

# Utilizing an African American Studies Course to Garner Critical Consciousness Among Students: Considerations for Improving Campus Climate

by

Blaze Campbell, M.A.  
Coordinator of Student Development  
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo  
bcampb11@calpoly.edu

Blaze Campbell received her M.A. in African American Studies in 2015 from Temple University, Philadelphia, PA. Ms. Campbell currently works in higher education within the Student Affairs sector combining her passion for academics, social justice, and student's lives living and learning outside the classroom on a college campus at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

## Abstract

As student bodies across the United States have become more racially diverse, Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) have needed to readjust their strategies to effectively engage students who were once prohibited from attending. Despite these attempts, research indicates that black students continuously express race-related concerns while pursuing their higher education. Thus, while these institutions claim a commitment to diversity the racial social climate often indicate otherwise. It is imperative that all students be provided opportunities that help them understand the complexities of race to improve race relations on campuses beyond superficial cross-racial interactions. This paper examines four strategies PWIs can implement to provoke critical consciousness among students that will truly demonstrate their commitment to diversity by way of a general education required African American Studies course. These recommendations are as follows: (1) ground the course in social justice education, (2) provide opportunities for ally-ship development among students, (3) facilitate structured dialogues about race, and (4) provide service learning opportunities as an extension of course responsibilities. Shifting the way in which students understand race will impact the way they interact with one another and positively impact the overall racial campus climate.

**Keywords:** African American Studies, race, race relations, diversity, social justice, racial development, inter-group dialogue, ally-ship, critical consciousness, higher education, predominately white institutions.

## Introduction

It is crucial that colleges and universities provide transformative and educational opportunities about the historical and contemporary significance of race in the United States so that critical consciousness is provoked among students. Igniting transformational thinking about race will create inclusive campus environments where students of all races can thrive academically as well as socially, feel supported, and feel acknowledged. While countless predominately white institutions (PWIs) espouse an obligation to “diversity” by adopting buzzwords within their mission statements such as multiculturalism, pluralism, and equity (Harper & Quaye, 2009) the practices employed to uphold such commitment are not always identifiable. It is important to note “diversity” encompasses a wide range of factors such as: age, gender, sexuality, race, class, religion, mental/physical ability, etc. However, within this context the word diversity is being used to deal exclusively with race. As such, it is being defined as the presence of historically underrepresented and systematically oppressed groups, specifically African Americans.

Students of color consistently report their perception of campus life at PWIs as racist and lacking in acceptance (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). According to Harper and Hurtado (2007) the racial climates across predominately white college campuses consistently indicate that there are disparate gaps in social satisfaction among racial groups, institutional neglect in regards to fostering interracial interactions, pervasiveness of whiteness in curricula and activities as the norm, and issues regarding race remain an avoidable topic at these institutions. This research seeks to examine what actions PWIs can take to truly uphold diversity when the contemporary lived experiences of students of color indicate otherwise. Furthermore, how can a PWI initiate dialogue about racial oppression<sup>1</sup> in a supposedly post-racial society?

Young people must be educated about the systematic issues that sustain hostile race relations on college campuses and beyond. Providing spaces for college students to learn and reflect on race have important implications for their racial development, campus environments, and how students contribute to society post-graduation. The mere presence of historically underrepresented and systematically oppressed groups on campus and in classrooms is not enough. This is substantiated by the fact that African American student graduation rate is twenty percentage points lower than white students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). One cause for this disparity stems from the environment of PWIs, which are not supporting the personal, social, and cognitive development of black students (Fleming, 1984). As one scholar puts it, “true equity does not cease at enrolling black college students, but enrolling black students closer to their presence in the population and they need to graduate” (Love, p. 28). In other words, enrolling black students does not automatically indicate racial equity on these campuses.

Additionally, white students who have been conditioned to discriminate against people of color and uphold white supremacist ideology, subtly and unsubtly, due to their pre-college socialization need to be re-educated and Student and Academic Affairs professionals need to make it their responsibility to foster the process of “re-conditioning” these students (Evans, et al., 2009). The development students undergo cognitively, affectively, morally, and interpersonally wholeheartedly depends on their university’s ability to nurture this growth inside and outside of the classroom. Hence, being able to create campus environments that are truly inclusive is the first step to adequately engage and support students of color and have positive implications for white students as well.

