Stronger Together: A Faith Inspired Resistance to Racism in Higher Education

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FEATURE ARTICLE

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Among the many themes that surfaced in the year 2020, matters of racism and social justice have been raised to the level of social awareness in greater ways than seen in recent U.S. American history. Black Lives Matter, Juneteenth celebrations, and outcries against unjust systems, especially in light of the deaths of people like Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery, will be remembered as significant experiences in this unprecedented year. In this essay, we continue the conversation of social justice within the scope of racism with an application of the topic at private, faith-based institutions of higher education.

In September 2018, the campus of Harding University received word that alumnus, Botham Jean, was shot and killed in his apartment by Dallas police officer Amber Guyger. This was the moment that a predominantly white campus awoke to the tragic impacts of racism and stereotyping that people of color have long understood and endured. Before this, the campus had occasional speakers who presented on race relations, but Botham's death was not a "what-if" scenario. It was real. It was personal. It was unthinkable. Botham was a friend to everyone who crossed his path. Those of us who knew him personally, knew him to be a spiritual man, a good friend, and a person with a never-ending positive attitude. When a successful, young businessman gets attacked in his apartment by a police officer, the thought raises in people's minds, "If this can happen to Botham, it could happen to any of us." More precisely, "If you are a black man, this could happen to you." The real fear was felt, or at least understood, better on Harding's campus that semester.

No matter how many times racially motivated tragedies occur or how often students in colleges and universities get "caught" with racist and inappropriate behavior, such as social media posts of "black face" or "white power" symbols, it appears that history continues to repeat itself while the problems of racism remain in higher education. The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2020) collects incidents of racism at college campuses. A quick scroll through the accounts shows evidence of ubiquitous racism and discrimination in U.S. higher education that affects the state as well as private faith-based institutions. Although one might presume that a "Christian"

school would be a safe zone, sociological divisions persist in damaging ways.

Furthermore, a school campus lies within a community that may or may not share the values of the institution. Not only are students on their guard against discrimination on campus, but they may also face overt racism as well as microaggressions in the community. No matter what efforts are made by a faith-based institution to minimize racism, any person coming from an underrepresented racial location knows that facing racism and problems with social justice is an unfortunate regular dilemma.

Racism in higher education has existed in the United States for as long as people have attempted to integrate. Segregation was legalized in the late 1800s when there was deliberate segregation of blacks and whites in schools. Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896 was a milestone in the U.S. American history. This case derived from an African American named Homer Plessy who would not sit in a train car designated for blacks. The court dismissed Plessy's argument, and his constitutional rights were not upheld. The Supreme Court decided that a law separating blacks and whites was not unlawful. Jim Crow laws would soon come into effect that would further the racial divide and bolster unjust systems. Now that it is 2020, how well have things improved? There continue to be protests for equality. There have been several deaths throughout the years from police brutality as well as other hate crimes. Today, people are fighting to have their voices heard and mourn the loss of those who have been victimized.

Despite the ongoing problem of racism in public, private schools, and faith-based institutions, one would still hope that students would have different experiences at faith-based schools, given that these institutions ought to have deeply rooted theological motivation for seeking social justice and fairness for all students within their systems. In this article, we take a closer look at how private, Christian schools might experience and respond to matters of racialization. First, we consider the Breaking the Cycle Model (Westbrook, 2017) of responding to social inequities, a model that has been developed from the experiences of students who have successfully navigated predominantly white faith-based institutions along with the challenges of racialization. Second, we consider one of the author's (Alea's) personal experiences of being international, black, and female at a predominantly white school from an autobiographical perspective.

Breaking the Cycle Model

In the 2014-15 school year, I (Timothy) conducted a phenomenological qualitative study on the experiences of African American adult learners at three different faith-based adult degree completion programs. As a qualitative study, the focus was to explore rich data of the lived experiences of the participants. Altogether, there were 7 male and 17 female interviewees. All of the students approached their degree pursuits from the perspective of adult learners, meaning that they had sought out degree programs that had non-traditional schedules in order to accommodate their busy lives, which normally included having to balance school with work, family, and parenting concerns. All 24 participants were African American students who were enrolled in predominantly white faith-based institutions. For more details of how the study was conducted, see Westbrook (2017, pp. 59-75).

