



Conversations on Race

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Abstract

More students of color enroll in U.S. colleges today than in previous decades due to changing demographics and rising aspirations. However, racist incidents on college campuses, persistent achievement gaps, and lack of faculty of color indicate there are race-related problems in higher education.

Research shows that conversations on race increase cultural competency, promote empathy, reduce prejudice, improve relations among conflict group members, and develop critical awareness of privilege and oppression. Yet, educational leaders rarely engage in racial conversations to affect systems change.

This paper examines the growing body of literature on the use of race conversations in schools and colleges. Additionally, it considers how race conversations might be aligned with systems thinking for dismantling structural racism within the higher education system.

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Background

Conversations on Race

Conversations on race are process models that engage participants in intentionally and truthfully talking about racism, whiteness, dominance, and oppression (Palmer & Louis, 2017; Acosta & Ackerman-Barger, 2017). Participants use race-specific language (Irby & Clark, 2018) and listen to the voices of “others,” especially those who have been traditionally marginalized (Mansfield, 2015). Because they involve risk taking and confronting mental models, safe space and the equal status of all participants are non-negotiable.

There are two predominate forms of interracial conversations: Intergroup Dialogue and Race-Centered Conversations:

Intergroup dialogue (IGD)

IGD is often used in academic settings and involves structured groups, such as student cohorts, participating in a specific number of conversations over an prescribed time period. IGD bring individuals with a history of conflict together for direct communication and interaction. It separates participants into social identity groups. The model is also used to address issues such as gender and sexuality orientation.

Race-centered conversations (RCC)

Race-centered conversations have been increasingly used in K-12 school settings to develop teacher competency in discussing racial issues among themselves and reflect on beliefs and practices that marginalize students of color. Through participating in RCC, educators learn to lead facilitation of race-focused conversations with peers and students. RCC is grounded in Critical Race Theory.

Systems Approach

Reasons for applying systems thinking for racial equity:

- Develop educators’ ability to deconstruct patterns of behavior, system structures, and mental models while developing the language and confidence to discuss and analyze systemic racism.
- Develop organizational capacity through training, coaching, peer networks, and accountability structures that strengthen educational leaders’ abilities to apply analysis to system reform.
- Develop understanding of racial conversations as dynamic processes rather than discrete solutions.

Future Directions

Researchers find it difficult to measure culture, as such, few evaluations exist on whether race conversations could effectively change higher educational culture. There is a pressing need for institutions of higher education to examine their beliefs, policies, and practices that contribute to systemic disadvantages for people of color.

Further research is needed on whether sustained reflection and conversations on racial issues would increase educational leaders’ willingness to review and if needed revise policies and practices to transform their schools into genuine equity-focused institutions.

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