Special Issue: Students' Critical Reflections on Racial (in)justice

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Students’ Critical Reflections on Racial (in)justice

Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs
Mission

A student-run, open-access journal, the Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs provides a venue for international, interdisciplinary scholarship that examines higher education and student affairs through the explicit use of critical frameworks. The journal strives to provide meaningful, intentional, and actionable scholarship that can effect change on and with campus and community, understanding their interdependence and interrelated nature. As such, this journal seeks to serve the promotion of justice in “openhanded and generous ways to ensure freedom of inquiry, the pursuit of truth and care for others” (Loyola University Chicago, n.d.).
SPECIAL ISSUE FEBRUARY 2016: students’ critical reflections on racial (in)justice

How Black Students Are Saving Higher Education

David C. Turner III
Doctoral Student, University of California Berkeley

What a time to be alive.

In the wake of the one-year anniversary of the non-indictment of Michael Brown’s assailant, Darren Wilson, and the murder of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, we are witnessing an uprising from Black people across this country that is only parallel to the civil rights movement. The energy from these national uprisings, the righteous rage, frustration, love, and sense of urgency has undergirded a new movement for Black lives follows us back from our marches with the community to our campuses. The way that Black Studies departments and Black cultural centers see consistent cuts to their funding; the way that universities exploit the labor of graduate students and adjunct faculty; the daily microaggressions that cut a little deeper each day; and the recent threats on our very lives for fighting for what we believe in, have all forced us to act. We are tired of the being relegated to second class citizens everywhere we go. We are tired of losing what little resources we have. We are tired of being the last hired and the first fired.

And this is why we are calling for a transformation of higher education.

In spite of the media sensationalism that fixates on building name changes and the resignations of executive administration members, Black students all across the country are calling for systemic changes that are far more than just symbolic. For example, Black students from Concerned Student 1950, the student group at Mizzou that sparked the new Black student movement, are calling for Black faculty to be at least 10% of the entire campus. Students at California State University, Los Angeles have called for the creation of tenured-track positions in their Pan African Studies department, and an additional $20,000 for Black Student Union programming. Students from AU Shut It Down, an Atlanta based group that runs out of the historically Black Atlanta University Center, is addressing homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and they are pushing back against efforts to gentrify the local area. A student of color collective at Brown University won a $1 million-dollar initiative to address racial injustice on their campus. Here at Berkeley, we have called for many things, including a Black student resource center where we can organize, study, and exist in a racially affirming space.

While conservative forces paint us as unruly, entitled, and even violent, what we are doing is actually saving higher education. By calling for an investment in faculty, we are combating the privatization of the university and the neoliberal forces that exploit labor, devalue teaching, and turn social justice into a commodity as opposed to a lifestyle. The Black Liberation Collective, the Black student-led organization that helped to coordinate the national day of action, has called for universities to completely divest from the private prison system, and to invest in the communities that surround them. Of the 70 colleges who have issued demands, at least 40 of them have called for some sort of cultural competency or diversity training in order to address the hostile racial climate on college campuses. Students have called for support systems for civic engagement work, for psychological services tailored to Black experiences, and for universities to fulfill their missions to be servants of the public good. We are doing more than just talking about the problems; we are actually working to transform them.

Currently, Black youth and Black students are viewed as mere recipients of social forces, through a deficit lens of disparities and gloom, and through a cultural matrix that seeks to explain our plight, not transform it. At this moment, we are in the wake of a political transformation. Black young people, both inside and outside the university, are the current vanguards of one of the most important social movements of our time. We are strong. We are worthy of what we are asking for. We embody the radical, democratic visions of Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King Jr., and others who sought to transform American society. We are doing so much more than just trying to make these campuses more accommodating to us – we are saving higher education.
Students' Critical Reflections on Racial (In)Justice

Fighting the Privilege to ‘Forget’

Melissa Charles
Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs, University of Michigan

In June of 2014, I began my job as a community organizer. The work was hard. As an organizer, I was responsible for mobilizing community members to:

1. Identify and vote on a community problem
2. Research the problem in depth and find best-practice solutions
3. Build a power of people through continuous engagement of a network of justice-workers
4. Publicly ask city officials to address community problems and implement identified best-practice solutions

It was important work and to this day is something I aim to bring into all areas of my life. Early on into my career as an organizer, I found myself working with people who had children my age. There was little to no engagement with young adults in the community despite it being a college area. I was just one month out of college myself so I quickly began to seek out opportunities to infuse the local college and search for students who might be interested in participating with the rest of the community. It was ineffective.

That summer of 2014 also ended up being the resurgence of a new, public era of grief for the Black community. Eyes not completely dry from the murders of Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant and Jordan Davis, we quickly lost Mike Brown, Eric Garner, John Crawford and Tamir Rice. As a new full-time employee working 50+ hours a week and not technically allowed to make public, I felt helpless. The night of Mike Brown’s non-indictment, I found myself sitting idly by watching CNN feeling as though there was absolutely nothing I could do. Then I witnessed young adults begin to mobilize in some of the most powerful ways.

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I was inspired to return to a setting where I could utilize the skills and knowledge I’d gained as a community organizer amongst young students — future leaders. One year later, I am now a student again pursuing a Masters in Higher Education with a concentration in social justice education in hopes of one day ‘fixing things.’ I have gone from an active organizer to a theoretical student, and it hurts. I frequently find myself wishing I was helping to mobilize change as opposed to writing another paper. But for now, this is my action.

Still, I can not just throw away my identity. I am a Black woman. When I see students at Mizzou protest and create change, I both empathize with and am inspired by their experience. I have only ever attended PWIs and can easily say that the problems students at Mizzou face are not an anomaly. I do my part in remaining an ally and advocate within my own campus communities. I stand in solidarity with Mizzou. I stand in solidarity with 8BlackLivesMatter. I bring up topics that might make others uncomfortable to the forefront of our classroom discussions. I actively engage in social justice education in hopes that the undergraduates who I work with will take these lessons into their future. I research student activism specifically, in hopes of one day being able to fully support more students like the ones at Mizzou who organized and created positive change in their college community. I will always be a community organizer at heart.

If I allow myself to stop for even one minute to contemplate the terror being inflicted upon my brothers and sisters on a daily basis, I know I will enter into a deep depression.

I now understand why my attempt to engage college students in community work was ineffective. As a student — as a Black woman who is a student, I have both the privilege to ‘forget,’ and the burden of remembering all the while. When news of Sandra Bland’s death reached me, I was on my way to a hiking trip with a friend. It was a few weeks before my graduate program was to begin and I was reveling in my final vacation. I distinctly remember being grateful that I would soon lose service and not have be aware of any updates regarding the case. At the same time, the fact that Sandra Bland was a young Black woman who drove cross-country to begin a career in higher education was something I could not shake. In just a few weeks, I would pack up my own car and drive cross-country in pursuit of my own career goals.

This experience is college in a nutshell. On campus, I find myself plagued with classwork, internships, volunteering, retreats and group projects. On the rare occasions where a break presents itself, I immediately retreat to Netflix and a few close friends. There is simply no time for me to think about all of the Black people being murdered on a daily basis. If I allow myself to stop for even one minute to contemplate the terror being inflicted upon my brothers and sisters on a daily basis, I know I will enter into a deep depression. I will miss assignments, forget events, not show up to work. I will turn into the ‘stupid, lazy, affirmative action Black woman’ they already think I am. So instead I press on, immersing myself in my studies, networking, going above and beyond. I study the systems and administration at my university; watching what decisions they do or do not make with regards to diversity and inclusion. I focus all of my assignments around the topics of social justice, allyhood, and student activism. I set my sights on one day ‘fixing things,’ I have gone from an active organizer to a theoretical student, and it hurts. I frequently find myself wishing I was helping to mobilize change as opposed to writing another paper. But for now, this is my action.

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I was inspired to return to a setting where I could utilize the skills and knowledge I’d gained as a community organizer amongst young students — future leaders. One year later, I am now a student again pursuing a Masters in Higher Education with a concentration in diversity and social justice education. My ultimate goal is to work in an administrative capacity to create institutional change within education and on college campuses. I also aim to encourage coalition building and activism amongst students.