Five major themes emerged from the experiences of these 24 students. These themes may be summarized as *goals*, *context*, *support*, *faith*, and *race*. The themes reflect the experiences and attitudes of non-traditional African American students who successfully earned their degrees from faith-based predominantly white universities. One of the participants offered the right image for the experience of returning to school to seek uplift in life. He described this experience for him as a way to "break the cycle" (Westbrook, 2017, p. 76). As I began to explore how these five themes fit together, it became more and more apparent that what I was finding was a holistic model for education that encourages successful degree completion, thus, helping students "break the cycle," whatever their cycle might be.

The Breaking the Cycle Model begins with one's "goals for education." The theme *goals* reflect the ways participants had some life-goal associated with their desire to return to school. Parents wanted to be good role models for their children. In some cases, earning a degree would lead to a salary increase or a new job. For others, the inherent value of accomplishment associated with a college degree served as motivation. Whatever the goal might be, it was remembered by the participants as a powerful motivator that helped the students stay focused and committed to graduating from college.

Context ("adult learning conditions" was the theme used in the study) refers to the life circumstances of the participants when they decided to return to school. Some had children, and some participants were rearing children as single parents. Some were married and had spouses to consider. All had jobs and had to balance time in class with their work schedules. While the data reflected the adult learning experience, 18-24-year-old college students also have some sort of life-stage challenges they bring with them to their college experiences.

Support, or "support systems," was also an important theme for these students. The importance of a support system for educational success has been well documented and cannot be overstated (see Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Baker, 2005; Johnston, 2006; Richardson-Shavers, 2007; Hancock, 2011; Arnold, 2014, and Hargrove, 2014). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the students in this study also benefited greatly from a welcoming and supportive learning environment.

They shared stories of family members, faculty, staff, and fellow classmates who facilitated this network of encouragement and support. Predominantly white institutions must develop strategies to give the students the support they need to complete their degrees successfully.

Faith is an important theme that is strongly tied to faith-based institutions and students who attend such schools. For the interviewees, faith was a major part of their lives and influenced their expectations of their predominantly white institutions. Students presumed that their teachers and school administrators would demonstrate a "Christ Like" attitude, and although "Christlike" was largely undefined, there seemed to be a general expectation that at their faith-based schools that the employees of the schools would be caring and that the curriculum would include "ethical and spiritual concerns." In sum, *faith* as a theme in the model became a stabilizing force that helped students when they faced various forms of adversity. Concerning the discussion of racism and social justice, the faith-based nature of these students' experiences gave them a spiritual resource that deepened their resolve and connected the students with their teachers and classmates in a spiritual domain. Faith was convincingly seen as a resource for success.

The theme *race* was unique to the participants of this study because the research focused on experiences of racialization by African American students at predominantly white institutions. Two major points were raised and show how *race* played a role in the Breaking the Cycle Model. First, the participants all expressed ways they had been victimized by racism at some point in their lives. There was no way to deny or minimize the fact that experiences of racism contributed to the academic journey of each participant. Second, the predominantly white institutions largely failed at demonstrating ways the schools would respond to racism (note that all interviews were drawing from experiences before 2014). While the participants did not share overt experiences of racism in their degree completion programs, the programs themselves shifted the responsibility of dealing with racism from the school to the students. Whether or not the schools intended to send this message was unknown, but there was no question that African American learners at their predominantly white schools did not feel that their academic institution was in an alliance against racism.

These five themes of *goals*, *context*, *support*, *faith*, and *race* can be envisioned as a conceptual bridge. At the start of the bridge, the student finds herself or himself in a personal context with both resources and deterrents for success. On the other side of the bridge are the goals, the reasons for students to keep moving across the bridge. The pathway stretching across the bridge is the support system, the friends, family, and educational community that walks alongside the students over the ravine. Supporting the bridge is faith. Faith connects the students and

