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From Integration to Cultural Consciousness: The Call for Culturally Engaging Environments on Community College Campuses

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Community colleges enroll diverse “students across lifestyles, creeds, racial/ethnic backgrounds, gender groups, ability levels, and socioeconomic statuses...” (Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2011, p. 35). Subsequently, community colleges that are predominantly white struggle with creating warm and welcoming campus environments to engage and equitably meet the cultural needs of their diverse learners. This is particularly the case for students who hold racially minoritized identities due to systems of oppression.

When racially minoritized students (RMS) enroll in a college whose environment is not culturally diverse or engaging, this limits the amount of social support they can have when managing psychological distress and other stressors resulting from racial microaggressions (Smith, 2008; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000). According to a 2019 survey on the uncivil, hate, and bias incidents on college campuses, including the two-year sector, 82.61% of respondents reported occurrences of hate crimes, and 65.22% reported happenings involving hate speech (Jones & Baker, 2019). The data are troubling for community colleges since 50% of students from racially minoritized backgrounds are enrolled in this sector (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020).

Historically, predominantly white institutions (PWI) have been less than appropriately responsive to the social



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and intellectual development of the RMS population, diminishing its competencies and intellect that ultimately shape these students' collegiate experiences and persistence. Research during the last two decades has examined the impact of institutional environments on the social and academic outcomes of RMS, demonstrating that these students face racism, discrimination, tokenism, and biases while on campus. To systemically address the devaluation of RMS competencies and intellect, higher education institutions, particularly PWIs, must adopt and create culturally responsive practices and environments to ensure their success and retention. Culturally engaging environments are defined as those that create, cultivate, and nourish students' intellect, competencies, and sense of belonging, ultimately creating equitable and sustainable outcomes for socially diverse student groups.

The importance of culturally engaging environments stems from the structural and institutional racial and culturally biased policies and practices that have historically excluded groups who identify with a racially and ethnically diverse background. Culturally engaging environments have been linked to student retention (Nelson, Kift, & Clarke, 2012), students' sense of belonging (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2018; Strayhorn, 2018), mental health (McShay, 2018), and graduation outcomes (Druery & Brooms, 2019; Museus, 2014). Culturally engaging environments are characterized by cultural validation, holistic support, and cultural familiarity. Through culturally relevant pedagogy, various resources offered on and off campus, and training for faculty, staff, and students, community colleges can move

toward creating a culturally engaging environment. The need for cultivating these environments in this sector must be highly prioritized given the racial climate in the U.S.

Contemporary Issues

In recent months the world has entered a global pandemic, and COVID-19 has further highlighted the preexisting structural inequalities within American higher education (e.g., white privilege, socioeconomic disparities, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and implicit bias). Black student activism in communities and on campuses has increased as the world has witnessed the murders of multiple Black people at the hands of law enforcement officers. Thousands of college students have engaged in riots, protests, marches, and submitted demands to leaders at institutions. Reforming the way police officers interact with these individuals is key to implementing these changes, with some activists demanding altogether discontinued partnerships between their campuses and law enforcement organizations.

The experiences and calls for change from Black student activists are critical links to understanding the necessity for culturally engaging environments. At Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC) in Pennsylvania and other institutions, these calls encompass reforming policies and practices that affect their campus experiences (McLarty, 2019). HACC students advocated for the reinstatement of mental health resources because the institutional leadership decided to discontinue funding for these services (McLarty, 2019). These demands for institutional change, equity, inclusion, and racial justice should not be a surprise, as Black students in particular have dealt with structural inequities for decades, which make participation in their campus environments unbearable.

Countless critical research scholars have discussed these structural inequities for decades. Within this timeframe, structural inequity has prevented community colleges from cultivating culturally engaging environments. It is notable that 27% of racially minoritized students attending two-year institutions live in poverty (Pew Research Center, 2019). The challenges of COVID-19 have unveiled the difficulties that numerous low-income community college students experience as part of their daily life. These issues include homelessness, housing and food insecurity, and mental health disparities. Additionally, these students often have little to no access to high-speed Internet connections and the technology required to complete off-campus academic work. These challenges are not new for racially minoritized students, who have always had to cope with

these physiological and psychological difficulties while simultaneously navigating campus environments that are filled with covert and overt racism and hate from White faculty, staff administrators, and students (Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot, 2005). These racist campus environments often decrease student satisfaction and completion rates, particularly for RMS.

This has led Dr. Shaun Harper, a critical race scholar and the executive director of the Race and Equity Center at the University of Southern California, to organize more than 60 California community college presidents to form an alliance to actively address racism. To participate, institutions pay an annual fee of \$25,000 and are given access to specific resources and tools to address racial inequities on their campuses (St. Amour, 2020). These resources assist community college leadership in addressing racial inequities and dismantling systems of oppression. Through this work, predominantly white community college campuses can become culturally engaging and welcoming to RMS.