I now understand why my attempt to engage college students in community work was ineffective. As a student — as a Black woman who is a student, I have both the privilege to ‘forget,’ and the burden of remembering all the while. When news of Sandra Bland’s death reached me, I was on my way to a hiking trip with a friend. It was a few weeks before my graduate program was to begin and I was reveling in my final vacation. I distinctly remember being grateful that I would soon lose service and not have be aware of any updates regarding the case. At the same time, the fact that Sandra Bland was a young Black woman who drove cross-country to begin a career in higher education was something I could not shake. In just a few weeks, I would pack up my own car and drive cross-country in pursuit of my own career goals.

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An Experiential Response to Ferguson and Eric Gardner

Domonic A. Rollins
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It’s Thursday, December 4, 2014 – the morning, my favorite part of the day. I like getting a jump on the day, starting fresh and really considering what the day may have in store for me. Though, today is slightly different. In the span of three days, we, the United States, have learned the result of two grand jury trials – both rendering the same decision not to indict White police officers in the killing of a Black teenager and a Black man. Today is also different because I am facilitating a dialogue for the Office of Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Maryland, where I work, about Ferguson. The program seeks to offer People of Color, Multiracial, and White people committed to eradicating racism a dialogue space to explore, reflect on, and interrogate race, racism, justice, and resistance in the aftermath of the Ferguson decision.

It is still the morning, and I am preparing for the rest of the day while in the library. Each morning I start my day at the library; it is my constant. Usually, I arrive by 8:00am. I check emails, read for class, write, and plan out my day on campus. However, this morning is a little different. My inbox, Twitter feed, and Facebook are filled with posts, information, and stories. I can tell my people are enraged, confused, and filled with emotions.

Up until this point, I haven’t participated in Facebook postings concerning Ferguson. Sincerely, while I have appreciated so much of what my friends, colleagues, and family have shared, I haven’t felt moved to post – I figured those who know me, know where I stand. Friends of mine have shared prophetic, smart, painful, and nuanced things. Some have strived for balanced commentary to strike a middle-ground, and others have expressed outrage and grave disappointment in our society. Honestly, I am lost.

Yesterday, I expressed to a White friend of mine that I needed to feel insulated. And, like some of my educated Black and Brown brothers out there, believed that accruing the goods of the White middle class would afford me some protections from the injustices perpetuated against my “uneducated and poor” Black and Brown brethren. I know, knew, discover, rediscover, learn, admit, and am reminded this is NOT true. No Black, Brown, or Of Color body is protected, insulated, shielded, or safe in our racist society.

Here, I have to come out and say, for me, this is internalized racism. Sadly, I am motivated to achieve, gain, garner, and accrue to distance myself from my racialized Black, Brown, and Of Color family. I achieve upward mobility so that I may be safe. That is fucked up. That there is pressure to do so, and I am so moved to behave in a way to be seen differently by White people – to be seen as acceptable, a non-threat, approachable, nice – diplomatic, if you will. That is fucked up. The truth is, no matter what degrees I earn, the salary I garner, how I speak, where I live, or how well I behave, I will always be a Nigger to (some) White people and (some) of American society.

Others before me have said this, and it will continue to be said. Yet, there is something so jarring when you engage this idea – that I am Nigger too – for yourself. You consider how far White people – American society – have come, and see that there is no distance between slavery, Jim Crow, and today. Shaken up, you admit to yourself that you must be just as concerned about how you walk on the street today, as your ancestors were 50, 100, and 200 years ago. That thought, and all the other related thoughts that rush your brain are enough to make you crazy.

The Eric Gardner decision pushed me over the edge. Admittedly, I didn’t know a lot about it. Actually, I am not sure I knew of the incident back in July. In a racist society ignorance is not bliss, it’s necessary – one can’t consume it all. However, on the heels of Ferguson, another decision, with what some might say is more clear and convincing evidence, demonstrates our inability to even consider holding White law enforcement accountable. And further, it shows us just how racist (and not post-racial) America is.

Yet, what is most problematic to me is that there isn’t the admission to the racism that lives and breathes in the wake of these decisions. The beliefs surrounding who and what Black and Brown bodies are is so deeply entrenched that some of the mass White psyche is beyond considering race. I’m not sure I need the admission, but I know I crave the honest conversation.

Just tell me that you are scared of me. Say that you think I am less than. Spew out all of your hatred. Let’s get it all on the table. It’s only when we can uncover what is deeply seated in your heart and mind, that we can address change.

Image by Taylor Gordon
human being.

Fast forward, it’s about an hour before the dialogue, and I am enraged. I’ve hit my tipping point, and experienced a break through. I am Michael Brown and Eric Gardner. I’ve known this, I knew this, but something came alive differently for me as I watched videos, read commentary, and really considered the gravity of both killings. Filled with emotion, I must get these ideas out. I must read what I have written. “Beth, do you have a minute?” I ask my boss. She and I are both facilitating the dialogue later. “I need to process with you, I need to share.” We walk into her office, I pull out my laptop, and begin: “Up until this point, I haven’t participated in Facebook postings concerning Ferguson….”

My voice shakes, emotions move from the pit of my stomach to my chest. It is different to say these words. It is different to speak them. I can feel my eyes begin to well up, though I don’t cry. My eyes never connect with Beth as I stare at my laptop to read these words. The hardest part I read is about internalized racism and distancing myself from my Black and Brown brethren. I finish. Beth expresses gratitude. We process. I stare at my laptop to read these words. It is different to say these words. It is different to speak them. I can feel my eyes begin to well up, though I don’t cry. My eyes never connect with Beth as I stare at my laptop to read these words.

Fast forward again. It’s time for the dialogue. Everyone is gathered, and almost done eating pizza. Moments before I stuff a slice down my throat, and try to get centered before I enter the space. My nerves are bouncing a bit. I can tell I’m anxious, and feeling uncertain about how the dialogue will go. The room is full - sit on the floor. Looking around the room, I welcome and thank everyone for coming. We are multiracial. I look out onto every hue of skin tones as I share about the intentions I have set for our time together. I call for people to dig deep for compassion, and care, while being honest and authentic. My voice is soft. “How might you feel if you were Michael Brown’s parents?” I posed this question to the group and asked that people pair up with the person next to them to discuss. The volume in the room rises. Five minutes past, I quiet the room by chiming some bells. Nerves still bouncing, I stare out onto faces with varying looks. Some bewildered, confused, neutral, and already drained. I solicit a few responses: “I would be enraged.” “I’m not a parent so it’s hard to imagine, I guess frustrated.” “I would feel like I could kill Darren Wilson.” Emotions in the space are high. Moving through this anxiousness, I express gratitude to those who shared, and ask my colleague to facilitate the next portion of our dialogue.

“Talking about race makes you feel what, please fill in the blank.” Mary opens with a provocative prompt. Desiring to illicit and make emotions present, Mary asks every person to respond. Words like uneasy, vulnerable, anxious, and confused are shared. Tension increases in the room, as folks are uncertain about what will happen next. Carefully, Mary thanks each person for sharing and proceeds to divide the group for our next segment, affinity groups. The White people exit, and People of Color stay in the room.

I stay. I begin: “In times like these, we need to be able to come together to express ourselves and put words to our emotions with people who look like us, and may feel similarly to how we are feeling.” Now the space is officially open for all of the People of Color gathered; they begin to share. Not long into comments, tears stream down so many faces. Mothers discuss their fears in having to raise Black and Brown boys. Almost mothers listen intently, echoing the fear and emphasizing the insurmountable apprehension of what is coming. The White kids talk about the insecurities of the system despite playing by the rules. “Damned if I do, damned if I don’t,” one Black man shared. A police officer shares that each day he promises his two-year old twins that he will come home that night. The dialogue is complex, nuanced, and hard. During several moments my eyes began to well up, though I don’t cry. This lasts for more than two hours.

Final fast forward, it’s Friday, December 5, 2014 – the morning, my favorite part of the day. I wake up hungry. Almost sprinting to the kitchen, I make my coffee, toast waffles, and broil some sausage. My roommate Sean is up, seated in the dining room. I haven’t seen him in a few days. I suppose I’ve hidden away a bit in the chaos of Ferguson and Eric Gardner. I tell him that yesterday was my angry-Black-man-day. I shared that I felt more yesterday than I had in the previous days concerning all that was happening in the United States. I ask Sean if I can share my writing with him. I begin: “Up until this point, I haven’t participated in Facebook postings concerning Ferguson…” Still, he sits, somewhat unaffected. I finish. He asks: “How are you feeling now?”

