

8

This chapter reviews the impact of using race caucuses with members of a student affairs leadership team to deepen their capacity to both recognize common dynamics of racism, internalized dominance, and internalized oppression, and explore specific strategies to create greater equity in their organization.

Race Caucuses: An Intensive, High-Impact Strategy to Create Social Change

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Race caucuses can be a powerful multicultural initiative to deepen the competencies of higher education administrators and student affairs practitioners to create equitable, inclusive campus environments for students and staff. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the outcomes from using race caucuses at a large public university and offer a critique of this methodology as a tool for professional development.

Most higher education administrators and student affairs practitioners have participated in some form of diversity training, and yet many have not developed the critical competencies necessary to dismantle institutional racism. Too often multicultural initiatives are narrowly focused solely on “valuing diversity” and discussing the experiences of members of marginalized groups. This “diversity as good” approach (Watt, 2011, p. 131) falls into one or more of the following pitfalls: increasing staff self-awareness about issues of race and racism without significant skill development to create racially equitable and inclusive programs, policies, and services; focusing on increasing knowledge without a parallel emphasis on affective elements crucial to unlearning racism and developing staff as change agents; and locating the responsibility for organizational change with staff of color without an intentional strategy to develop whites as allies in creating inclusive campus environments.

It is imperative that college administrators deepen their capacity to recognize and dismantle policies, practices, and services that, often unintentionally, disproportionately advantage whites and disadvantage people of color. Broido (2000) argues that ally work encompasses three components: educating members of privileged groups, creating organization and cultural change, and supporting members of marginalized groups. Race caucuses provide a forum for the development of skills in these three areas as well as

a space to engage in authentic dialogue and personal work critical to developing capacity to create sustainable organizational change that eliminates racial barriers to student success.

Race Caucuses

Identity group caucuses are a common learning methodology used in Social Justice Education and Intergroup Dialogue (Adams, Bell, and Griffin, 2007; Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, and Love, 1997; Zúñiga, Nagda, and Sevig, 2002). Homogeneous caucus groups provide participants a more intimate, supportive, and comfortable space to stimulate honest self-reflection and explore various ways that race, racism, internalized dominance, and internalized oppression impact their lives (Abdullah and McCormack, 2008; Walls and others, 2009; Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, and Love, 1997). This methodology can help participants discuss common issues, themes, and concerns (Adams, 2007) that they may be hesitant to initially raise in a cross-race setting (Griffin and Harro, 1997; Walls and others, 2009; Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, and Love, 1997).

Caucuses can enhance meaningful dialogue about controversial topics and provide opportunity to discuss more intimate issues and experiences before sharing them in the larger group (Abdullah and McCormack, 2008; Zúñiga, Nagda, and Sevig, 2002). Facilitators contribute significantly to the learning process as they authentically share their own struggles and feelings, recognize times they experience white privilege, and acknowledge examples of their racist attitudes and behaviors or collusion (Walls and others, 2009).

Participants choose to attend the race caucus that most aligns with their racial identity. The white caucus is for people who identify as white and/or who experience white skin privilege, including those who are bi/multiracial with white ancestry. The people of color caucus is for those who identify as Latino/a, black or African American, API (Asian/Asian America/Pacific Islander), Native American or Indigenous, Middle Eastern/Arab, and Bi/Multiracial. Facilitators need to hold the same racial identity of the caucus they lead (Griffin and Harro, 1997).

People of color often express relief when able to gather and talk openly about racism, internalized oppression, and collusion without potential resistance and defensiveness from white participants (Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, and Love, 1997). While this space is often unfamiliar for many people of color, they are able to connect and support each other through dynamics resulting from racism. During this time, horizontal hostility may arise providing the opportunity for authentic dialogue across targeted racial groups. As people of color explore their own internalized oppression, they are able to dismantle stereotypes they may hold about their racial group(s), other targeted racial groups, and whites. In doing so, they are able to discover and confront racist dynamics on the individual, group, and systems level (martinez, 2010; Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, and Love, 1997). People of color

are also able to explore ways they have colluded with racist dynamics and what they need in order to heal and liberate themselves from racism.

The goal of a white caucus is to help participants develop competencies, attitudes, and courage to effectively engage issues of race and racism on campus. Key learning outcomes include the ability to recognize whiteness, white privilege, and internalized dominance, and to acknowledge feelings of guilt, shame, defensiveness, and embarrassment in order to shift these emotions into passion and commitment to create meaningful change in themselves and their environment (Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, and Love, 1997). In sharp contrast to the sense of relief that many participants of color experience in caucuses, whites are often reluctant to engage in caucuses and doubt that any meaningful learning can occur without the presence of people of color (Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, and Love, 1997). Some may resist out of concern that the structure creates further separation and division among whites and people of color (Griffin and Harro, 1997).