academicians in a spiritual sort of way that helps them draw from faith as a resource not only for learning but also for overcoming adversity. Problems associated with racism or racialization are seen as the major adversity that attempts to knock the sojourner off the bridge and into the ravine, but with the help of a solid structure of support and faith, hopefully, each student can overpower the wounds of racism to accomplish his or her goals of education. (See Figure 1.)
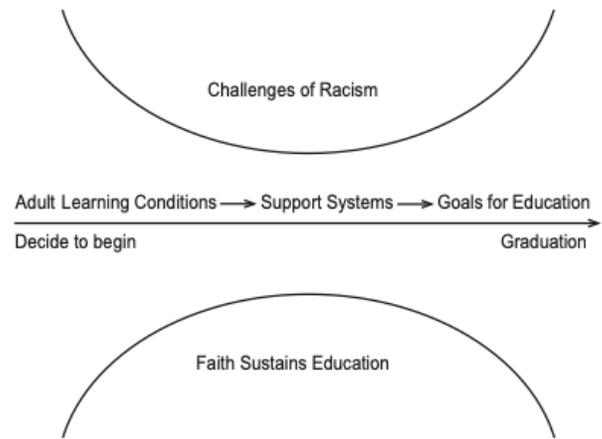
Figure 1. The breaking the cycle model (Source: Westbrook 2017, p. 128)

While this cycle reflects lived experiences of African American adult learning programs, the model corresponds with students broadly in higher education, in particular, to students in faith-based programs who also experience challenges of racism. In the next section, we will address this matter from a personal journey.

Alea's Journey

As an international student, I came to America to study at Harding University. Racism and social justice was never something that resonated in my mind. Coming from a majority-black nation factored in how my ignorance of social problems blinded me. However, once I was face-to-face with racism, I knew exactly what it was. Thankfully, I have only encountered racism once with a teacher on campus. This is not to say that my experience of racism deserves a pass; nonetheless, I am happy that I have not experienced discrimination on more than one occasion at a Christian university. I am aware that this may be different for many minority students at Christian university, However, all of my other experiences of racism have happened outside of the university realm. For example, once I was with a friend from Rwanda who was also a black international student,

and we were followed by a truck with a group of men on the interstate who yelled and threw bottles at our moving vehicle. At another particular time, I was interning at a school, and my parents bought me a car. Because of the type of vehicle that it was, my new colleagues joked around with one another and came up with the conclusion that my parents were probably in some kind of gang or mafia, or they robbed someone, which is how they were able to afford to pay for my vehicle. These were people who called themselves Christians. I was a bit disappointed because I would have thought that as sisters in Christ, they would not have committed these microaggressions behind my back. Another unfortunate time was when I was walking to class on campus and someone yelled out the n-word to me.

These were just a few examples of what I experienced as profiling and racism, and I knew that these were not appropriate. Yet it seemed like being a victim of racism was becoming my new normal. As a freshman, this type of discrimination resonated with me, and I knew that the U.S. South was a different territory than what I was accustomed to. I spoke to several of my American friends about it, and they were pretty much used to it. I have also noticed that there was a bit of difference with treatment when someone knows that you are black and international and when you are black and you are from America. Depending on what value an international person has to that particular person, you might be viewed as exotic or special, or you might be viewed as an immigrant who just wants to take the American people's jobs. What does all of this have to do with racism and social justice? It shows that in this day and age we are still talking about the injustices that minorities face on a daily, if not a regular, basis because of the color of their skin and where they are from. It also draws attention to how even Christian brothers and sisters who claim to hold the name Jesus close to them sometimes turn a blind eye to racist behavior.

Furthermore, being a female in a faith-based institution, I have experienced some restrictions on cultural and religious aspects. Throughout my college years, I was able to adjust while incorporating my own beliefs and values into this new culture, but over some time I felt that the way people would address marriage and religion became a microaggression against my sense of identity.

I was honestly both shocked and amused when I first heard about the reputation at my university of being a "marriage factory." The culture of a U.S. Southern Christian institution encourages marriage at such a young age, much younger than in my own culture. Coming from the Bahamas, the general age of marriage occurs in the late 20s as opposed to the early 20's. There is a sense of urgency for a long-lasting commitment, while we are focused on stabilizing ourselves before enduring the commitment. I have been approached by several people on and off campus that have asked about my marital status. There were questions such as "Why are you not married as yet?"; "Did you run that idea by your husband first?"; or, "Gee you are getting up there in age, are you thinking about marriage soon?" I was at first a bit insulted because it made me feel as if I was not on the right track with my life. Looking at this, there is a difference between asking a 26-year-old male if he is looking at marriage and asking a 26-year-old female if she is looking at marriage soon. These expectations are culturally biased, and one's parochial presumptions can be insulting.