Barriers to Establishing Culturally Engaging Environments

There are several barriers that community college leaders face when attempting to establish a culturally engaging environment to recognize and affirm the cultural values of students from diverse backgrounds. These are detailed below and include chilly campus environments and a sense of not belonging, color evasiveness, politics, and racial

inequity; the absence of culturally responsive practices; and leadership that is not reflective of the student body.

Chilly Campus Environments and a Sense of Not Belonging

Most, if not all, community colleges that are predominantly White have a history of racism and participation in oppressive practices toward RMS. Hooks (1994) reminds us in her classic book, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, “until we can acknowledge the negative history which shapes and informs our contemporary interaction, there can be no honest, meaningful dialogue...” (p. 102). Community college leaders who only send one mass communication message about the importance of respecting each other and being civically engaged when a racialized matter occurs on campus reinforce racism. Students can easily recognize this hypocrisy because these actions are ingenuine. Numerous college presidents have released statements denouncing racism and bigotry but have done little to dismantle White supremacy on their campuses. Therefore, students do not feel a sense of belonging, and any attempt to create a culturally engaging environment without explicitly addressing the existing inequities on campuses will be futile.

Color Evasiveness, Politics, & Racial Inequity

As a result of institutional politics and bureaucratic policies governing community colleges, faculty, staff, and administrators have committed to color evasive practices.



These practices are described as “a childish, stunted analysis of racism. It starts and ends at ‘discriminating against a person because of the colour of their skin is bad’, without any accounting for the ways in which structural power manifests in these exchanges” (Eddo-Lodge, 2019, p. 82). When community college leaders do not acknowledge the presence of race when making decisions that will ultimately affect students, this gives space for implicit bias to be introduced as well as persistent racial inequities on campus. This form of racism does not allow for a culturally engaging environment to be established.

Absence of Culturally Responsive Practices

When community college leaders do not embed culturally responsive practices within their campus’s inner workings, culturally engaging environments are not established. Culturally responsive practices recognize students’ lived experiences, values, beliefs, and customs. This practice ensures that policies, programs, and curricula are relevant to all students while considering their social backgrounds. Harper and Hurtado (2011) assert that racially minoritized students will continue to feel unwelcome if institutions fail to provide programs and services that reflect the diverse cultures that are present on campus. If community college leadership does not require all faculty and staff administrators to embed culturally responsive practices into their daily work and teaching pedagogies, student outcomes and equity gaps go unaddressed.

Community College Leadership is Not Reflective of the Diverse Student Body

There is an overrepresentation of White people in positions of power at community colleges nationwide. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2018), 75% of community colleges are composed of White faculty and 63% are made up of White student-services professionals. Research has shown that having a racially diverse representation of faculty and staff in leadership positions increases student outcomes and success rates (Umbach, 2006). Students want to establish relationships with higher education professionals with whom they share similar cultural backgrounds. This practice will lead to mentorship, student success, and having someone on campus who can process and think through the racialized matters affecting them socially, academically, and professionally (Umbach, 2006).

Recommendations to Create Culturally Engaging Environments

“To resist deficit assumptions, we must shift the focus to assess and reflect on more complex causes of inequality” (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015, p. 17), and consider ways in which continuous forms of discrimination act as barriers to integrating RMS into predominantly white campuses. Two-year institutions typically have less time to engage and integrate their students into the campus environment; therefore, community colleges must begin to create and maintain culturally engaging atmospheres that ensure student retention and a sense of belonging for all.

Given that culturally engaging campus environments are associated with higher levels of a sense of belonging, and in turn a greater likelihood of success in higher education (Museus, 2014; Strayhorn, 2018), researchers have recommended:

- enhancing the cultural awareness and knowledge of faculty and staff (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008; Singleton & Linton, 2006)
- using culturally relevant language (Cartledge & Johnson, 2004; Monroe, 2009)
- increasing cultural competence of school leaders to support staff (Bustamente, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009)

These steps are important factors in creating a culturally engaging campus environment. Individuals who are responsible for creating and maintaining this environment include students, faculty, staff, and stakeholders from all racial backgrounds.

Zamani-Gallaher, Green, Brown II, and Stovall (2009) argue that campuses must take an activist leadership

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approach that goes far beyond stating a commitment to equity, educational access, racial/ethnic diversity, and gender participation.