A key benefit of white caucuses is that whites often realize the damage they have experienced from the impact of racism in their lives, including building their sense of self on the illusion that whites are superior to people of color; believing that they have earned their place in society solely from their own competence and hard work; acting in ways that violate their core values by treating people of color based on racist attitudes and stereotypes; living in isolation without any authentic connections with people of color; coping with deep feelings of guilt, fear, shame, and inadequacy; and losing real intimacy and community with white allies (Kivel, 1996). Another benefit is that whites realize that they can learn from each other and take responsibility for dismantling racism without subjecting people of color to any further pain or discomfort as we openly discuss our racist attitudes and behaviors (Abdullah and McCormack, 2008).

It is common practice in both Intergroup Dialogue and Social Justice Education to facilitate a conversation in a full cross-race group after caucus sessions to discuss and share common themes, the impact of learning in same-racial group caucuses, and strategies to create community and liberation. It can be powerful for whites to hear more directly about the day-to-day impact of racism from their colleagues of color as well as for people of color to hear whites acknowledge the privilege and internalized dominance they experience and take responsibility for creating change in themselves and the work environment (Wijeyesinghe, Griffin, and Love, 1997).

Race Caucuses as a Multicultural Initiative

In the following sections, we outline the central elements of the multicultural initiative we facilitated using race caucuses for higher education administrators at a large, public university. We received a request for a training session to help the top thirty student affairs leaders and directors increase their capacity to engage in authentic dialogue and strategic change efforts

that address dynamics of race and racism on campus and within the division of student affairs. After talking with the top leaders of the division, we chose to use race caucuses because the leaders could discuss racial issues at a conceptual level, but most did not demonstrate the ability to talk honestly about their own experiences as raced beings nor acknowledge or respond to racial dynamics that occurred in discussions and meetings. We believed that exploring issues of internalized dominance and internalized racism in race caucuses would provide participants the opportunity to develop competence, compassion, and courage necessary for creating sustainable racial equity on campus.

We designed a 1.5-day event and planned for the race caucuses to occur on day 1 and for the full group to engage in cross-race dialogue on the morning of the next day. Key activities during the people of color caucus included the opportunity for participants to connect and form community with other people of color. They discussed their struggles on campus with race and racist dynamics, including those with other targeted racial groups. Through storytelling they were able to validate and normalize their lived experience and the resulting internalized oppression, which impacted their emotional, physical, and mental health. Participants discussed their needs with each other to deal with and dismantle racism while healing and liberating themselves from racist dynamics. Lastly, in this newly empowered space, participants developed strategies to work with their white colleagues in authentic, meaningful ways.

Because people of color were rarely afforded the opportunity to spend time together as a group, it took them time to not focus the discussion on their white colleagues and what they needed from them. After reflecting on their behavior and some guiding questions, they were able to shift the dialogue to their individual and collective experiences. Participants discussed the desire to connect with each other but struggled to do so because of lack of time and not knowing how to do so without their white colleagues questioning them. In addition, they realized that they did not know how to engage and be authentic with each other as a result of whiteness. This element of the design was the most critical for the group to connect and support each other. At this point, they were able to authentically share their stories, which included their struggles, pain, and challenges with other people of color and whites. In working through some of their internalized oppression, participants became clear on their needs and ways to ask for them from other colleagues of color as well as their white colleagues.

Key activities during the white caucus included the opportunity for participants to discuss their commitment to dismantle racism and create racial equity as well as their feelings about participating in a white caucus. They explored examples of progress as well as common microaggressions toward people of color, such as dismissing their frustrations as

overreactions, undervaluing their contributions, and constantly questioning the accuracy and legitimacy of statements from people of color. A critical section involved authentically describing times participants believed that whites were superior to people of color as well as common racist behaviors and attitudes that perpetuate and maintain unproductive team dynamics and institutional racism. Participants then discussed specific behaviors and strategies to interrupt racism and the benefits of creating greater equity and inclusion in both interpersonal dynamics and organizational practices (Goodman, 2011; Kivel, 1996).

Possibly the most critical element in this design involved the participants acknowledging times they had each reacted based on racist attitudes and behaviors or sought personal advantage by using white privilege. There was a sense of relief and freedom from honestly claiming their racist behaviors and realizing “I am not alone” and that their colleagues struggled with a similar depth of internalized dominance. The participants reported an increased ability to recognize racist attitudes and behaviors in the moment and a greater willingness to interrupt these dynamics in themselves and others. In addition, several participants expressed a strong desire to no longer act in ways that undermined their collaboration with other white allies, including competing with other whites to be seen as “the good one,” distancing themselves from other whites by judging their behaviors and attitudes without relating in and owning how they have similar reactions, and moving away from talking about race by focusing on other areas of oppression where they have marginalized identities.

We designed the full cross-race group dialogue on the morning of the second day to provide participants the opportunity to engage in authentic conversations about both their experiences and insights from their race caucus as well as current dynamics of race and racism in the division and on campus. In addition, the leaders discussed strategies to create greater racial equity and negotiated specific action steps to continue their learning, the depth of authentic dialogue, and organizational change.

