

Developing a Multifaceted, Participatory Program to Address Racism on a Conservative Campus

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Racism on College Campuses

Racial bias is incredibly common on college campuses, with over 1,000,000 incidents each year, most of which are never formally reported (Swail et al, 2003). Research shows minority students commonly experience the following sources of stress which affect their performance, retention, and satisfaction: few culturally similar professors and peers; biased policies; difficulty making friends with white students; discrimination; “rude or unfair” treatment; and academic self-doubt (Swail et al, 2003). Many studies also show students from underrepresented groups face unique difficulties at college, and these students’ perception of their university’s policies and approach affects satisfaction and academic performance (e.g., Kuh et al, 2006).

Unique Challenges of this Environment

Three primary elements in the climate of the university make the CARE work seemingly more difficult than at other institutions:

- The level of ignorance [inadequate education and basic understanding] about historic and current racism
- A deficiency of empathy for oppressed communities, even by those who demonstrate awareness of the issues.
- Work at the systemic level has historically and currently been frustrating and ineffective.

As a faith-based institution, the university is owned, operated, and embedded within a larger system, the culture of which has been generally slow to adopt awareness and understanding of diversity issues. Thus local change is constrained by the need to maintain alignment with and devote institutional resources toward the priorities of the system.

Past efforts to address racism on campus were met with resistance, inconsistent support, and eventually expired prematurely. This current effort continues to live by attracting a larger group of dedicated allies from a wider range of campus staff, faculty, and administrators, and by working concurrently on different levels of the Spectrum of Prevention (Cohen & Swift, 1999) within a long-range strategic plan for cultural change.



[image from <http://preventioninstitute.org/component/jlibrary/article/id-105/127.html>]

The Coalition Against Racism for Everyone (CARE)

The CARE committee began with informal meetings of a few staff members to share their distress about covert, but clearly racist comments expressed at staff meetings, a broad lack of knowledge and sensitivity about racial issues at all levels of the university, and a seeming intransigence of the institution to recognize or act to address and prevent racism on campus. A small group of fellow potential allies was invited to gather, which became the nucleus of a committee that would become organized with the goal to undo and prevent racism on campus. The CARE group grew to consist of a mixture of faculty, staff, administrators, psychology practicum workers, and students.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

- PAR seeks to both understand and change social conditions (Baum et al, 2006).
- PAR has been described as the development of equal partnerships between researchers and stakeholders to develop and evaluate interventions based on community-defined needs (Calleson et al, 2005).
- PAR focuses on action, attends to power dynamics, and empowers participants to take part in developing research, applying results, and planning (Baum et al, 2006).

PAR Principles in Action

- The CARE project was initiated by discussions between staff, faculty, and students and sought to include a diverse group representing these bodies.
- Students were involved at each stage of planning, evaluation, and implementation.
- Issues of power and privilege were continually examined explicitly and openly.
- Whenever possible, results were presented to the original participants for additional feedback, clarification, and suggestions about next steps.
- Results were evaluated with action and change in mind.

Group Interviews

Students were invited to participate in group interviews during spring 2011 regarding racism on campus. Purposeful sampling created groups representative of campus diversity, including white students and students of color (SoC).

Group Interview Results

The following themes were extracted from qualitative analysis of interview transcripts:

1. *Prevalence of unacknowledged racism on campus:* Racism exists on campus; There don’t seem to be channels to address racism on campus; Teachers don’t know how to handle racism.
2. *Frequent experience of microaggressions:* Students are “not expected to be places” based on race; Interactions on campus sometimes make student feel like a “2nd class citizen;” Feeling “tokenized,” particularly in religion class; Students experience anonymous incidents of racism.
3. *Emotional and interpersonal consequences of racism:* It can be challenging to develop relationships on campus; Feeling neglected or unwelcome on campus; Feeling isolated in residence halls.
4. *Experiences of privilege and bias:* Feeling like “the example” of their race and their actions reflect on their entire race; Experiencing white privilege, ignoring racism, or supporting privilege.
5. *Hopefulness, investment, and desire for venues to talk about racism and develop skills:* Students are hopeful; Students want tools to talk about racism and diversity.

All students who participated in the group interviews were invited to a follow-up meeting (8 attended). Students reflected on the results, asked questions, and identified additional sources of concern including:

- Concerns that race affects interactions with staff and faculty.
- Students not feeling sure about how to communicate regarding racism.
- Students expressed a strong desire to have venues to address racism and diversity.
- Interest in training for students and belief that training for faculty and staff would be helpful.

Based on the themes and follow-up discussions, CARE adopted 3 initial goals.