Before attending my institution, I was not familiar with this particular religious culture. Even the matter of my salvation was questioned because of my religious background. Some of the religious practices were restrictive because of gender roles. In the beginning, I resisted the restrictions, but it soon became my norm, which I accepted. I was able to work through my differences with this culture while still holding to my autonomy. In a way, I was able to look at this religious culture as something to explore.

The Breaking the Cycle Model mentioned above has put many thoughts into perspective for me. *Faith*, *support,* and *race* have been a part of my conceptual bridge. I used faith and support in my experiences because it was only faith and my relationship with God that has brought me this far in life. This might sound trite, but there were times when I wanted to give up on my schooling and pursue other routes; however, I was able to stick it out because of faith and support. The support came when friends helped me along the way through encouragement and their love. They also went the extra mile to help me realize why I needed to achieve not only my academic but also long-term life goals. In my case, this bridge of support and faith has assisted me in overcoming the battles when faced with racism. Without these themes, looking back, I probably would have not achieved my goals of academic success.

The Breaking the Cycle Model can be useful to students as they face everyday challenges. The good thing about this model is that it has many aspects that are incorporated into our daily lives. An example of this is goals, which many of us in society strive to achieve. This goes for students and people in the workforce. Our experiences play an enormous role in who we are and where we want to go in life. In a predominantly white university, it might be hard for underrepresented students to focus and continue with their goals in the face of adversity. Deterrents such as blatant racism and microaggressions can easily discourage students from continuing even at a faith-based school. This model can be applicable in keeping students in these universities on the path across the ravine and reach their end goals.

Conclusion

None of us are flawless, but we are saved because of our Creator. At the end of the day, we are completely and continuously spared on account of God's grace. Because we are people made in God's image (Gen. 1:26-28), we should make presumptions about individuals with respect, and we should honor other people's dignity. Our attitudes are connected to how we conduct ourselves toward others.

Equity and fairness ought to be important for Christian institutions, because God cares about righteousness and justice (see for example Deut. 10; 16; Prov. 1:1-7; Eccles. 4:1-2; Is. 1:17; Jer. 22:3; Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8; 2 Cor. 8:13-14; 1 Jn. 3:16-17) God's call for equity might make a lot of us feel awkward, expecting us to move away from our customary ranges of familiarity and into spaces of vulnerability. When we live fairly as God has called us to, we carry on with our lives in such a way that moves us toward the interminable home God is preparing for his people. This home will be liberated from any foul play or agony. As Christians, we are representing God's kingdom in everything that we do as well as everywhere we go. When it comes to Christian schools, there is an expectation that God's love and characteristics will be shown through the faculty, staff, and students.

Where do we go from here? A good starting point is to acknowledge that racism is indeed still a real problem, even in faith-based institutions. Not only should we acknowledge this but also stand against racism when we see it or hear it. Racism shows itself in many different forms, whether it be passive or aggressive. It does no good to turn a blind eye to something that you may be against. Of all institutions, Christian schools ought to be leading the way to show how communities can explore new ideas in a way that is safe and encouraging for all. So what does social justice look like from a Christian perspective? Some might merely think that it is a social and political word that continues to trend in our society, but true justice is holistic and includes religious witness. A religious, or indeed theological, point of view encourages brotherly love, kindness, and acceptance. Drawing from the Break the Cycle Model, faith-based institutions should be a community in which students can pursue their goals with the full academic and social support of the administration, faculty, and fellow students. Faith-based schools also provide ideological frameworks for success in an encouraging and safe learning space. Communities with trust and camaraderie naturally lead to fairness and just treatment of others. While challenges may continue with cycles of prejudice, adversity, and defeat, perhaps this holistic version of higher education in which justice is upheld in academics, social concerns, as well as spiritual matters, might be the very formula needed to help break unwanted cycles and lead to something greater.

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