While some may assert schools’ primary purpose is to provide individuals economic opportunities like job security, there is a growing movement within the counseling field, k-12 education, and higher education that argues true education goes beyond the accumulation and recitation of de-contextualized information. Throughout the United States’ history, the fundamental purpose of education has been to prepare students to be informed, democratic citizens (Andrzejewski & Alessio, 1999; Hytten, 2006). According to Apple and Beane (1995) democratic citizenship education seeks to develop just citizens that strive for the common good (Apple & Beane, 1995). While most schools identify democratic or global citizenship as the purpose of education, it is not always clear how this goal is reflected in the current curriculums. According to Andrzejewski and Alessio: (1999)

Our educational experiences did not provide us with the information and tools to understand what is happening in the world, how it affects our lives, the lives of others and the planet itself. We were not taught how we, as ordinary (non-rich) people, might live our lives and actively participate in creating a safer, more humane, sustainable world. (p. 1)

The preceding quote illuminates the need for an alternative pedagogy to replace the one that is currently being utilized. A teaching method that connects class content with present day problems need to be employed as, the regurgitation and repetition of information with no explicit connection to students’ lives is not a productive way to engage students.

Developing critical consciousness among students will lead to more inclusive, engaging college campuses. Critical consciousness refers to a reflective awareness of the inequalities imbedded in the social relationships in society (Freire, 1970). Content that focuses on race is usually difficult for students to grapple with, especially when the discussion includes people who hold conflicting views. However, it is through these difficult conversations students are able to experience growth.

This paper examines four strategies PWIs can implement to provoke critical consciousness among students that will truly demonstrate their commitment to diversity by way of a general education African American Studies<sup>2</sup> course: These recommendations are as follows: (1) course must be grounded in social justice education, (2) provide opportunities for ally-ship development among students, (3) facilitate structured dialogues about race, and (4) provide service learning opportunities as an extension of course responsibilities. Shifting the way in which students see race will impact the way they interact with one another and positively impact the overall racial campus climate. Therefore, it is imperative opportunities for students to develop critical consciousness be embedded in aspects of college life. Hopefully, higher education professionals can use the strategies discussed in this paper as a starting point to develop initiatives at their institutions that will help foster a truly inclusive environment that go beyond lip reverence. The strategies discussed in this paper will benefit the overall campus environment in regards to race relations because students of all races will be exposed to opportunities to garner critical consciousness towards issues about race.

## **Theoretical Thrust**

The arguments presented in this paper are firmly grounded upon the certainty that the historical experiences of black people as a result of racism should be used as an educational means to teach individuals about race relations (Kershaw, 1992). Kershaw writes (1992):

Historically, the status of African Americans in the United States has been dominated by race. To attempt an understanding of present race relations, a knowledge of past relations is essential. Without a historical knowledge of race relations, it is impossible to understand if the status has changed, how it has changed, when, and so on. (p. 478)

Critical Race Theory supports (CRT) this contention and works as the theoretical backbone of this work. CRT is an interdisciplinary methodology that seeks to deconstruct and critique racism and power (Delgado & Stefanic, 2011) and is based on four main tenets: (1) racism is ingrained in everyday life in the United States, so much so, it often goes unnoticed, (2) the voices of people of color are a critical component to challenging white privilege, (3) the white racial group will only support the advancement of people of color if it benefits them in some way, and (4) notions of color blindness and race neutrality need to be challenged because they negate the lived experiences of people of color (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). According to Tatum (1992):

It is virtually impossible to live in U.S. contemporary society and not be exposed to some aspect of the personal, cultural, and/or institutional manifestations of racism in our society. It is also assumed that, as a result, all of us have received some misinformation about those groups disadvantaged by racism. (p. 3)

The preceding passage reflects the deep-rooted relationship between racism and the United States. Racism is defined as a “system of advantage based on race,” (Wellman, 1977). This system is based on white supremacy and is the main function of racism, benefiting Euro-Americans exclusively (Welsing, 1974). Therefore, this work is situated within a CRT framework as, CRT examines the relationship between race, racism, and privilege (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012).