Outcomes

Participants identified several key outcomes as they reflected on the impact of the race caucuses and cross-race dialogue, including an increase in their ability to engage in authentic dialogue about race across racial identities; greater capacity to recognize dynamics of internalized dominance and internalized racism in daily interactions and practices; a deeper understanding of how dynamics of race and racism impact colleagues and students; an appreciation for the commitment of colleagues across race to create racial equity and inclusion on campus; and increased willingness to continue this level of dialogue both in leadership meetings and daily activities with colleagues and students.

Lessons Learned

While many participants expressed appreciation for their learning and insights from the race caucuses, on reflection, the outcomes could have been greatly enhanced by the following changes.

Position Race Caucuses within a Larger Organizational Culture Change Effort. The impact of using race caucuses as a multicultural initiative will be far greater if the experience is situated within a comprehensive organizational change effort. Instead of viewing the caucus experience as a stand-alone event, participants would realize that they are expected to transfer their insights and skills into daily practice as they infuse issues of racial equity and inclusion into policies, practices, services, and programs.

Ensure All Participants Have a Common Foundation of Inclusion Awareness and Skills Training about the Full Breadth of Privileged and Marginalized Group Dynamics on Campus. In our experience, participants in race caucuses, especially whites, are more willing to explore issues of privilege and internalized dominance/racism after they have had the opportunity in facilitated workshops to discuss and explore their multiple, intersecting marginalized and privileged group memberships. In addition, people of color and people who are bi/multiracial are more willing to engage in authentic dialogue with whites after they have been given space to explore their privilege and advantage in other areas of difference as well as share their own experiences of marginalization.

Provide Learning Opportunities for Participants to Develop a Shared Understanding of a Common Set of Concepts and Terms. It may be useful to establish prerequisites for participating in race caucuses, including assigned pre-readings and/or attendance at a foundational workshop on race and racism, so that participants share a common understanding of basic concepts.

Establish a Framework of Accountability. There are a number of accountability structures that could increase the likelihood of learning application and systemic change, including creating performance expectations and establishing clear performance indicators for all staff; requiring pre- and post-meetings between participants and their supervisor to review expectations and identify development goals for performance management processes; and conducting quarterly meetings with their supervisor to assess progress toward performance goals. These accountability structures assume that supervisors demonstrate the multicultural competencies and capacity to support the professional development of staff.

Provide Follow-Up Training Sessions Every Four to Six Months to Deepen Development of Cultural Competencies. Recommended topics for ongoing professional development include the following: review current data (quantitative and qualitative) about the racial climate on campus and in the division; identify policies, programs, services, and practices that (may unintentionally) create racial inequity in the division and discuss ways to

shift those to create equity and inclusion; explore examples of racist behaviors and attitudes still tracked within the division; identify examples of white ally behaviors and efforts by people of color in the division to interrupt racist behaviors and practices; share organizational change practices implemented in units across the division; develop tools and strategies to navigate triggering events; and discuss where people still “feel stuck” and identify strategies for creating greater inclusion and racial equity.

Conduct Required Professional Development Activities That Explore Other Areas of Oppression. Develop and implement a professional development plan that addresses inequity related to a full range of intersecting issues including sex; gender identity and expression; socio-economic class; ability and accessibility; sexual orientation; religion, belief, and spirituality; national origin and immigration status; and hierarchical dynamics related to job function, department, and position within the division.

Suggestions for Using Race Caucuses in Different Settings

There are some predictable challenges for implementing race caucuses on some campuses. Three are discussed here.

Demographics. Many divisions of student affairs do not have enough leaders and managers of color to conduct caucuses within the division. A minimum number of participants is six to eight people. It may be possible to broaden the potential participants to include staff of color from throughout the division or colleagues of color from other administrative and faculty units.

Size of Leadership Team. On smaller campuses the number of leaders and managers may be too small. Another approach is to invite colleagues from local colleges and universities to participate in regional race caucuses or to include all of the members of the student affairs division in the process.

Access to Skilled Facilitators. Many campuses may not have staff or faculty who demonstrate the full breadth of critical facilitation competencies to lead race caucuses. Facilitators need the ability to create a container for deep authentic dialogue, self-disclosure, and personal storytelling (Martinez, 2010) and the capacity to use triggering events as teachable moments (Obear, 2013). In addition, facilitators need to effectively engage resistance and defensiveness from members of privileged (Watt, 2007) and marginalized groups. It may be possible to use skilled facilitators from the local region or external consultants.

Closing Thoughts

Race-alike caucuses provide participants the opportunity to deepen their capacity to recognize the common dynamics of racism, internalized dominance and internalized oppression, explore specific strategies to create greater equity in their organizations, and develop the courage to step up as change agents. Participating in caucuses can develop effective relationships

within and across racial groups for future partnership and collaboration in creating inclusive campus environments and racial equity for all.

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