What a profound question, I thought to myself. I struggled to respond. Swirling in my head were phrases like: “Of course I expected this outcome from the judges.” And, “History is bound to repeat itself!” Yet, I suppose I thought or hoped the outcome would be different. And now, as Sean asked me that question, I feel with a little less hope. As a Black man living in a racist society, I expect the weight of judgment to benefit White people and disadvantage Black people.

However, for me to remain hopeful about the fight against injustice, I know I require a morel of progress – just a moment that creates the light of possibility. Simply, a small declaration that justice is achievable, even with all the injustice surrounding us. I suppose I thought that the Eric Gardner decision on the heels of Ferguson would offer me that light. I thought: “we can get it right this time.” Even if the outcome of the
I am a graduate student in a higher education administration and policy program—a future administrator, if you will—who is not required to develop cultural competency prior to graduation.

My colleagues and I are able to discuss issues of access and success for minority and underrepresented students using theoretical, philosophical, and even moral perspectives. Likewise, many of my peers in graduate programs across the country can analyze policy, evaluate programs, and make recommendations related to equity in education.

Unfortunately, many will also conflate social justice with diversity, mistaking accommodation for inclusion. We tout our liberal use of gender-affirming language, throw around buzz words like dialogue, and have double standards when it comes to expectations of students compared to our own.

The problem is many of my colleagues also believe that we live in a post-racial society. They say things like, “the only race that matters is the human race.”

Some will alarmingly respond, “This whole PC thing has gone too far, and I can’t keep up.” “Freedom of speech and academic freedom are at stake here.” “We are being coddled.”

Sadly, in programs across the country, this is how many of us prepare to become administrators and faculty members.

Last week, five of my colleagues showed up to listen to or be present while hundreds of Black students pled for their safety, right for a dignified educational experience, and equitable treatment on campus. There are roughly 40 people enrolled in my program and cohort.

I wonder if the rest of them care. Maybe.

Yet, they think having one three-hour session talking about the “challenges of diversity” and the “changing landscape of higher education” means we have excavated ourselves from our complicity in systems of oppression; that we have exonerated ourselves from our responsibility to uproot a system that continues to oppress, suppress, and diminish the livelihood, potential, and futures of Black students and other students of color on college campuses everywhere.

We are told everyday we are the future leaders of higher education. And, the reality is, we are. I can very easily see the Claremont McKenna College/Yale/Mizzou/[insert institution name] emails coming from most of my peers. In fact, I have heard variations of them time and time again.

And, unfortunately, it is not entirely their fault.

I want to blame programs for their carelessness and irresponsibility. I want to blame the systems at play for making us complicit, docile. I want to blame institutions for not making cultural competency a critical component for the preparation of future educators, administrators, and faculty.

But at some point, we have to take responsibility too.

You see, the wave of student protest and activism on college campuses across the country is much larger than a single offense, individual, or institution. The systems within which we are training administrators, educators, faculty, and staff are broken. It is time we start holding our peers, our programs, and ourselves accountable.

No one is exempt from this work. Providing adequate training, education, and critical engagement within and across difference is the first step in preparing graduate students for entry into campuses that desperately needs transformative change. Beyond learning the language of diversity, graduate students must be equipped with the information, knowledge, and skills necessary to interrogate and challenge the systems they are bound to be working within. Perhaps then we can begin to interrupt the cycle of ill preparation of future practitioners.

Institutions must also work to remediate current administrators and faculty. This can no longer be a reactionary measure to student demands. It is time for administration and faculty leadership to develop strategic plans for members of a campus community to interrogate themselves and their socialized biases. Doing so allows us to then develop a shared mission of supporting educational equity, cultivating knowledge around the experiences of marginalized students, and developing the skills necessary to facilitate a truly inclusive campus community.

Enhancing the experiences of students of color, improving campus climate, and achieving educational equity has to be a multipronged and multidirectional process that involves all members of the campus community. None of this is novel.

The cycle of producing and re-producing incompetence needs to stop, and it is our responsibility to call for it. If we are to truly value Black life, if we are to truly commit to justice and equity in all aspects of higher education, and if we believe we are responsible for the future of this mess, then we must do better. The question of how this all can be implemented has been thoroughly studied and corroborated by scholars and practitioners time and time again.

What are we waiting for?

In Solidarity,

Khaled Ismail
As a Black male student on the campus of a predominately white university, I come with baggage. Yes, we -- as human beings subject to emotions and years of built up issues -- all come with baggage. My baggage is different, however, and it is time everyone acknowledges that. Unlike the invisible knapsack carried by my white counterparts, my baggage is ceaselessly evident. My baggage looks like over 400 years of oppression and matches the pain of 1,000 slaves. I have been torn, battered, removed, shifted, and locked away by teachers, leaders, strangers, and friends all before arriving to this campus -- a campus where I am expected to behave according to your white, middle-class standards. I am forcing you to deal with it with the same tenacity that I have been forced to suppress it. So when I see people who look like me being tossed around and treated poorly at institutions very similar to mine, I cannot help but look around for the injustices and threats to humanity here. Tears have been shed, letters have been written, and discussions have been had, but I still cannot seem to find a way to release the enormous amount of emotion shut within me, begging for an outlet.

But what happens to the student who does not understand this very issue? What happens when Black students become so outraged with a situation that they can no longer control their actions or words? Furthermore, how do we handle the students who seek to make a change but do not have the training or know-how to effectively start the task? We, as the informed minority members of predominately white institutions, are doing our peers a disservice by not engaging with them to create effective “change mechanisms” that make a difference on our campuses in the same manner that Jonathan Butler and the students at Mizzou have done.

As I sat and watched the unfolding of a movement at the University of Missouri (Mizzou), my blood began to boil. Initially it boiled in anger against the men and women who dared stand in front of my peers and lock their arms in counterprotest against us. I could see the hurt and the fear in the white woman’s eyes. They called her Anna, and I wanted for the life of me to be there so I could scream to her, “Anna! Have some humanity and stand up to them. Be our ally and tell them no.” I could see she wanted so badly to do so. There was, however, hope for me in this video. At the half way point, the student behind the video camera, while capturing every moment of the incident, consistently yelled to my peers, “Do not engage, y’all! DO NOT ENGAGE!”

When I look back at events that shaped the 1960s, I recall pictures and videos of Black people linked and locked together as if they were trees planted by the water, solemn and silent as they had been trained to do in order to achieve the most impactful goal: change. They would demonstrate, chant, and protest, but they would never engage with the oppressive forces surrounding them. White men were facing them, ready for war, and armed to attack. In 2015, however, I would never have guessed that I would see my peers facing this exact same scenario on a college campus. Now, I understand that there is a certain method to handling issues of racism and race relations within a university system, but when these issues are continually being ignored by administrators who are in positions as powerful as former Mizzou President Tim Wolfe, there is a problem.

Furthermore, how do we handle the students who seek to make a change but do not have the training or know-how to effectively start the task? We, as the informed minority members of predominately white institutions, are doing our peers a disservice by not engaging with them to create effective “change mechanisms” that make a difference on our campuses in the same manner that Jonathan Butler and the students at Mizzou have done.
I t can be difficult to be critical of the institutions that we are a part of, from inter-personal relationships to big corporations. Part of this is because our own institutions of education do not teach us how to be critical in the first place. I was born into a family that practices the Baha’i faith, which is a religion that teaches that education is the key to human progress, and that lack of education leads to oppression and chaos. The Baha’i faith originated in Iran, which is where my father was born and raised. Baha’is in Iran are denied access to high education and because of this, I have always been hyper aware of my privilege as a college student. My dad came to America to go to college, and when the Iranian revolution happened, the country became unsafe for Baha’is, so he was forced to apply for political asylum. One good thing that came out of this is that he met my intelligent, beautiful, wonderful Black mother and they are currently living happily ever after.

Because of the importance placed on education, my parents have always bent over backwards to ensure that I got the best education they could provide. One thing my education has lead me to know is that I have the capacity to accomplish whatever I set my mind to. I like to believe that my accomplishments are the reason that I got into college, and that I’m here to become more equipped to accomplish even more, better things. The most frustrating thing is knowing that no matter how much knowledge I gain, and no matter what I achieve, I will still be terrified to walk alone at night to my (on campus) apartment, for fear of being murdered because of the color of my skin. The most frustrating thing is knowing that no matter how much knowledge I gain, and no matter what I achieve, I will still be terrified to walk alone at night to my (on campus) apartment, for fear of being murdered because of the color of my skin. The most frustrating thing is knowing that no matter how much knowledge I gain, and no matter what I achieve, I will still be terrified to walk alone at night to my (on campus) apartment, for fear of being murdered because of the color of my skin. The most frustrating thing is knowing that no matter how much knowledge I gain, and no matter what I achieve, I will still be terrified to walk alone at night to my (on campus) apartment, for fear of being murdered because of the color of my skin.