Furthermore, African American Studies scholars have the social responsibility to work towards a more just society. In this regard, social responsibility refers to the notion that knowledge formation should always be produced to aid in the liberation of oppressive and unjust aspects of society (Campbell, 2015). When reading the subsequent sections it should be realized these are the ideological perspectives that frame the position of this discussion.

## **Be Grounded in Social Justice Education**

A social justice orientation is the most appropriate, beneficial, and productive approach for a higher education institution to employ in order for students to have a positive experience related to race relations. The definitions of social justice are varied and abundant, as such, the social justice definition that most appropriately fits into this discussion is Murrell’s (2006) stated as follows: “A disposition toward recognizing and eradicating all forms of oppression and differential treatment extant in the practices and policies of institutions...” (p. 81). Thus, social justice is: (1) an attitude grounded in the belief that a just society provides all citizens with full access to resources and opportunities regardless of their identity and (2) the belief we all have a social responsibility to uphold this principle (Campbell, 2015). While there are institutions that claim a social justice grounding or utilize the terminology they do not address systemic racial issues, which is a key principle of social justice.

Multiculturalism and social justice are sometimes discussed as extensions of each other but they hold distinctive definitions from one another. To be multicultural refers to the, “state of being in which an individual feels comfortable and communicates effectively across social groups” (Talbot, 1996, p. 381). A multiculturalist is also sensitive to language that is oppressive or offensive to marginalized groups in society, emphasizing the importance of developing professionalism associated with working with people that are different from one’s self (Watt, 2007). It is also fundamentally tied to the notion of political correctness which refers to the idea that people need to be mindful of their speech to not offend others (Campbell, 2015). The notion of political correctness influences what is appropriate and acceptable in our language (Hughes, 2011). According to Campbell (2015), “a person that is aware that in this day and age he or she should refer to an African American person as “black” rather than “colored” reflects the connection between multiculturalism and political correctness,” (p. 2).

Although multicultural awareness is important, it is not enough to improve race relations and presents a limited understanding of racism when it does not include a conversation about the acts of racism at the institutional level, whereas social justice addresses issues that deal with institutional racism. Kwame Ture (2011) provides insight into the difference between individual and institutional racism in the subsequent passage:

The second type [institutional racism] is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive of human life. The second type originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation than the first type [individual racism]. When white terrorists bomb a black church and kill five black children that is an act of individual racism, widely deplored by most segments of the society. But when in that same city - Birmingham, Alabama - five hundred black babies die each year because of the lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities, and thousands more are destroyed and maimed physically, emotionally and intellectually because of conditions of poverty and discrimination in the black community, that is a function of institutional racism. (p. 4)

Ignoring the impact of systematic forms of oppression is problematic because being *aware* of and sensitive to racial differences, varying worldviews, political correctness, celebrating difference, and stigmatizing hateful language is only the first step to creating a less hostile environment. Thus, while a multicultural perspective teaches an individual how to interact and appreciate people different from themselves, a social justice perspective educates individuals about systematic social, political, and economic issues that plague our society (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Simply put, racism does not cease at individual acts of meanness (McIntosh, 1989).

A rudimentary way to breakdown the different levels of awareness that multicultural and social justice perspectives foster, is by utilizing an iceberg as a symbolic tool to understand these two approaches. Campbell (2015) writes:

The tip of the iceberg represents the issues that a multicultural perspective address, hence, what has surfaced. For example, those individual acts of meanness, micro-aggressions, or harsh, offensive language, and racial slurs all can be combatted by education grounded in multiculturalism. However, beyond the surface, the larger part of the iceberg, hidden by the water, represents the issues that a social justice education can mitigate. These deeper issues address privilege, oppression, and systems that are embedded in our society that perpetuate racial injustice.

