close racial equity gaps among students and employees.
- 4 Attend NCORE.** The National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education occurs annually, immediately after Memorial Day. Each year, several useful sessions cover topics such as confronting difficult racial issues, making productive use of racial conflicts when they arise in the workplace, achieving racial equity, and understanding the racism that people of color face on predominantly white campuses.
- 5 Use climate data more responsibly.** Higher education leaders pay the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education \$25,000 to \$40,000 to conduct campus racial climate assessments, but ultimately do very little (sometimes nothing) with the reports they receive. Because the findings are usually unflattering, many administrators do not widely distribute the reports. This is bad practice. At the very least, colleagues should engage in divisionwide discussions about the findings and recommendations offered.
- 6 Be honest about your racial biases.** Getting comfortable talking about race requires getting more familiar with your own racial beliefs and biases. Project Implicit (implicit.harvard.edu) at Harvard University offers free online tests that help reveal an individual’s racial biases. Colleagues should talk with each other—perhaps during a staff meeting or at a division retreat—about their personal discoveries, common misconceptions, and ideas to address biases that likely undermine espoused commitments to racial equity.
- 7 Hire a Facilitator.** Skillful, experienced facilitators can productively manage a half-day or day-long forum in which all student affairs division staff members collectively discuss the health of the campus racial climate, their racialized experiences in the workplace, the pervasiveness and undercurrents of racial equity gaps in the division and beyond, and other race-focused topics.
- 8 Take Advantage of NASPA Resources.** Over the next several months, as part of my year-long NASPA Expert in Residence appointment, the association and I will collaborate on a range of meaningful, race-focused engagement opportunities for members, including Expert Live Briefings, Twitter chats, collective reading sessions, and presentations at the 2017 NASPA Annual Conference in San Antonio. **LE**

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