

# Texas Education Review

## **Improving Campus Climate: The Role of Social Justice**

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Volume 1, pp. 59-72 (2013)

Available online at [www.txedrev.org](http://www.txedrev.org)

## **Improving Campus Climate: The Role of Social Justice**

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Most colleges and universities recognize exposing their students to diverse perspectives and taking steps to increase representational diversity on their campuses are important ways to improve campus climate. Most generally, this focus on diversity in higher education has referred to the inclusion of historically under-represented groups and perspectives, particularly that of racial and ethnic groups. However, higher education needs to do more and do better. The purpose of this paper is to identify key ideological barriers that can impede efforts to improve campus climate particularly with respect to race and racism, and to provide an additional framework or lens through which to carry out effective campus climate improvements.

In terms of creating a more diverse student and faculty body, intergroup relations theory is very clear that *mere* contact between members of groups who historically had conflict will typically lead to more, rather than less, conflict (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). Intergroup contact must be conducted under specific conditions including “equal status between the groups, opportunities for self-revealing interactions, and equalitarian norms endorsed by relevant authority” (p. 629). Another common way to improve campus climate has been through various curricular efforts. Since the late 1990s, diversity course requirements have become a ubiquitous feature of undergraduate

education. In 2000, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) reported 63% of colleges and universities either have a diversity requirement in place or are in the process of developing one. Studies suggest some types of diversity course requirements are useful in that they challenge students' racial views and assumptions as well as provide for a better learning environment (e.g., Gurin, 1999; Humphreys, 2000). However, the defining qualities of diversity courses that do and do not achieve those positive outcomes are not always clear. The AACU (2011) strongly advocates that institutions of higher education deepen the conversation about diversity: "Higher education's goal, we believe, should be to deepen public and campus knowledge of United States diversity histories, to reengage with democratic aspirations as a moral compass for intersecting communities, and to recommit ourselves—as educators and as citizens—to the still-elusive goal of meaningful equality for every American" (p. 1).

The need higher education faces to create better climates around diversity issues is increasing. With respect to race and ethnicity in particular, Patricia Gurin and her colleagues (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013) argue changes in the United States in the coming decades will present challenges to colleges and universities on three fronts: increasing ethnic-racial minority enrollments, including international students and biracial or multiracial students; a growing need to help students become effective citizens in a diverse democracy, particularly with respect to inequality; and, the shift from a world in which America was the dominant economic, financial, and cultural power to a world that is more globally interdependent and requires agile, pluralistic, and empathetic citizens.

To address the challenges outlined by Gurin et al. (2013) and the AACU's (2011) call to deepen diversity education, this

paper argues that current curricular and representational strategies for diversity should be matched by an emphasis on having students understand and value *social justice*. Social justice goals include educating about systems of inequality, enabling learners to see their role as a member of such systems, and motivating learners to use whatever social power they have to ameliorate such inequality. Achieving these goals, however, is a complex process for many reasons. Many Americans prefer to not talk about difference at all and, when they do, they prefer to talk about it in glowing terms invoking notions of “celebration” and “harmony,” discourse Bell and Hartmann (2007) dub as “happy talk.” Bell and Hartmann’s qualitative interview study, as well as our own interviews conducted at a predominantly White liberal arts college (Chi et al., 2008; Wolfe et al., 2010) suggest many embrace and welcome diversity, but when pressed for more specifics about the importance of diversity, the undeveloped and uncertain reasoning for their positive attitudes is revealed. Discussions of inequality also inevitably collide with self-protective ideologies like being colorblind and believing in a just and fair American meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007). Thus, many campuses may be trying to engage in deeper conversations about race in a climate in which many students simply do not understand the need and do not have the basic vocabulary or background knowledge required for such conversations.