Hence, a social justice framework is essential because individuals or institutions who claim a social justice perspective are committed to working towards an egalitarian society. An egalitarian society in that it does not privilege one group while debilitating another through structures that systematically uphold oppression and discrimination. Research indicates that a student's college experiences significantly impacts their social justice awareness (Broido, 2000). This relies wholeheartedly on the college or university's ability to provide social justice education.

Conversely, institutions often pride themselves on being "multicultural." But learning about differences is insufficient when white middle class norms are still seen as the quintessential prototype for human development (Bobo & Fox, 2003). Celebrating cultural differences fall short when it comes to interrupting status quo injustices. For example, hosting a "taco night" in which people wear sombreros and drink tequila does not combat the discrimination Mexican Americans face at an institutional level but rather, reinforces stereotypical images and further silences the struggles these individuals face on a daily basis. Education needs to go beyond multiculturalism because this approach tends to rest on teaching students how to celebrate difference and how to speak politically correct about marginalized groups but does not expose or critically examine systematic oppression (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009; Vera & Speight, 2003).

A social justice approach acknowledges and addresses issues of power relations and institutional policies and practices through advocating for change (Goodman, 2001). A person with a social justice perspective feels a sense of social responsibility to help shift our society into one that is just to all citizens and is concerned with educating others about their social responsibility to disrupt oppressive systems (Rhoads & Black, 1995). Social Justice approaches to education serves as the catalyst for critically examining societal injustices in our society and aims to interrupt oppressive systems that create privileges for some and disadvantages for others (Campbell, 2015).

Social justice education has three learning outcomes: (1) to analyze and critique policies, (2) to compel individuals to challenge the status quo and longstanding "truths" in the United States and (3) to motivate advocacy against institutionalized inequalities based on identity i.e. race, class, sex, religion, age, sexuality, disability, etc (Oakes & Lipton, 2003; Campbell, 2015). According to Hytten, (2009) for education to truly be social justice oriented it needs to be rooted in critical pedagogy. Proponents of critical pedagogy argue that education should be geared towards critiquing social inequalities and reflecting on strategies for social transformation (Hytten, 2009). It also needs to include and contextualize historical and present day issues surrounding oppression not only associated with race, but also class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and disabilities (Marshall and Theoharis, 2009; Bishop, 2002). Two examples of disciplines rooted in critical pedagogy include African American Studies and Women and Gender Studies, as they provide a voice for two historically marginalized groups (Hytten and Bettez, 2011).

## **Provide Opportunities for Ally-ship Development**

As white students gain opportunities to develop their racial identity they should subsequently be educated about how to use their privilege towards social justice efforts. White students often find themselves in the depths of white guilt and hopelessness when they are made aware of race injustices. It is important that they subsequently be educated about action steps they can take to make differences in their daily lives and what it means to be an ally. The idea of ally-ship began appearing in the 1990's literature in reference to members from the heterosexual community joining forces in solidarity with the Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual and Queer community's (LGBTQ) demand for equal rights and treatment (Broido, 2000). An ally can also be thought of as an advocate on behalf of a group that is facing discrimination or oppression through way of unjust policies and practices (Broido & Reason, 2005).

Ally-ship should not be viewed as a linear process nor as a competency one acquires after simply passing a test or taking a course. It is an ongoing process in which a person is always learning and transforming. There are, however, theories that have been developed that are helpful when working towards creating curricula and initiatives that institutions can utilize to foster ally-ship among students. Two examples of such theories are outlined in the subsequent passages. Studies like these should be examined or even conducted to help inform ways in which ally development opportunities can be an embedded part of class.