No matter how empowered I became, nothing I do alone will change the struggles I face based on the color of my skin. It doesn’t matter how much knowledge I have gained or how many Black Student Union meetings I go to, or how many movies screenings or social justice dialogues I host at my small liberal arts college in Olympia, Washington. I cannot affect enough change alone to stop the violence that Black college students are facing all over the country. I can honestly say this breaks my heart.

I go to a school that has been ranked as the most liberal college in America, where a lot of the students are quick to consider themselves activists. In the spring of last year, two unarmed young black men were shot outside of a grocery store down the street from my school. Other than a protest and some optional workshops hosted by my college, nothing has changed in our community. Students of color still face the same challenges we did before, and everyone else seems to be apathetic. It seems like to some people, social justice is only really appealing when you can yell protest chants with a big group of people and stop traffic for a few hours.

I am currently taking a class called Gateways for Incarcerated Youth. Gateways allows me to visit Green Hill School for Boys (a juvenile detention center in Chahels, Washington) twice a week, and learn alongside incarcerated young men who are enrolled in the class. I’m not only learning about race theories on cultural wealth and cultural trauma, but I also have the opportunity to apply my knowledge and practice to what I’m learning outside of the traditional classroom. Something I learned quickly is that if I want to get the most out of my time in Gateways, I have to allow room for myself to make mistakes. It is necessary for me to get out of my own head long enough to ask the question that I think “sound dumb.” At first, it was really easy to get caught up in my thoughts, worrying about saying the wrong thing. I had almost forgotten that our humanity is most deeply connected through our struggles.

This class has brought me to a new level of understanding of the importance of learning across differences, and I have learned more in this class than I have in any other course I have taken in my fourteen years of education.
We are powerful. We are the generation derived from those born free physically, but bound mentally by accounts of slavery and oppression from our forbearers. We are the generation that can demand respect from any human without trepidation of being hosed down by police or masticated by police canines. We are the generation in which more people of color have the opportunity to participate in higher education. Even so, we are the generation that attend universities (some of us are first generation attendees) where we must fear for our safety as we walk from class to class. We are the generation who, when protesting, are called farm animals and other derogatory terms. We are the generation that will forever stand against people of color, on and off college campuses. We are the generation that will address the acts of discrimination that must not and will never give up, for we are powerful. We are the powerful generation

Nonetheless, it is imperative that the raw, sometimes unfathomable, often times uncomfortable truth be told. But one of the most taxing aspects of revealing these truths is that people believe we exist in a “post-racial” society.

For change to be crafted on college campuses there first must be a pervasive understanding that there is, in fact, an issue of race relations. Many Americans are not aware, are not taught, or do not understand the fact that people of color have been, and still are treated differently because of historical and institutionalized racism. In fact, some individuals would rather be unconscious of revealing these truths is that people believe we exist in a “post-racial” society. Because it disrupts their perception of the world and the institutions they support. Nonetheless, it is imperative that the raw, sometimes unfathomable, often times uncomfortable truth be told. But one of the most taxing aspects of revealing these truths is that people believe we exist in a “post-racial” society. However, in our society in which people of color that are a part of a larger scale of systemic racism do not matter. Circa fifty years succeeding the civil rights movement we are reminded that diversity does not equal inclusivity, nor does it equal respect. For change to be crafted on college campuses there first must be a pervasive understanding that there is, in fact, an issue of race relations. Many Americans are not aware, are not taught, or do not understand the fact that people of color have been, and still are treated differently because of historical and institutionalized racism. In fact, some individuals would rather be unconscious of these truths is that people believe we exist in a “post-racial” society. Because it disrupts their perception of the world and the institutions they support. Nonetheless, it is imperative that the raw, sometimes unfathomable, often times uncomfortable truth be told. But one of the most taxing aspects of revealing these truths is that people believe we exist in a “post-racial” society. However, in our society in which people of color that are a part of a larger scale of systemic racism do not matter. Circa fifty years succeeding the civil rights movement we are reminded that diversity does not equal inclusivity, nor does it equal respect. For change to be crafted on college campuses there first must be a pervasive understanding that there is, in fact, an issue of race relations. Many Americans are not aware, are not taught, or do not understand the fact that people of color have been, and still are treated differently because of historical and institutionalized racism. In fact, some individuals would rather be unconscious of these truths is that people believe we exist in a “post-racial” society. Because it disrupts their perception of the world and the institutions they support. Nonetheless, it is imperative that the raw, sometimes unfathomable, often times uncomfortable truth be told. But one of the most taxing aspects of revealing these truths is that people believe we exist in a “post-racial” society. However, in our society in which people of color that are a part of a larger scale of systemic racism do not matter. Circa fifty years succeeding the civil rights movement we are reminded that diversity does not equal inclusivity, nor does it equal respect. For change to be crafted on college campuses there first must be a pervasive understanding that there is, in fact, an issue of race relations. Many Americans are not aware, are not taught, or do not understand the fact that people of color have been, and still are treated differently because of historical and institutionalized raci
The Pain of Our Bodies and Souls

Wendolens Ruano Zazueta
Graduate Student, The University of Utah

My heart is heavy. I feel the weight of my heart pounding against my chest, bruising and breaking me from the inside. The weight in my soul is the agony, violence, and hate that students of color are facing at institutions of higher education across the country. I know that like myself, students of color at The University of Utah are facing similar crimes against our bodies and our souls. We feel the sorrow, hate, pain, fear, and anger as we pursue our education and it is exhausting. It exhausts my body and my mind. Being on this campus exhausts my spirit. For so long, we have endured and challenged painful rhetoric and thinking, putting our histories, our bodies, our lives on the line for a taste of justice at an institution that often tokenizes us. It exhausts my body and my mind. Being on this campus exhausts my spirit. For so long, we have endured and challenged painful rhetoric and thinking, putting our histories, our bodies, our lives on the line for a taste of justice at an institution that often tokenizes us. We arrived at the ballroom where the president and his administration were seated at the front of the stage facing us – a large audience of pain. Members of his administration explained to us that the forum was an opportunity for them to listen to us, to learn about how we experience the institution. But what went unrecognized by every single member of the administration seated in front of us was the pain required to recount our stories – to recount how we survive this space.

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One week later, on Friday, November 20, 2015, the president of the University, David Pershing, sent a letter to college deans and community members gathered outside the president’s office. I could feel the intensity in the air; our bodies served as a witness to the pain endured at this institution and while I was conflicted, I was present. I wanted the opportunity to stand in solidarity with each other and to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters at Mizzou, Yale, Harvard, and other universities across the nation who are coming into consciousness and recognizing our collective power. Together, I stood in solidarity with every student, faculty member, and staff member who has had to work and exist in a university system fueled by what Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) refers to as “the Dream” – the fantasy of meritocracy that thrives off the ignorance of White America. I looked out and saw others standing in solidarity and carrying posters that were critical of the university, critical of the administration, and I witnessed a breaking of silence imposed on marginalized bodies through taped mouths and signs that read: “Do we matter?”

We marched with dignity and with accumulated disappointment. We arrived at the ballroom where the president and his administration were seated at the front of the stage facing us – a large audience of pain. Members of his administration explained to us that the forum was an opportunity for them to listen to us, to learn about how we experience the institution. But what went unrecognized by every single member of the administration seated in front of us was the pain required to recount our stories – to recount how we survive this space. The administration said repeatedly that what they were about to hear would be difficult, but necessary in order to enact change and ensure an inclusive climate for all of us. But no recognition was given to how difficult the process of sharing can be, how intricately embodied the experience of story-telling is (Anzaldúa, 1987; Ayala, Hererra, Jiménez, & Lara, 2006). Our accumulated anger, disappointment, and wounds were expressed in a condensed space meant to extract and contain our outrage. Students expressed their thoughts, experiences, demands, and opposition, in various ways. There were non-violent demonstrations in which students of color taped their mouths shut to symbolize the exhaustion of talking about issues of racism and the administration taking no action.

Other students presented pieces of spoken word expressing the wounds the institution has inflicted upon them. Leaders of the Black Student Union presented a list of demands and a call to action from the administration. Students spoke, cried, yelled, asked, challenged, and attempted to humanize our presence on this campus. We represent such a low percentage in statistical records on campus and in the hour we had for the forum, many brave students attempted to give those numbers a name, a story, a face, and a body.

