HOW CAN WE ENGAGE OUR CAMPUS COLLEAGUES IN CRITICAL DIALOGUE AROUND RACE AND EQUITY?

Minh Tran

Moving from Racelessness to Race-Conscious Approaches
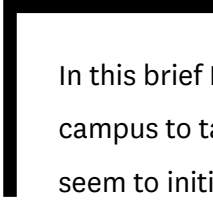
July 2022

BIOGRAPHY

Minh Tran, Ph.D.
(he/him/his)
Director of Racial Equity Research Partnerships, USC Race and Equity Center

Minh Tran, Ph.D., Director of Racial Equity Research Partnerships, USC Race and Equity Center Minh began his professional career as community mediator developing restorative justice and peer mediation programs at K-12 schools and colleges throughout Los Angeles. For 20 years he has facilitated courses in mediation, conflict resolution, intercultural communication, and intergroup dialogue. Through UCLA Health Sciences and the USC Equity Institutes, he has provided professional development seminars for college leaders, faculty, staff, and students. The guiding principles of his teachings are to reduce prejudice, increase empathy, dismantle systems of oppression, and build alliances and coalitions. His research seeks to understand how to identify and fully develop STEM talent by examining culturally responsive strategies related to mentorship, innovative teaching, classroom technology, grading policies, and departmental culture. He has also worked as a student affairs practitioner, where he was thoroughly exposed to complex student issues, including substance abuse, mental health, disabilities, undocumented status, and unmet basic needs.

In this brief I explain the critical need to carve out time and spaces on campus to talk openly about race and identities despite how difficult it may seem to initiate these conversations. Then I describe the culture of silence that prevents talking about race, its lasting effects, and how to recognize signs this is happening on our campuses. Recommendations will follow for counteracting institutional silence by initiating conversations that begin to normalize dialogue and establishing ground rules to work through disagreements while building consensus.

INTRODUCTION: COUNTERACTING THE CULTURE OF SILENCE

In 2007, I taught my first college course in Intergroup Dialogue with a group of 20 students at UC Santa Cruz. I had never taught a course like it before, so together over the course of ten weeks we learned that Intergroup Dialogue allows people of various social identities to engage in deep, meaningful conversations about their differences to learn from other perspectives and build empathy. I have continued to offer these courses every year since, and year after year enrollment has steadily grown largely from students of color, first-generation students, community college transfer students, indigenous students, veterans, former foster youth, students with dependents, immigrants, undocumented students, LGBTQIA students, and students with disabilities. The thousands of students who have enrolled in the past 15 years share one thing in common, a longing to find rare academic spaces where they could openly acknowledge and engage in discussions around their multi-layered racial, ethnic, and social identities, which are not easily severed or disentangled from their academic and professional pursuits.

At the beginning of the quarter, as my students go around a circle taking turns describing their hopes and expectations for the class, they often describe a hostile climate on campus where they are expected to conceal their identities in the classroom as if hanging up a coat at the door. Over the years, the focus of my work shifted to STEM students, research faculty and clinicians. They also describe academic disciplines, labs, and clinics devoid of any discussion about culture or identities, which are falsely believed to bias their work and interfere with objectivity. In the cases of both my students and STEM colleagues, they received explicit and implicit messages that talking about race would have negative consequences, including exacerbating racial tensions on campus and lead to people questioning their capabilities. Rather than embracing racial differences by talking openly about cultural identities, they became resigned to the culture of silence ingrained in our academic institutions and clinical environments. This culture of silence not only stifles dissent and hides problems on campus that persist when left unchecked. It silences the voices of marginalized groups, like people of color, who tend to have a more critical worldview due to their experiences with systemic racism and oppression.

We must ask ourselves why do we accept an institutional culture that automatically assumes talking about race and racism is considered divisive and calls out problems that have no solutions? Why do we not adopt a culture of dialogue, where sharing our identities is normalized and talking openly about race is actually a sign of our commitment to our college and a key step to begin understanding and solving racial inequities? Below I provide three recommendations to begin transforming our committees, classrooms, labs, and clinics toward a culture of racial dialogue.

Recommendation 1: Recognize the Signs to Begin Making Changes

Noticing the signs can be difficult at first when the culture of silence is ingrained in our institutions and everyday practices. In a classroom setting, some signs include a lack of participation or disengagement by certain groups of students, including students of color, women, LGBTQIA, first generation and undocumented students, who may not feel their unique perspectives and contributions will matter to the class discussion. These students may not feel safe asking questions or acknowledging struggling academically and personally with mismatched course expectations. It looks much the same within a department or committee meeting. The signs are often a lack of disagreement and unwillingness to acknowledge missteps or admit to things they don't know for fear of being perceived as incapable leaders. In a lab or clinical setting, it can be witnessed by defensiveness to giving and receiving feedback, which can make learning stressful and anxiety-inducing while stifling the development of innovative methods and treatments.