A six-step framework was created to explain how racial social justice ally-ship is developed among students (Bishop, 2002). This framework is based on the progression of a student's understanding of the various forms of oppression through elevated awareness (Bishop, 2002). According to Bishop (2002), the first step to becoming an ally is understanding oppression. Individuals on their way to ally-ship need to be educated about the historical origin of oppression, how it is sustained, and the influence oppression has on people and institutions (Bishop, 2002). The second step of this process also involves oppression, but in this step, an individual becomes enlightened about the different forms of oppression (Bishop, 2002). This allows a person to become aware of how different forms are similar and connected to one another. The individual begins to see various forms of oppression as interrelated and reinforcements to one another. The third step of this framework deals with consciousness and healing (Bishop, 2002). In this step, what a person has learned about oppression becomes a part of their consciousness, essentially making this new awareness that they were previously ignorant of, a part of their inner workings (Bishop, 2002). Healing refers to the process that needs to take place after learning about some of the harsh realities of our society (Bishop, 2002). A person also needs to heal from the effects of learning the ways they have contributed to the oppression of others unknowingly. In step four, a person begins to liberate themselves from forms of oppression that directly affect them (Bishop, 2002). In step five, one becomes an ally for others and participates in actions that show solidarity towards those individuals (Bishop, 2002). The sixth step of this framework involves an individual maintaining hopefulness the situation will improve as a result of social justice driven work (Bishop, 2002).



Reason and Davis (2005) created another model for racial justice ally development by conducting interviews with students that self-identified as racial social justice allies. Based on the findings, the components of this model include: pre-college characteristics, curricular, and co-curricular experiences, and cognitive complexity in the reconstructing of whiteness (Reason & Davis, 2005). The findings indicate that students who became allies felt they needed to be invited to participate before they assumed the ally role. Additionally, participants discussed the impact of leadership roles as the starting point of their ally development (Reason et al., 2005). Another important piece of information that was discovered in this study was that the participants who reflected intensely on their whiteness showed higher levels of ally-ship than participants who did not reflect as intensely. These students discussed the ways they were involved on campus in social justice initiatives and how they continued to be involved in these types of actions post-graduation.

Moreover, it is important to remember that ally-ship is not an easy identity to assume (Brown, 2002). Self-proclaimed allies who are committed to their role, stated they were constantly faced with challenges because of their ally-ship (Brown, 2002). Some of those challenges include: risk of exile from loved ones, potential imprisonment, and loss of income because of their stance on certain issues and involvement in various social justice movements (Brown, 2002). This by no means is an easy process because it entails reevaluating much of what one has been socialized to believe. Brown (2002) also raises the point that allies have to be careful not to be intrusive of the group they are advocating on behalf of. Allies' efforts can be counter-productive if they are too abrasive or target group members begin to feel the allies are overstepping their boundaries in their support. Therefore, allies need to be mindful not to exert their privilege in a way that would reinforce oppression. It is important to reiterate that ally-ship does not culminate in a certificate or by passing a course. To bring about true ally-ship is to introduce the practical ways students can make a difference and advocate on behalf of targeted groups. We must teach students the power of speaking up, the day to day changes they can make that will impact the campus environment, as well as the power in actively standing against something they know is wrong even if it does not impact their group identity. We must help students lose the position of "since it does not affect me, it is not my problem." But rather, help them realize the intersectionality of all humanity.

Additionally, the process that students of color go through as they become aware of race as a salient part of their identity and society should be kept in mind. It cannot be assumed that by virtue of group membership, a black student is automatically social justice oriented. Racial identity among black students also needs to be nurtured. Similar to white students, black students need to be educated explicitly about what social justice means and actions they can take that will reflect this perspective.

## **Connect Service Learning to Course Content**

Service learning is an important pedagogy because it presents an opportunity to link the classroom experience with a practical application or solution (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). It is through service learning that students are able to learn how they can contribute to society's needs. While there has been countless evidence to support the benefit of service learning during the undergraduate years, opponents of service learning argue that service should be done as a co-curricular activity on a student's "own time" (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). However, McKenna and Rizzo (1999) report that students who are involved in service learning as a part of their course work report a positive correlation between service and their ability to understand course concepts. Another study reinforced this finding when they found that students reported higher levels of learning when involved in a service learning experience (Moely, et al., 2002).