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I am a young Black man in higher education. Sometimes, I wonder critically and passionately how we arrived at the current state of affairs in higher education. I wonder how we can make change. I wonder, where must we begin and what steps will follow. As I think critically and reflect often on my journey as a change agent, I have begun to answer the questions that plague our institutions of higher education. Central to my understanding of the current state of affairs is the understanding that higher education, in every way, is a microcosm of the culture of society in the United States of America. This culture undergirds the foundation upon which it was built has not changed, and has continued to plague how higher education operates and what it values.

Institutions, much like people, must recognize and admit there is a problem before moving forward. Institutions must acknowledge American higher education’s long-standing struggle with equity and civil rights. This admittance begins a journey of healing for many students like me, who fall victim to institutional racism. This system was not built to provide access, equity, or social justice as it was built from a capitalist culture that values one group of people over another and wealth over the human experience. This organizational structure has continuously grown in size and scope while maintaining these rigid systems. As many have fought and died for equity and access, the foundation upon which it was built has not changed, and has continued to plague how higher education operates and what it values.

Institutions must acknowledge American higher education’s, long-standing struggle with equity and civil rights. This admittance begins a journey of healing for many students like me, who fall victim to institutional racism undergirded by imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy (hooks, 2009). Once this process has begun, institutions must have conversations that allow victims to air their grievances to their primary academic experience is littered with microaggressions, macroaggressions, and institutional racism. This system was not built to provide access, equity, or social justice as it was built from a capitalist culture that values one group of people over another and wealth over the human experience. This organizational structure has continuously grown in size and scope while maintaining these rigid systems. As many have fought and died for equity and access, the foundation upon which it was built has not changed, and has continued to plague how higher education operates and what it values.

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A few weeks ago, one of my students shared his desire to own a Nazi uniform. This was in response to a journal prompt that asked the students to identify two to three items they would like to own.

Many national news outlets have covered stories of blatant racism on college campuses, starting with events at the University of Missouri. I don’t have to be at Mizzou to understand their struggle and desire for safe space because I know what it’s like to be a Black student on a predominantly White college campus. I’ve been in predominantly White schools since the third grade and racism isn’t just this “thing” happening “over there.” It’s here at the University of Kansas (KU). Most of my life, I’ve been seeking ways to confront racism as a student, but now I’ve also had to consider it as a teacher. In the past few weeks, I’ve had a lot of time to think about freedom of speech. Not only because of recent events at Mizzou, KU, and other campuses, but particularly thinking about how freedom of speech functions in the classroom. He shared that he is interested in “alternate history” and that although the SS uniform is a symbol of evil, he believed “the Nazis are misunderstood.”

Yes, he may have freedom of speech but he is not free from the consequences of his speech. None of us are. Everything we express has a positive or negative effect and I would be remiss to allow my students to speak freely without follow up.

You see, immediately following class, a student expressed his frustration and distress regarding his shared item. She felt extremely uncomfortable, and I did too. As a teacher of color, it was difficult for me to not see his attraction to racist material as a comment on my identity and authority. But I couldn’t rest in my discomfort long as I had to consider ways of consoling the student who made her discomfort clear, while also considering other students that my have been uncomfortable, bearing in mind my Jewish student.

During the next class session, I redressed the incident with the class. Too often our students don’t see us publicly acknowledge their hurt and discomfort and I found it important to openly show my support. We discussed our shared role in creating a safe environment and reflected on our responsibility in regards to free speech, concluding that even when we intend well, we have to be attentive to the effect of our words.

I also spoke with the student to further gain his perspective and to discuss the discomfort brought to the classroom. He shared that he is interested in “alternate history” and that although the SS uniform is a symbol of evil, he believed “the Nazis are misunderstood.”

His comments were deeply troubling to me, but I used his phrasing to help him see the problem with sharing this “symbol of evil.” He agreed and recognized how his expression made other students (and me) uncomfortable. I encouraged him to always consider his audience and to discuss the discomfort brought to the classroom.

As of late, it’s common to hear dismissive rhetoric claiming that people “are too sensitive” or “enjoy making others feel bad for their own problems” or “just need to move on.” Such comments are violent, silencing tactics. Yet this is precisely the rhetoric that has been commonly spewed in response to claims of racism on campus. To think specifically about this rhetoric as applied to my scenario, could you imagine me telling my Jewish (and other non-White) students to simply “move on?” Of course not — that would be a crass response for me to give.

I imagine that we don’t use such dismissive rhetoric when our family and friends express that we have harmed them or made them uncomfortable — at least I hope we don’t. No, we listen to them, find ways to respond differently, and change our actions, even if we didn’t intend to hurt. This approach can and should be applied to our students and colleagues. This is where we can start, shifting the ways we respond. For you and I, we are always responsible for the things we put into this world. I’ve only been teaching for 15 months now and the best/worst part of the job is the unpredictability but it’s still the greatest thing I’ve ever had the pleasure of doing.

My priority, as a teacher, is to create a classroom that is safe and comfortable as possible. Yes, I remind my students that sometimes we have to be uncomfortable to grow and learn, but for the most part my students should feel comfortable to attend and speak in class. This classroom encounter has helped me think through current conversations surrounding racial injustice on college campuses.

Charlesia McKinney
Graduate Student, University of Kansas
I n November 2015, I had the privilege of attending a retreat at Loyola University Chicago’s LUREC campus in Woodstock, Illinois. The retreat brought together LUC’s men of color who are involved in the Brothers for Excellence (B4E) mentorship program. B4E is a peer mentorship program where upperclassmen provide academic and social support to first-year men of color. The students who participated in the retreat led discussions about what being men of color meant to them, followed by in-depth conversations around masculinity and stereotypes typically associated with being men of color. The student organizers followed these discussions with a screening of John Singleton’s 1995 film, Higher Learning.

Higher Learning is a sensational film depicting issues of racism, homophobia, and White supremacy that are still prevalent on college campuses throughout the U.S. It was the first time I had ever seen the film, even though the movie was released 20 years ago. The conversation following the film echoed my own struggle around masculinity, personal identity formation, and racism as an undergraduate within the personal narratives of the B4E participants.

This discussion became a radical space of empowerment and support that is not commonly provided to men of color. Dialogues around masculinity at my undergraduate institution were simply an affirmation of stereotypical topics such as sports, music, and heteronormative values. The conversations at this recent retreat did not feel this way. I sensed something unusual in this space compared to my previous experience in other settings, which is a strong sense of community and solidarity.

The events outside of the discussion confirmed the necessity of establishing community and solidarity among young men of color. Young Black and brown men (and children) are being shot multiple times as a result of racial profiling by law enforcement officials. Most of these victims have never killed another person in their lives. However, when a White 21-year old man opened fire at multiple churchgoers at a historically African American church he had the privilege of being escorted with a bullet-proof vest provided by law enforcement officials. Racism and injustice prevailed throughout this case. When people of color called for attention to these systems of injustice the media focused on the heinous act of violence itself, not the systems that perpetuate these acts.

Silence is the sole reason why change does not occur. A quiet community does not mean that it is a safe one. I have never felt so aggravated by the views, stereotypes, and discrimination that people of color face on a daily basis until now. To a certain degree, I feel like my own silence on issues of injustice, racism, and masculinity has prompted these events to escalate over the past couple of years. In order to change this silence I knew I had to use my voice. If there was any space I felt confident change could - and would - occur, I knew it would be in the retreat space with other men of color experiencing the same dilemmas.

As I reflect on the dialogues, discussions, and conversations that took place at this retreat, I think about the resilience that the men of color exhibited in that space. I think about how radical it was to have men of color dismantle their own perception of masculinity, society, and racism. The realization is that conversations such as the ones at the retreat are avoided at predominately White institutions across the country. These conversations have the potential to create substantial change by challenging systems and institutions that have maintained White supremacy for centuries.

The retreat also did something that Conceived Student 1950 was trying to seek from the administration at the University of Missouri: respect and acknowledgment. I find myself too often having to explain why Black and brown bodies and lives should be valued just as much as society values European traditions and physical characteristics. This valorization is a trap that ultimately benefits White supremacy. However, if more spaces like the one at this retreat were to exist on all college campuses in the U.S., we might move in a positive direction towards social justice and equality for all racialized students.