Goal #1: Increasing Awareness

A survey was distributed to undergraduate, campus-based students (i.e., not those taking only online courses) to assess baseline rates for future comparison and further understand the awareness of issues on campus. Major findings from the 192 (36% SoC) who responded included:

- 41% (57% of SoC) agreed racism/discrimination were a problem on this campus.
- 61% (57% of SoC) witnessed students and 29% (36% of SoC) witnessed faculty or staff making racially insensitive comments/actions.
- 53% said they would be uncomfortable approaching and 52% said they would not know how to interrupt someone who made such a comment/action.
- 49% (49% of SoC) felt there were places they were unwelcome because of their race.
- 63% (75% of SoC) wanted students, staff, and faculty members to receive training on racial issues and cultural sensitivity.

These findings were presented at a campus-wide event entitled *Are We There Yet?* along with a diverse panel of students, staff, and faculty who discussed their experiences with racism on campus. Examples of other actions taken toward this goal included:

- *Share Your Story:* an online form university community members could use to report incidents of racism they experience or observe on campus. Those who shared stories could choose to do so anonymously and/or allow CARE to share the de-identified story with others.
- *Button Campaign:* a student-led initiative to spread awareness of automatic judgments made based on physical observations.
- *Faculty Panel:* an opportunity for students to ask questions on any topic to faculty volunteers to increase communication and humanize relationships on campus.
- *Hoodie March:* a rally in support of Trayvon Martin where campus community members wore hoodies to raise awareness of the tragic events in Sanford, Florida.

CARE also led a coordinated response to recent, overt racist incidents on campus which included organizing an online Change.org petition which received 271 signatures, a video response from the president of the university, and a Welcome Pledge endorsed by the president.

Goal #2: Providing Education & Training

An online training module was developed to provide students with the tools to approach a peer who makes a racially insensitive comment. Students are presented with a scenario where they overhear someone say the following in the hallway: “It’s so nice to have Cerise in class so we can hear the Black opinion on these issues.” Students are then walked through a series of questions to ask themselves before approaching someone (e.g., “Do I feel safe?” “Can I approach this person without my emotions taking over?”) and a three-step model for intervening: *Initiating the Conversation*, *Informing Your Peer*, and *Educating Your Peer*. At each stage, students are provided sample statements to select from. Some options are better than others, and the student is provided immediate feedback both verbally and non-verbally through a response statement and photograph of the person being confronted, followed by more detailed information about the pros and cons of selecting that statement.

Training URL:

<http://concordia.csp.edu/Counseling/Advocacy/ABTraining/ActiveBystander.html>

Goal #2: Providing Education & Training (Continued)

A sample exchange from the Initiation phase is:

- *Student User:* “I don’t want to make a scene, but I’m concerned about what I just heard you say. You’re implying that all African Americans have the same opinions. Can I talk to you for a minute?”
- *Simulated Peer:* “I’ve got a minute. What do you mean?”
- *Detailed Feedback:* You opened the conversation politely and approached the student in a way that is likely to be received positively. You shared your feelings and talked about the behavior rather than the student making the comment.

The statements and responses in the training were reviewed by students in a psychology class and modified to sound more like what students would actually say. Results of pilot testing with 41 students found:

- The percentage of people who felt comfortable approaching someone who made a comment similar to the one in the training increased from 46% to 63%.
- The percentage of people who said they were likely to approach someone making such a comment increased from 44% to 71%.
- 85% believed encountering a situation like this was somewhat or very likely and 44% reported having heard statements like this at this university.
- 73% would recommend the training to others.
- 75% were interested in similar trainings on different situations, such as: homophobia, bullying, racist jokes, inappropriate comments by professors, comments in classroom discussions, or religious diversity issues.

Several in-person training activities were also conducted:

- Starpower (Shirts, 1969) involves participants playing a game in which the rules favor some groups more than others to create lived experience of what some groups face in society. Following the game, group debriefing led to open discussion of privilege and discrimination in the United States in general and this campus specifically.
- The VisualsSpeak (www.visualsspeak.com) facilitation materials were used in a campus-wide event to talk about cultural sensitivity. The activity involved first selecting an image from an assortment of options. In small groups, discussions then focused on what drew each person to the image he or she chose as well as other people’s reactions to the images. Then each group combined their images to create some message they wanted to convey about diversity or cultural sensitivity and presented their collage to the other groups.



Goal #3: Creating Long-Term Action Plans to Sustain Momentum

While working to create early momentum and enact change at the lower levels of the Spectrum of Prevention, CARE has also begun to develop interventions targeted at the higher levels. These initiatives are at various stages of implementation, but examples include:

- Trainings for Campus Security officers.
- Trainings for staff and faculty.
- Trainings for RAs and Peer Advisors.
- Developing stand-alone, for-credit courses.
- Developing curriculum modules which can be inserted in numerous courses.
- Identifying and developing student leaders.
- Securing dedicated programming for racial justice in new student orientation.
- Seeking grant funding for multi-year, multi-dimensional campus programming.
- Extending to other social justice and diversity issues.

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