Service learning also alleviates racial and cultural tension. People that have been labeled "the other," generally people of color, and the dominant culture or more privileged group understand each other on a deeper level after service learning experiences (Haugsbys, 1991). After participating in a service learning experience heightened cross-racial understandings as well as an increased dedication to activism emerge among the students who participate (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). Hence, the students who participate have a deeper understanding of race, culture, and social justice (Astin and Sax, 1998).

While there are definitely benefits to service learning, a positive and productive experience depends wholeheartedly on the quality and facilitation of the service learning experience. If service learning is not planned correctly it can produce negative consequences such as de-emphasizing the institutional oppression in our society. If participants do not realize the systemic implications that cause resource and distribution disparities it can reinforce the detrimental viewpoint that community members are deficient and at fault for their position in society (Eby, 1998). The service learning experience may also reinforce students' stereotypes, and increase distance from community. It is imperative that service learning be thought out, well planned and facilitated by someone who has the ability to challenge and support students through the process.

Participants also need to receive baseline knowledge through class lectures, readings, and have an opportunity to process their experiences which can be done through writing assignments and dialogue. This way, the instructor can help guide students through the process and help them make sense of their experience in a way that does not reinforce prejudice.

## **Provide Structured Ways to Engage in Dialogue About Race**

Difficult dialogues are the catalyst for initiating critical consciousness among students. Watt (2007) defines a difficult dialogue as “a verbal or written exchange of ideas or opinions between citizens within a community that centers on an awakening of potentially conflicting views of beliefs or values about social justice issues,” (Watt, 2007, p.116). A technique that is being used across professions and disciplines to foster critical consciousness are inter-group dialogues (Nagda & Zuniga, 2003; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). According to Dessel, Garlington, and Rogge (2005) an inter-group dialogue is a “process designed to involve individuals and groups in an exploration of societal issues about which views differ, often to the extent that polarization and conflict occur,” (p. 304). Inter-group dialogue is a way for people to learn more about one another’s lived experiences as it relates to their social identities and the varying perspectives that have the tendency to divide people into polarizing categories. The facilitators of these dialogues are charged with setting ground rules that aim to avoid unproductive language, promote active listening skills, improve communication, and develop shared meanings (Chasin et al., 1996). Research supports that positive changes do occur for the individuals who participate in inter-group dialogues including: decreased stereotyping, increased knowledge of inequality and an emphasized obligation to social responsibility (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). A study conducted by Denson and Chang (2009) showed that students who regularly engage with people who are different from themselves have greater cognitive and affective expansion. But the mere presence of racially and ethnically people does not increase the likelihood that meaningful cross-cultural dialogues will occur (Pope & LePeau, 2012). Therefore, institutions must be committed to ensuring these dialogues occur by providing structured ways for them to take place. This could be achieved by linking an inter-group dialogue to a course.

There are also a number of difficulties associated with conducting a successful dialogue that cannot be ignored including: misinterpretation of non-verbal communication, stereotypes, language differences, and the denial of racism (Barna, 1988; Parker et al., 1992). Non-verbal communication can drastically alter group dynamics. If an individual’s body language is perceived negatively by other group members, then the interactions will most likely become hostile. Misinterpreted non-verbal communication also impacts people’s comfort and ease during discussions. For example, if a person makes a comment and the other group members’ non-verbal communication indicates judgment or dismay, this group member will most likely contribute less to the discussion. If they do continue to contribute, it will be in a defensive manner. Additionally, it cannot be assumed that everyone who is participating in the dialogue is at the same point in their development, especially their racial development and awareness of racism. Some participants may not be at the point they believe racism exists and may overemphasize similarities making it difficult to have an effective inter-group dialogue (Pope & LePeau, 2012).

## **Recommendations for Conducting a Successful Inter-group Dialogue**

Stemming from a case study that assessed how a race-related inter-group dialogue session affected student leaders' social justice perspective, several themes were extracted from a content analysis conducted as a part of the case study (Campbell, 2015). The following sections provide recommendations for facilitating a successful inter-group dialogue based on the findings of said study.