All these things, disengagement, feeling unsafe, defensiveness, and lack of feedback or disagreement, are detrimental from both an organizational and academic perspective. Without a culture of giving and receiving feedback, students, faculty, and staff will be unable to call out disrespectful behavior, like microaggressions, that weigh people down and erode the trust necessary for effective working relationships. When instructors are not explicit about feedback being welcomed without retribution or judgment, it becomes unlikely that students will voice their dissent or make requests for conditions in class that meet their specific learning needs.

Last year, I had a student who was legally blind and identified by pronouns they/them. Several weeks into the quarter, they told the class the polling and white board applications we used to engage students on Zoom were actually hindering their participation because they could not enlarge the text enough to read their classmates' responses. As an instructor, I was stunned that I had not noticed this student could not participate for weeks, and I was unsure how to move forward. I knew at that moment I needed to shift my role to being a learner and careful listener. We decided to pause the class and hold an impromptu discussion, which resulted in an agreement among the students to verbally describe any written responses they posted for the remainder of the day. Later they agreed for the next class session to share their written comments in a Google Doc where the text could easily be magnified. The student was initially hesitant to discuss their disability status or the need for an accommodation, but the entire class

thanked them for speaking up because everyone benefited from these changes. There was a noticeable uptick in participation during the Zoom sessions, and students seemed much more thoughtful and reflective about the course topics after they began to describe their written responses out loud.

Recommendation 2: Normalize the Sharing of Culture, Identity, and Positionality

Several years ago I began providing training to community college administrators and faculty in "navigating racism" and "using inclusive pedagogy." Before then I primarily presented these skills workshops to medical faculty and STEM researchers. Given this new audience and institutional context, I found it helpful to start each presentation by sharing a story about my family to introduce myself. My experience working with community colleges was noticeably lacking, having taken a handful of classes at my local community college during high school and summer breaks while attending the University of Michigan. Yet I hold a deep affection and respect for the California community colleges through a connection with my extended family. I grew up in the Bay Area in a small multigenerational house full of cousins, aunties, and uncles who lived with us at different points throughout the 80s and early 90s after my parents sponsored them as refugees from Vietnam. I witnessed how they used community colleges as a vehicle to rebuild their lives after immigrating to this country by learning English, navigating public services like transportation and finances, developing job skills to reinvent their careers, and finding renewed purpose in life by being in community with other students like themselves.

If we are willing to be open and forthcoming when talking about our cultural differences, it opens the potential for us to empathize and learn from each other. By introducing myself and my positionality as a relative outsider in relation to my community college colleagues, I had to overcome my fears about not being immediately trusted or accepted. By outwardly embracing my differences with the audience, I also acknowledged that these differences come with strengths and weaknesses. I needed to learn to accept and acknowledge what I did not know about community colleges from having only worked at four-year universities throughout my career. The audiences responded well to this approach, with participants saying they appreciated the show of humility and vulnerability in sharing openly about my ethnicity and my family's immigration story. Instead of magnifying our differences, it set realistic expectations. It

gave them a clear reference point from where I drew my experience and perspective and what I still had left to learn. Rather than focusing on our differences, I found that community college faculty easily connected with my examples of my bilingual, immigrant family, and of me teaching first-generation transfer students and working in clinical health science settings. If we try to begin each class or committee meeting with a willingness to be transparent about our positionality and acknowledge our different identities, we often find that it normalizes the simple facts that a) we don't need to always agree, and b) we have so much we can learn from each other. If we adopt this approach widely, it can gradually permeate our institutions and structures. If we reach the point where initiating and facilitating conversations about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability/disability and immigration status becomes normalized, then we can begin addressing equity gaps without becoming defensive about our shortcomings.

Recommendation 3: Setting Ground Rules and Community Guidelines

When possible, we should take a deliberate and intentional approach to initiating campus dialogues about race. In the previous examples above, I described situations where I had to react in the moment or adjust my approach midstream. This is quite difficult to do, but it can be made easier by establishing from the very beginning a set of conditions needed for effective communication. I have heard many people interchangeably refer to these conditions as either community guidelines or ground rules. I have worked with different groups, including law students and instructors, student-athletes and coaches, and health care teams, to help them each establish a set of guidelines or ground rules for when cultural conflicts arise. These groups had their own unique characteristics, but they shared a few key commonalities. They were all in fast-paced environments where miscommunication routinely happened, and disagreements were often rooted in cultural misunderstandings. They also had distinct hierarchies where students or employees would sometimes feel disempowered and disengage from conversations. In each case, we discussed how to create specific ground rules for when certain situations arise during a team meeting, patient appointment, or class session. For instance, law students described a tense classroom environment where they debated controversial topics. Instructors routinely employed the Socratic method of calling them out to answer on the spot to simulate a courtroom setting. Some students of color, women, or LGBTQIA students would describe situations where classmates and even instructors triggered them with sexist, homophobic, or racially charged comments. However, they felt unable to change the classroom dynamics to allow them to interrupt the class to call out these biases.