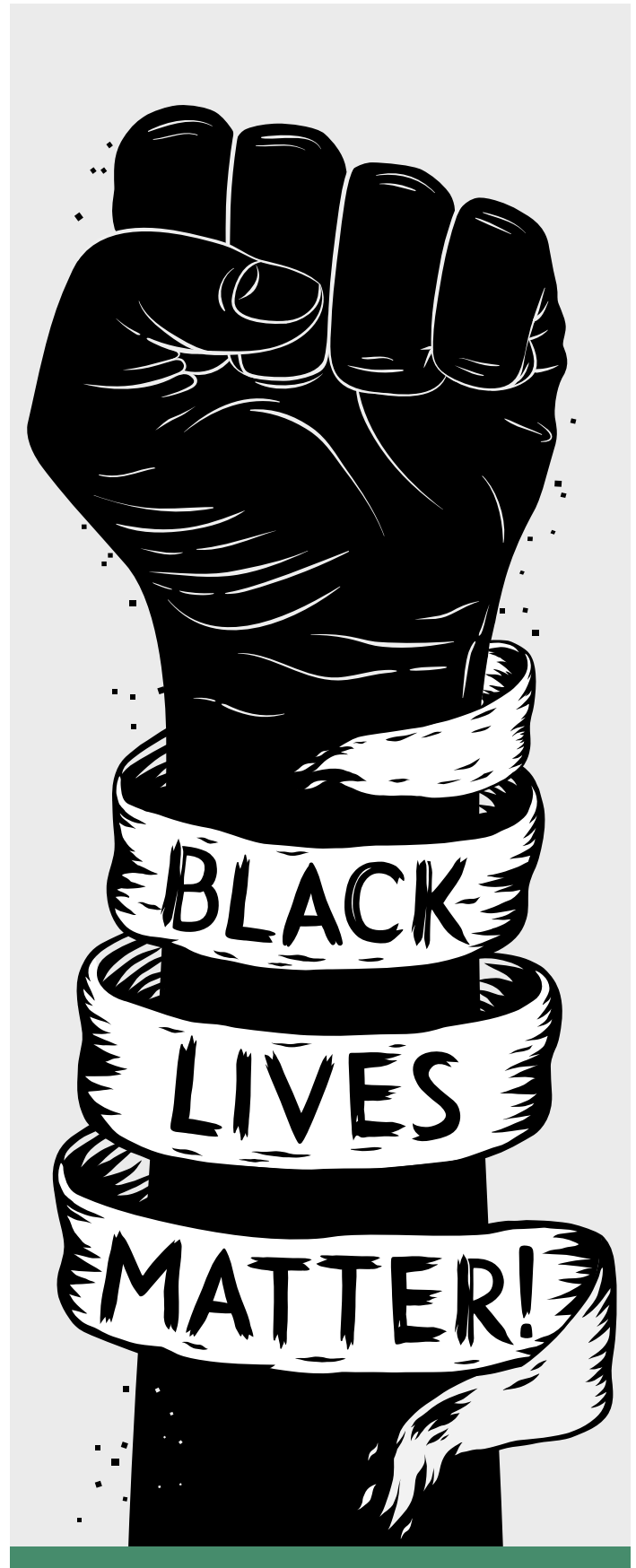
Activist leadership reaches beyond the campus to include outside individuals who have demonstrated, through active engagement, the importance of building inclusive environments. Zamani-Gallaher and her colleagues (2009) propose the following dynamic actions to establish this form of leadership:

1. Take a clear diversity stance
2. Craft and articulate a clear message to campus constituents
3. Educate the media across platforms
4. Encourage and participate in ongoing dialogues
5. Use a leadership team approach
6. Revise or correct failed practices

Conclusion

While culturally engaging environments are not new ideologies, institutions of higher education have yet to move from integration to cultural consciousness. This goes far beyond having cultural centers or resources that do not represent, support, or appeal to RMS. Culturally engaging environments also include culturally relevant pedagogy; diverse faculty, staff, and administration employees who have equitable resources to effectively do their jobs; a clear and institutional-wide commitment to anti-racist work; and supportive colleagues from all racial backgrounds. Administrations support diversity, equity, and inclusion missions by actively engaging and transforming their campuses to create, cultivate, and nourish students' intellect, competencies, and sense of belonging. Such leaders will be successful in establishing culturally engaging environments.

Moving from integration to cultural consciousness begins with acknowledging and deconstructing the racist philosophies and practices that have historically been embedded in PWIs. To make this happen, the barriers identified in this brief must be overcome to create gateways for institutional success. Failure to move from integration to cultural consciousness at the community college level will continue to result in disparities for RMS. The historical and current national racial climate highlights the urgency for community colleges to adopt culturally engaging environments that nourish students' intellect, competencies, and sense of belonging.



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