### ***Set the Tone for a Candid Atmosphere***

The facilitator/instructor needs to foster an environment where participants feel they can express their thoughts and opinions without restriction or hesitation in order to have the most productive dialogue. The facilitator needs to properly sequence dialogue topics in a way that naturally progresses to topics that become increasingly more difficult. For example, asking students to discuss personal anecdotes that expose some of their own biases should not be the first topic you discuss with your students because trust among group members has probably not been fostered yet. When thinking about the structure of the inter-group dialogue it is most effective for it to be an on-going endeavor, so that trust can emerge between group members over time. The facilitator also needs to be sure to prepare meaningful discussion questions that evoke reflective and critical thinking. In addition, the questions should help the students engage the literature that is being utilized for class so that students are grounded in the readings while simultaneously making connections between what they are reading and their lived experiences. It is important to remember that the purpose of the dialogue is not to remain at surface level understandings of race, but to explore and introduce institutional racism, oppression, and privilege. Therefore, the activities and discussion questions should be structured in a way that allows conversation to go beyond a multicultural awareness.

### ***Implicate Lived Experiences***

The ability to reflect on and express one's lived experience regarding race is a powerful learning tool and an effective inter-group dialogue allows participants to do just this. An inter-group dialogue about race should include discussions that provide students the opportunity to think about how different lived experiences implicate one's perspective on race relations. By discussing one's own life, shared meanings, parallels in experiences, and an understanding of the intersection of oppression will emerge. Insightful conversations can also take place by using current events to help frame the dialogue so that abstract concepts are contextualized.

### ***Establish Baseline Knowledge***

It is important to establish baseline knowledge among participants. The facilitator should connect participants' personal narratives to larger ideas and key concepts. This can be done by assigning readings and addressing ideas throughout the dialogue and connecting them back to the readings as the dialogue progresses. As a facilitator it is important to address misinformation, problematic language, and challenge participants' comments when necessary.

### ***Develop Action Steps***

The dialogue should culminate by participants having an understanding that knowledge about race is ongoing and cyclical. The facilitator should work towards generating solutions and strategies to work towards improving racial oppression in their everyday life. Participants should be presented with realistic, everyday steps they can take to move past dialogue into action which, may be towards ally-ship.

### **Conclusion**

While pursuing higher education, students should be provided opportunities to develop their knowledge about the impact race has on the United States because of its salience in our society. Providing students with learning opportunities that acknowledge the experience of students of color in turn establish truly inclusive campuses in which students of all races feel engaged, supported, and validated. Education must go beyond information recitation and instead challenge students to deepen their perspectives. It should expose students to knowledge about how they can be socially responsible and provide them with ways they can make a difference.

Institutions of higher education need to be held accountable for the promises they are making in regards to cultivating environments that celebrate diversity. Ensuring that they provide students with knowledge about current race issues, social justice will more likely be an embedded part of their viewpoint. Therefore, it is important we provide opportunities for critical inquiry and reflection. PWIs need to ensure they are living up to their promise of inclusive campuses by taking race into account for campus climate issues. In addition, higher education leaders should be proactive about educating students about race to help combat issues before they arise. Intentional steps need to be taken to teach students about race and help black students have a better experience. We need to listen to the experiences of black students and other marginalized groups on campus to know for sure if the campus is truly inclusive. As Harper and Quaye state (2009), "repeatedly emphasized ... is the importance of listening to students in order to understand how to enhance their educational experiences" (p. 8). It is the job of colleges and universities to take part in the holistic development of students and this includes their racial awareness and identity.

Regardless of their experiences before they entered college, upon graduation student should be prepared to enter society with the knowledge that will help them make sense of the intersection of race, oppression, and the systems that uphold inequity on every level. Not only will this awareness impact students post-graduation it will impact the cross-racial interactions and the overall racial climate on universities and colleges all over this county.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> According to Ruth (1988) oppression is the “systematic mistreatment of the members of another group or by society as a whole” (p. 434) Please see Ruth, S. (1988). Understanding oppression and liberation. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 434-444.

<sup>2</sup>The nomenclature for African American Studies courses include: Africana Studies, African Diaspora Studies, Ethnic Studies, African and African American Studies, as well as other variations.

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