In the 1980s, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) created a slogan that became the defining image of the AIDS crisis movement. Silence = Death. The men of color that participated in this retreat were not silent about racial and social injustices they struggle to overcome at a predominately White institution. They serve as a prime example of why spaces uniting young men of color are essential - not only to ensure their academic and personal success, but also to combat social injustices around the world. I carry this mentality as a young man of color knowing that my silence will no longer protect me. My silence never protected me. It only allowed me to perform masculinity by negating any passionate emotions related to social injustices. Thanks to this retreat, I have deconstructed my own silence and will encourage other young men of color to examine their role in the global fight against social injustices.
I just want to start off by saying thank you to the Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs for giving me this opportunity to share my voice and express my opinions. My name is Shumon Jenkins. I am from Brockton, Massachusetts and I go to Emmanuel College in Boston, Massachusetts. And I have to say the issues and incidents that have taken place over the last few years have made me, to be blunt, FUCKING UPSET. From the death of Trayvon Martin, to the protests at the University of Missouri, I fear I am a target to those who do not understand me and have no desire to do so. I feel I have no other choice but to express my outrage and frustration by calmly telling you about my life as a young Black male.

In my life, my pants sag like my eyes, Exhausted from school and the dramas with it. She did this, he did that, Dude it was ill, god damn she's getting fat. This is my life.

And I got my own problems to deal with it. Three five-page papers due, Didn't even start. This girl I loved doesn't even want to be my friend anymore, And it breaks my heart. To top it off my brothers just died. Eric Gardner, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Along with too many other guys. I don't want to die too, But I fear I will without knowing what I can truly do. I wanted to be a Malcolm X, a MLK, or a Tupac Shakur. I wonder what my brothers wanted to be, I didn't live their lives, but if I did what would I see? The police protecting me and telling me this is what I should do? Or will they look at me, Follow me, Take me down, Shoot then kill me, Leave me on the street, Ending my life before I can text my mom back, "I love you too".

This is my life.

To never fully be understood, trusted or looked at the same way I look back at you, What would you do? A skin color, a blessing and a curse, Let it be known that there is good in bad situations, But with racism, the situations only get worse and worse.

I fear racism will always exist unless we all become the same color, But until that day, please stop taking Black sons from their Black mothers. God. If there is one, he didn't want this I don't know who would, but if I could just somehow understand, Why?

Why was I called a monkey? Why do I speak "white"? Why do I know my dad? Since he was supposed to leave me at first sight. And why do I have to know how to fight?

Why?

This is my life.

Or how to ball. How to rap, How to sing, How to dap, How to roll, How to act, These are "facts" about being Black.

This is my life.

And with it, I walk with the memories of my dead brothers. Along with the marks of every lashing and whipping of my ancestors on my back, And although I might lack in the history of my people, It is now my mission to make it. This is my life. Thank you for listening.
University of Dayton Campus Climate: Sunny with a Chance of Microaggressions

Kwyn Townsend Riley
Undergraduate Senior, University of Dayton

The University of Dayton campus racial climate is sunny with a chance of micro aggressions. “I can’t see Kwynn, it is too dark!” “Kwynn is your hair always crazy and wild?” “Kwynn do you know anyone who is in a gang, since you are from Chicago?” was my welcoming statement at a freshman leadership camp. In retrospect, it was naive of me to think that I chose a different kind of college. I knew what I was getting myself into; I knew that I was attending a predominantly White institution. The University of Dayton is a predominantly White institution. Majority, 87%, of our students are White. I am part of the 3.3% of African Americans. Ever since I stepped into my first class, I felt “minoritized.” I have been the only student of color in my classes since my first year. I have only had four professors of color, one for each year, during my undergraduate career at the University of Dayton. I feel as if I have only been educated about White culture, and have been fed the White hegemony of thought. The three classes that I was fortunate to take were an African American Film course, a Creating Inclusive Community course (this class examined White privilege) and an American Ethnic literature course. All three of these classes had only 5-7 students compared to my other classes of 30-40 students. The majority of the students feel threatened by words like privilege, racism, and #BlackLivesMatter, because they do not know what they mean. This ignorance continues to breed racist acts. Racism may not have the face of lynching or yelling racial slurs as much on campus, but it appears in the lack of courses or celebration of history and the absence of opportunities.

The slithering smoke of racism appeared when the news of John Crawford and Michael Brown hit our campus. We held Die-In’s and #BlackLivesMatter protests for a week. I was involved in protests, authored controversial articles, while being a Resident Assistant on a majority White floor. I also wrote a play called “UNNOTICED” inspired by the Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison. The play was a product of my experiences at the University of Dayton. The responses from my fellow students were unbearable. To me, the campus had become a suffocating environment as a Black woman. I could not breathe. I could not be Black and be a student at the University of Dayton. I was forced to choose between the two. There were so many disgusting Yik Yak posts and articles in the campus newspaper. I found it very interesting how my lighter hued counterparts talked about racism as a past fad, a myth even. It just did not exist. Not in our community, not at UD. That is still the mindset of our student body currently.

A revered tradition at the University of Dayton is calling the student neighborhood “the Ghetto.” The University of Dayton owns over 200 homes surrounding the college. Moreover, in the surrounding neighborhood near the Holy Angels Church there are in total over 400 houses currently used as residential space. The neighborhood used to be home to employees of the nearby NCR Corporation and other factory workers, but now only houses students. I challenged this so-called tradition. Along with other prominent Black student organizations, we wrote articles in the paper about the word “ghetto,” held protests, and received support from SGA to host debates about the use of the word. We met with the provost, the president, and other university officials. Despite all that, the use of the word and the neighborhood nickname remain.

The University of Dayton is known for its community, and I will make sure that the community includes all students at the university. The incidents at Mizzou are not unaccompanied. The solidarity of Black students at Mizzou is paramount and stimulating. It is inspirational to students at predominantly White institutions everywhere, that we can be heard. There needs to be a critical conversation had about the University of Dayton campus climate. I am not actually being sunny without the chance of microaggressions.
It’s in the Air: Race, Activism, and Power

Charity N. Whitehead
Undergraduate Student, University of Connecticut


We took a stand today against incidents of racism and xenophobia on our campus. This situation felt all too familiar, though. A year and a day ago this time last year, we were in the same space marching to hold our community directly.

And the power of their voices, their insistence that enough was enough, propelled myself and others on campus to finally take a firm stand and no longer settle for mediocre administrative band aids and surface campus events regarding diversity, inclusion, and equity over addressing the issues within our community directly.

The time for change on our college campuses is now. We had no choice but to engage it head-on. It is within this space that I have become acutely aware of how powerful we, the students, are and in turn how powerful it is to take a stand for what you know is right. It has been a realization that is equal parts frightening, empowering, and groundbreaking. Being a part of social justice work comes with the awareness that the struggle always continues. While the ultimate goal is to eradicate oppressive systems and make permanent change, there is an underlying awareness that all activists foster that being involved in the work and furthering the movement is as close to achieving the ultimate goal that they will experience in their tenure in the trenches. There is a subtle emphasis on accepting the fact that you can only make things better, but not necessarily radically change them. This mindset is to aid in ensuring that those involved in the work do not get discouraged at being a part of the process and not seeing the instant results that they desire. However, it also fosters complacency and an unconscious disbelief that true change is even within grasp; the Sisyphus of all activist work. The effective student protests that have been happening across the country helped remind me that the goal is in reach. We can win. Their victories are what have spurred the victories in the same fight on different campuses. As the Negro spiritual says, you must wade into the water while it is troubled. The time for change on our college campuses is now. We had no choice but to engage it head-on.

It is within my organizer space that I have learned how crucial it is to recognize that the direct action methods with which we intend to make change is as important as recognizing the issues and that change needs to occur. Even in the midst of being around those who would see themselves as change agents, there can be negative discourse surrounding the methods and the focus of the movement at hand.

Every social movement, it is not something that one can completely understand or know how to handle until they are faced in that moment with the movement and their co-organizers. As a young activist it has raised many personal questions for me. Is there a wrong way to organize? Can two different methods combined help elevate the debate or distract from the greater goals? These are questions to which I am eager to continue my quest to find answers.

Through my activism work I have been able to find myself. I have begun to understand what it means to be a part of something that is greater than myself. I have found my voice. And even when it shakes, even when it does not have all the answers, I know that it is still important to speak. To show up with a heart and mind that is ready to listen, learn, understand, and move towards effective change that will create a better opportunity for the entire community.