Athletes described similar situations where speaking up about triggering events could affect team cohesion and reduce their opportunities for playing time. Instead of being reactive, they proactively came up with ground rules, or a set of group expectations for how they could respond when faced with these situations. Here a just a few examples of ground rules they came up with:

1. Suspend judgment: Take time to listen and ask questions first before formulating a response.
2. Say oops and ouch: Allow space to make mistakes while voicing triggers to inform others when you are offended.
3. Give and receive feedback as a gift: Correcting misinformation and giving constructive feedback is a sign that we are mutually invested in each other's growth and development.
4. Ask questions to get to know the person, their unique story, and their journey. Do not ask them to speak on behalf of their entire race or group.
5. No personal attacks: Respectfully challenge and disagree with each other's statements or actions.
6. Brave space: Step outside our comfort zone to learn and experience what makes us uncomfortable.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EVERYDAY PRACTICE

The faculty, staff, and administrators who attended my workshops over the years, have shared several ways they implement these three recommendations daily. I have had lab instructors who had their students prepare 5-minute introductions about their identities, culture, and life goals as they delivered lab presentations. Some faculty incorporate topics about race and culture into their assigned readings, written assignments, and in-class discussions. Other faculty members said they like to start Zoom sessions each week with a brief check-in where pairs of students share something about themselves while noting any school, family, or job-related stressors they were dealing with. I have had deans and department chairs hold "talking circles" after hours to allow students, faculty, staff, and alumni to support one another to process difficult societal events, such as police killings of unarmed Black people, the detention of migrant children, xenophobia and violence toward immigrants and Asian Americans. Faculty and administrators also wrote emails to acknowledge how these societal events could weigh on students and colleagues as they tried to focus on exams or meet work deadlines.

Keep in mind the majority of these examples involved white faculty and administrators speaking up and learning to acknowledge the salience of race in everyday settings. It feels more natural when predominantly white college leaders and instructors acknowledge these truths rather than pretend people of color are not humans affected by racial inequities happening in the greater society outside the walls of our school and office buildings. When we formally set aside time and make spaces to talk about our real-life identity experiences, it allows us to begin to remove the stigma we have been socialize to feel talking about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability/disability. We then normalize conversations around identities and institutionalize them in our everyday practices, so it no longer can be seen as disruptive or divisive when people of color, women, and members of the LGBTQIA community bring up these topics that deeply affect them. Having the foresight to talk openly about race then becomes a sign of one's commitment to moving institutions and colleagues toward a culture of dialogue that seeks to understand racial inequities instead of tiptoeing around them.

SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

Ali, D. (2017). Safe spaces and brave spaces: Historical context and recommendations for student affairs professionals. *NASPA Policy and Practice Series, 2*. Retrieved from https://www.naspa.org/files/dmfile/Policy_and_Practice_No_2_Safe_Brave_Spaces.pdf

Dankoski, M.E., Bickel, J., & Gusic, M.E. (2014). Discussing the undiscussable with the powerful: Why and how faculty must learn to counteract organizational silence. *Academic Medicine, 89*(12), 1610-1613. Retrieved from https://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/Fulltext/2014/12000/Discussing_the_Undiscus sable_With_the_Powerful_.17.aspx

Grant, D. (2020, July 15). On 'Difficult' Conversations. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/07/15/why-classroom-conversations-about-di versity-and-identity-shouldnt-be-framed

Harrington, C. (2022, January 26). Reflect on your positionality to ensure student success. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2022/01/26/successful-instructors-understand-their -own-biases-and-beliefs-opinion

Maxfield, D. (2016, December 7). How a culture of silence eats away at your company. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2016/12/how-a-culture-of-silence-eats-away-at-your-company

Steele, C.M. (2019, November 26). Why Are Campuses So Tense?. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-are-campuses-so-tense/

CONTACT

Dr. Adrián Trinidad
Assistant Director for Community College Partnerships
altrinid@usc.edu

Dr. Minh Tran
Director of Racial Equity Research Partnerships
mctran@usc.edu