### **Myths Perpetuating Campus Climate Problems**

Any effort toward enhancing campus climate needs to be examined in light of overall perceptions about race and racism. Students, faculty, staff, and administrators in dominant majority groups may not understand the urgency (or even the necessity) of

exploring diversity and, particularly, systems of inequality. For example, campus climate can be perceived by some White students to be “good” around areas of race and ethnicity, while being seen as “poor” by students of color at the *same* institution (Cokley et al., 2010). Some White students view ethnic student organizations as unnecessary or even responsible for creating racial tensions (Negy & Lunt, 2008). This evidence is not surprising when considered against the larger backdrop of race discourse in the United States. There are many false beliefs regarding all kinds of diversity issues, but three beliefs about racism are especially problematic.

### **Racism is Over**

Many Americans question the continued existence of racial inequality in part because systemic inequities and unconsciously driven acts of racism can be difficult to detect until you start looking for them (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005; Henkel, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2006). People who easily identify blatant acts of hate may be less aware of subtle microaggressions (e.g., invalidation of the abilities or thoughts of a subordinate group member, subtle prejudice), which are common and very harmful (Sue, 2010). Also, the societal advantages that go along with being White are often invisible to Whites, in part because such advantages are systemic and viewed as normative (Rothenberg, 2008).

### **America is a Meritocracy**

Moreover, campus climate problems emerge because people are sometimes *motivated* to maintain a belief that merit based outcomes are the norm, and they actively reject the

existence of a race-based hierarchy of privilege and oppression. Peggy McIntosh's 1988 influential essay "Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege" highlights the motivated invisibility of privilege stating, "For me, white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy" (para. 8). Whites often respond to the concept of white privilege with confusion and anger. They fail to acknowledge the distinction between earned and unearned privileges, and reject an ideology that appears to be denying the relevance of their abilities, talents, and hard work (Tatum, 2008).

### **Being Colorblind is Virtuous**

Despite unconscious bias, unwitting microaggressions, and invisible privileges, many Americans endorse (and believe they successfully enact) colorblind ideology. Colorblind ideology states society should value all individuals without reference to, or even acknowledgment of, their social identity (Neville, Awad, Brooks, Flores & Bluemel, 2013). This colorblind ideology is strongly endorsed and supported by the American belief in a system of meritocracy. This ideology is so strong that simply acknowledging difference (e.g., noting someone is Black) is often vilified as prejudice (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008). In simple terms, the concept seems appealing. Yet in practice, attempting to maintain a colorblind stance disrupts productivity and intergroup interactions (e.g., Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006; Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Trawalter, 2005), promotes stronger levels of implicit racism (e.g., Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004), and prevents ongoing racism from being detected (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers & Ambady, 2010).

Despite this evidence, Americans seem to cling to it as a

resolution to racial and ethnic tensions in the U.S. One reason for adherence to this ideology in college settings may be its self-sustaining nature. Students of all races who are unaware of racial issues do, in fact, perceive a more positive general and racial campus climate (Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008). These perceptions, in turn, reinforce the notion that there is no need to address racial issues.

Bell and Hartmann's (2007) interview participants maintained a careful linguistic separation between "happy talk" about tolerance and celebration of difference, and issues of power and privilege. This tension between ignoring social identity and highlighting it is a central problem faced in American discourse (Jones, 1998). Educators themselves may be caught in the confusing space between these two prescriptive norms. Students similarly caught may be resistant to any attempts at education about diversity because, in doing so, colorblind norms are violated. Thus, without deliberate introspection and intentional discussions by all constituencies on campus, diversity efforts are likely to be framed in terms of "happy talk." This frame is a barrier to accurate perceptions of campus climate, and to meaningful dialogue that is imperative for addressing the demographic and geo-political challenges posed by Gurin et al. (2013).

### **Social Justice as an Institutional Mission**

We believe colleges and universities must commit to a *social justice* framework for their diversity initiatives in order to overcome the pre-existing attitudes and assumptions students and educators bring to the enterprise. Some institutions enthusiastically endorse social justice goals. For example, a growing number of campuses have implemented peer-led

intergroup dialogues specifically designed to engage both subordinate and dominant group members in social justice education. The Program on Intergroup Relations at the University of Michigan ([www.igr.umich.edu](http://www.igr.umich.edu)) developed a specific intergroup dialogue technique, and has found that dialogue leads to very successful outcomes (Gurin et al., 2013).