We, the organizers, are continuing the work that has been started. Our goal is to create an inclusive space where all who wish to be involved in this process can do so. It is our hope that many will. Together we can. Together we will.
Black Activism Matters: Breaking Down The Racial Oppression of Predominantly White Institutions

In November 18, 2015 at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign the Illini White Student Union was formed on Facebook in response to a Black solidarity rally that an organization that I am a part of, Black Students for Revolution, organized. The rally was meant to show solidarity with Black students across the country as well as bring Black students together on campus as a student collective to organize and plan our movement. Although the rally was a success, it created anticipated pushback from White students who saw the rally as a threat to their hierarchy on campus. The group claimed their mission was to monitor Black students that have proven to be anti-White. The people who created the White student union Facebook page publicly asked its followers to submit photos of Black students that attended the solidarity rally. The Illini White Student Union used the same tactics that the Ku Klux Klan historically used to terrorize Blacks and other people of color. Allow me to be very clear about this matter, I denounce the group and recognize it for what it truly is, a White supremacist hate group.

On November 18, 2015 at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign the Illini White Student Union was formed on Facebook in response to a Black solidarity rally that an organization that I am a part of, Black Students for Revolution, organized. The rally was meant to show solidarity with Black students across the country as well as bring Black students together on campus as a student collective to organize and plan our movement. Although the rally was a success, it created anticipated pushback from White students who saw the rally as a threat to their hierarchy on campus. The group claimed their mission was to monitor Black students that have proven to be anti-White. The people who created the White student union Facebook page publicly asked its followers to submit photos of Black students that attended the solidarity rally. The Illini White Student Union used the same tactics that the Ku Klux Klan historically used to terrorize Blacks and other people of color. Allow me to be very clear about this matter, I denounce the group and recognize it for what it truly is, a White supremacist hate group. In the year 2015 there is an open White supremacist group on an American college campus. I, as a Black graduate student, was not alone in acknowledging the group for what it truly was. The Black students that were aware of the creation of the Facebook page also recognized the potential safety concern for all Black students at the university. Because of the very real threat that this White supremacist group presented to each and every Black student on campus, I was interested to see how the administration would handle the situation. Several campus wide emails were sent out in which university administrators spoke about the incident stating, “we recognize the right to free speech” and “we encourage you to exercise that right when you see examples of racism, discrimination or intimidation on our campus.” Although the email did mention that the university administration reported the group to Facebook and the page was flagged and pulled down, the email overall was worded in a manner that failed to denounce the White supremacist group or mention any repercussions for its students who intended to intimidate Black students. The university administration once again sided with White students who felt “uncomfortable” with Black students protesting at a public venue for radical change and the way we are treated at these institutions. The university once again turned its back on Black undergraduate and graduate students that came together to not simply ask for but demand change on our campus.

This is the current reality for myself and many other Black students around the country. Historically, Black students have been marginalized at predominantly White institutions and have for far too long been isolated, alienated, and made to feel as if we are not a part of the university. However, this year movements across the country have begun to sprout from Missouri and Harvard to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. These movements are led by courageous Black student activists who have grown weary of the status quo and have begun to dismantle years of uncondemned administrators, micro aggressions, and White supremacy that play a part of the collective marginalization of Black students at White institutions. Black students, historically, have been at the forefront fighting for Black rights, and that trend continues today. I stand in solidarity with all movements that attempt to radically remove White supremacy and the oppression of all people of color as well as LGBTQ. As a Black activist-scholar I support and encourage my Black brothers and sisters, because now, more than ever, Black students’ lives matter.

“It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.”

- Assata Shakur
The “Free-Speech” Paradox: The Threat to Effective Student Protest

Miranda Houchins
Undergraduate Student, George Washington University

Through the power of the Black student athlete, students at the University of Missouri recently triumphed in pressuring their President and Chancellor to step down. Student success like this is a rarity only made possible by a student faction that shapes the status of the institution (the highly-supported football team). More than 60 years after Brown v Board of Education, we continue to live in a desegregated, not integrated school system. This inequality transpires to race relation issues within America’s higher education system. College, a so-called “great equalizer,” in many ways still promotes White hegemony. Without a position of power to influence university status, minority student protests often become a peripheral experience to maintain the White status quo within the bureaucracy of education.

For some individuals, White privilege works to legitimize fabricated dangers such as “the threat to free-speech” as a way to uphold a reputation as a good fighter to the national treasure of freedom of speech, the intent of the alleged protector is overlooked. Instead of exercising free speech to call for institutional reform, many frame recent protests as attackers of freedom of speech (Manne & Stanley, 2015). In this regard, historically oppressed people are yet again met with the political analogue of stonewalling, a paradox of propaganda. However, it is important to note the notion of free-speech does not protect the right to hate speech, which is often the underlying element many want to protect. With the exception of outliers, the innate “threat” that recent minority protests pose is the threat to take away the right to White privilege.

The student voice is rarely embodied by the defendant who challenges institutional praxis. If it does, it is subordinated to cultural belittling. When oppressed peoples speak up and challenge those in power — their right to speak may be permitted, yet their magnitude of knowledge is challenged due to institutionalized prejudice. For this reason, I’ve seen peers disregard dissenting voices as a minority of troublemakers, not as co-creators responsible for bettering an academic community. The way in which protestors express themselves become the focus of news coverage with the help of the stereotypical frame of angry black woman or man. Under these standards, people are forced to raise their voices in order to be discernible; but because of the “tone” of their speech all that is heard is a cacophony of disruption.

Claude Steele suggests the presence of “a self-system that explains ourselves, and the world at large, to ourselves. The purpose of these constant explanations (and rationalizations) is to maintain a phenomenal experience of the self — self-conceptions and images — as adaptively and morally adequate — that is, as competent, good, unitary, stable” (Steele, 1999, p. 373). Under this psychology of self-defense, White students and faculty would be considered members under the umbrella of White privilege. Since the group has benefited from practices of exclusion, and has (perhaps unintentionally) preserved “White entitlement,” members will experience a serious disruption of their sense of self when confronted by their own injustice (Manne & Stanley, 2015).

As a White student at The George Washington University, who has only been taught by White professors, I have seen the “free-speech” of student protest used as a medium to belittle both a movement and a people. Although I must give credit to the university’s well-written response about “The GW White Student Union” Facebook page and the overwhelming social media support for Mizzou from students, the best example comes in a less-canned setting. During the recent democratic debates, a high ranking GW staffer liveweeted “How many say Both!?! #BlackLivesMatter” to this tweet my intent was to ask whether candidates would say BLM, ALM or Both.” Many felt by even posing that #alllivesmatter, the staffer invalidated all black GW students fighting for their equality. Black Lives Matter protestors have been targets by White supremacists at their own events and in “White-spaces” such as a recent Donald Trump rally. For that reason, a simple slip-up (even if it may have been innocent) raises the accusations of “dog whistling” against equality because the question does, in fact, work to belittle Black student activism on campus.

As the drought of diversity within America’s K-12 education system dwindles, stereotypical coverage of protests (and lack there of) works to extinguish the fire of student equity from spreading further. The occasional narrative I am exposed to by affluent peers (from all races) is that the Black Lives Matter movement is “shouting and complaining about nothing.” Once a perceived reality becomes endangered, racism imbedded innocently as a child reveals its ugly face. The fact that the movement has helped to create hundreds of non-profits and organizing groups is left out of the news’ narrative ultimately demotes the movement’s legitimacy.

The collective agency of students has changed history — but I worry that the emerging narrative of student protestors is diminishing the likelihood that students will utilize protest as a force of change in the future. Through the debated enigma surrounding the “protection of free-speech,” we cannot allow prestigious universities to fall back into their history of White supremacy. It’s important to remember a school desegregation law came only to fruition once the Court decided a diverse educational experience would benefit Whites too. Without distancing the protection of White privilege from the “protection of free-speech,” we will continue to abet our country’s living history of suppression.

I ask you to question the “ally” paradigm that often surfaces when a student supports a movement that they are not personally connected to. Whether it is a race issue or reproductive right’s issue, this sort of language implies that you (as a White person, for example) are merely outside helpers, rather than stakeholders, and I just don’t see that as a reasonable depiction of reality. As Matt McGorry says “We can’t pretend we live in a world where everything is even close to equal.” I will never know the struggle that a person of color faces, but I do know that I don’t want to live in a society where justice is rationed. The stakes are too high for me, regardless of the skin color I inhabit.
What does it mean for us to move forward?:

Combating Marginality and Institutional Racism

Karyn Dyer
Graduate Student, Syracuse University

What does it mean for us to move forward?
That is the question as I continue to process my current feelings on the role of racism in higher education. White supremacy is constantly at work and continues to oppress Black people and other non-Black people of color. Higher education professionals and those who are learning more about this field need to be aware of how White supremacy is being upheld in higher education. It is often in spite of trying to be more "inclusive" and more "diverse." It is frustrating to implement cultural and racial diversity trainings while many institutions continue to look the same and continue to disregard and isolate students of color. Black students still feel like they are putting in more time, energy, and finances into their education just to be ignored and isolated.

Moreover, there are faculty and staff of color who these students turn to in those times of institutional oppression, who receive little to no support from the institution. These people have multiple identities and have different roles other than the roles institutions pay them to fulfill. As I think about my current journey in becoming a student affairs professional, I realize that many of the professionals of color were in the same shoes and entered the field to be those agents of change. It is a very difficult journey because while undergraduate students have to deal with these issues, graduate students of color are caught in between dealing with those issues, learning about the field, and their current roles as interns, graduate assistants, or full-time/part-time employees.

What does it mean for us to move forward? It means more representation in the student population of Black and non-Black people of color. It means that administrators need to do more than changing mission and vision statements and dialogue programs. Racial justice does not come from apologies and powerful words. It comes with taking action and understanding that those actions may come with White people and others feeling uncomfortable.

What does it mean for us to move forward? It means that we are going to feel uncomfortable for a really long time as we try to change societal perspectives, values and views, and that is okay. We have been on the wrong side of justice for so long that activism is considered wrong. We should not be condemning students, faculty, and staff who are sacriﬁcing their academics, their physical and mental wellbeing to ensure that the future students of color do not have to experience institutional racism any further.

For me, if I cannot leave a direct impact on a student or a colleague, I need to be brave. I need to raise my voice in all ways possible and not feel guilty for wanting better for myself, my students, and my colleagues. I need to express my frustration and my anger in different ways. This reflection cannot be the only way that people know what I stand for and what I truly want to do to change the institutional systems.

To the Black students and non-Black students at the University of Missouri, Yale University, Occidental College, and other institutions with problematic systems in place, I will never stop thinking of you all as I continue to pursue higher education. I encourage all Black students and other students of color to continue to speak up, organize, and act in the name of racial justice in higher education. I encourage you all to hold these institutions accountable for what they say that they believe in and strive for. You all represent what it means to move forward.
As a Black woman in higher education, my presence is my protest.

I believe in the power of education to increase one’s social mobility and ability to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. Currently, access to higher education is limited and remains out of reach for some students. The disparaging underrepresentation of students of color in higher education continues to be an issue facing this nation. Unfortunately, the Black community is delving into a debate over whether or not our Black students should only go to Black schools and explore my Black identity. I did not want to go to an HBCU and find out that I was still not Black enough. I knew that if something went wrong, if my Black peers didn’t accept me, if it turned out that I wasn’t Black “enough” I knew I could make friends somewhere else. I’d done it before. But where would I go if the Black kids at the all-Black school decided I wasn’t good enough, Black enough, cool enough, down enough?

As I work, my presence is my protest.

My PWI gave me a space to surround myself with Black students and explore my Black identity. I did not want to go to an HBCU and find out that I was still not Black enough. I knew that if something went wrong, if my Black peers didn’t accept me, if it turned out that I wasn’t Black “enough” I knew I could make friends somewhere else. I’d done it before. But where would I go if the Black kids at the all-Black school decided I wasn’t good enough, Black enough, cool enough, down enough?

As I write, my presence is my protest.

As a Black woman, despite the barriers and limitations society tries to place on me, I am privileged. I proudly hold two degrees from two different PWIs and I am working on a terminal degree from a third. I refuse to allow myself, or anyone else, to be limited in their achievements because of who they are. I stand as one example of a student of color that succeeded, and is succeeding, in an environment that society is trying to tell me is not for me. But I’m fighting back. I am changing the conversation. Yes, I’m tired of being a token, an exception, or a novelty because of my race and gender. But, if I don’t fight to make a change and make it better for the next generation, then who will? Why not me? Maybe I will always be one of few instead of one of the many, but my students don’t have to be. My future colleagues don’t have to be. Others fought for me, and so now, I fight for those who are to come. I will not be shut down. I will not retreat. I will not back down.

As I rise, my presence is my protest.
Dear Officer Bogash:

Policing Black Bodies on College Campuses

Jordan S. West
Doctoral Student, Syracuse University

Do you remember November 13, 2005? I am almost scared that you don’t and that this day had no impact on you personally and professionally. Although this may have been another day for you as a College Park police officer, this day altered my life. What seemingly began as a fun evening on November 12, 2005, surely ended as a horrible morning on November 13, 2005. As you think back and try really hard to remember what could have happened on November 13, 2005, I will begin to fill in some details.

Several friends gathered on the evening of November 12, 2005 in New Leonardtown Apartments and out of fear, engravement of fear of Black and brown bodies, a staff member called the police and you arrived. I can situate myself thinking back to this moment. You called the police and you arrived. I can situate myself asking over and over again, what is the hope for brown and black bodies?

I knew very quickly that my anger, rage, and pain needed to translate into action. I knew no one inside the apartment that night did anything wrong and that I needed to make things better. I recognized that I had some power, which today I would identify as privilege and power. I did not fit the “image” of those you criminalize on a daily basis and I knew I had status as a student leader on the university’s campus. Within hours, I had plans to take you down. From ongoing meetings with leadership to protests on campus, I refused to sleep until you faced consequences that could honestly never amount to those that the two Black bodies you beat would face for the rest of their lives.

You are responsible. Officer Bogash, you are Darren Wilson, Daniel Panteleli, Johannes Mehserle, and the list goes on.

Do you see how this all ties together and creates a system where Black and brown bodies are constantly fighting with the odds against them in everyday situations? Let’s take a few minutes to understand this cycle you failed to interrupt on November 13, 2005. Your treatment of Black bodies, without warrant, led to the arrest of two college students on university property. The arrest led to news coverage by both the campus paper and the local news. The coverage led to multiple pictures throughout the media, intentionally depicting these Black bodies as criminals from the different angles captured. The multiple pictures led to articles with language that only further oppressed and reinforced the idea that Black bodies are criminals. The language used in these articles spread throughout the campus and surrounding community, leading to continued mistreatment by police on these Black bodies and other Black bodies because of course all Black bodies are the same. This continued mistreatment by police led to campus outrage by students of color and fueled dialogues in classrooms. This spread of dialogue within classroom settings was upheld and led by students of color, only furthering the obligation for students of color to be the educators of White people and being vulnerable for the education of White people. Does all of this make sense?

The United States created this really simple system years ago, before we existed, that unfolds each day in ways that oppress individuals who look black and brown. In the realm of education, there is often discourse around people “trying harder” and the assumption that doing that alone will “equal the playing field.” If the system is intentionally designed to keep Black and brown bodies separate and valued less than White people, I don’t know how much hard work matters. On a daily basis, Black and brown bodies are sent messages by police, educators, and society as a whole that tell them how they should be and when these performances of Black and brown bodies go against the expectations placed upon them, they pose a threat.

When educators, ideally like yourself as a police officer, reinforce expectations that Black and brown bodies are bad, instead of dismantling this assumption, you only further the mistreatment of individuals with Black and brown bodies. The messages you sent to the entire campus community on November 13, 2005 when you brutally beat two Black bodies was that Black and brown bodies are bad, less than, and criminal. You had the chance right at that moment to be different and to interrupt, challenge, and go against the expectations of you as a police officer and educator, but you didn’t.

Thanks to you, I found my voice fighting for racial justice. I am an educator and I will ensure that I am never like you. When I think about November 13, 2005 about ten years later, I find you still exist in spaces throughout our country. Your like-minded colleagues are continuing to uphold the system through the killings of Black and brown bodies. The messages you and your colleagues are sending to each and every community are that Black and brown lives do matter. You will forever be the system in my eyes, Officer Bogash. You poisoned my perception of police and have only provided me with the option to be a fearless educator and agitator. Perhaps one day I will be able to tell Black and brown people that there is nothing to be afraid of, but until then I will continue to build my armor because you keep showing me that I need to be prepared for war.

With Urgency,
The Unafraid Educator