Other institutions, however, view even the phrase “social justice” as politically charged and thus inappropriate for inclusion in the academy. This may be understandable when viewing the academy as a place where objective truths are taught impartially. Faculty and administrators may object to initiatives that have an “agenda,” even one that advocates equality. However, as noted earlier, it is the very nature of systems of inequality that the system will be invisible to those in dominant positions; that inequality disguises itself as normative reality. In the absence of deliberate and intentional counter-narratives, dominant ideologies *are* the so-called objective truth the academy is offering. In this way, the supposedly objective status quo is actually promoting an agenda that claims racism is over, meritocracy rules, and being colorblind will protect against future racism.

More importantly, diversity initiatives must be approached with institution-wide collaboration and vision. Most diversity programming and efforts are aimed at students, with little or no attention paid to the stance of the institution as a whole, or the attitudes and beliefs of faculty, staff, or administrators. As Mark Chesler and his colleagues indicate in their study of diversity initiatives employed by different universities, a consistent, unified mission is critical (Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot, 2005). An article in the publication *Diversity Digest* by Sonia Gonsalves (2005) indicated efforts to better enable students to “understand, appreciate, and engage with diversity” require “a combination of coordinated topics and readings, a larger learning community of

faculty and students, and greater consistency in instructional approaches. . .” (p. 29). This suggests campus organizations, at all levels, need to reinforce social justice goals. This requires coherence within the curriculum and across all constituencies of the institution. Our own research showed parallels in the ways diversity was framed institutionally (e.g., the description of the diversity course requirement), and how students and faculty defined and understood diversity (Chi, et al., 2008; Wolfe et al., 2010). This suggests student and/or faculty perceptions about diversity do not exist in an institutional vacuum. Faculty, staff, and administrators are not immune to the “happy talk” and colorblind ideologies that complicate diversity discourse in the United States.

A failure to garner top-down, institution-wide endorsement of social justice is likely to delay or even undermine efforts to improve campus climate. Indeed, one of the most fundamental conditions for successful intergroup interactions is, as Gaertner and Dovidio (2005) put it, “equalitarian norms endorsed by relevant authority” (p. 629). Diversity initiatives enacted without this level of institutional backing may temporarily improve campus climate, but the gains will likely diminish without reinforcement. In addition, without avenues for students to share or apply their new knowledge and skills, dominant ideologies may slip back into place simply because believing in those is easier than fighting them alone. Perhaps most importantly, without an institutional mission for social justice, people of color on campus are left to their own devices. They remain subject to the invalidation and microaggressions posed by meritocracy, colorblind, and post-racial belief systems. They are put in the delicate and painful position of having to educate their own oppressors about systems of inequality in order to enact change. Particularly on predominantly White campuses,

individual students of color are sometimes expected to serve as representatives of their entire race or ethnicity, another example of a microaggression. Other faculty and students can and should stand as powerful allies, but anyone involved in social justice efforts risks burnout and disillusionment without institutional support from the larger campus community.

Colleges and universities need to act collaboratively and with deliberate coordination. Faculty, staff, and administrators, as well as students, need to have a clear and accurate understanding of the climate of race relations on campus and in the United States. If the intention is to move away from the current practice of “happy talk,” then institutions must make a deliberate attempt to challenge the strong cultural (and national) beliefs in America’s meritocracy by engaging in discussions about systems of (dis)advantage, and their cumulative effects on various communities in this country and on campus. Institutions must be willing to invest time and resources into the effort. This includes calling on expertise from within the campus community and without. This includes asking all faculty, staff, and administrators to educate themselves about systems of inequality, consider their own positions in the social hierarchies, and explore their own biases and assumptions. There are well-researched strategies to implement change, and a great deal of literature is available for institutions that wish to move forward in a coordinated manner (e.g., see Recommended Readings, below).

When approached with a unified goal of social justice, diversity education can serve as a linchpin for improved campus climate, civic engagement, and better prepare students to address a host of real and compelling issues in the United States and abroad. As noted by Gurin et al. (2013), if higher education is to remain relevant in the coming decades, these goals must become central to our missions.

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