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Ally Immersion:

A New Look at Anti-Racist Work

Timothy R. Shiner and Sandra Spiegel

Multicultural centers exist on most predominately white campuses in one form or another as a primary support system and safe space for Students of Color. With an explosion of literature in recent years centering on how white student affairs professionals can be allies in anti-racist work, the question arises, can white staff at such centers be successful in supporting students? The personal experiences of the Director of the African, Latino/a, Asian, Native American (ALANA) Student Center at The University of Vermont and a white graduate student working at the same center provide the backdrop for this discussion.

Authors' note: As we wrote this piece, we found it necessary to, at times, leave our voices in their individual capacities and at other times, found our points to be more compelling when we joined our voices together. This is noted as clearly as possible throughout the article. We have chosen to capitalize "Students of Color" and other related phrases.

Introduction

Over the past decades, in the field of student affairs and many other fields, we have increased our understanding of how racism functions. Especially important is the theory that racism functions partly by leaving the dominant identity unexamined. Many also believe that the quickest and most effective way to create change is through a combined effort by People of Color and White allies. We, the authors, are thus continuing to examine what it means to be White and what it means to be an ally at greater depths. Among the trendsetters in this subject area are Hardiman (1961), McIntosh (1988), Cross, Katz, Miller, and Seashore (1991), and Washington and Evans (1991).

A closer look at this ally development research indicates that Rita Hardiman (1961) began the examination of White identity development with her model of acceptance, resistance, redefinition, and internalization. She envisioned White identity development including levels which were actively anti-racist and challenged her majority readers to envision themselves achieving that behavior. Cross and her associates (1991) offered their readers key concepts, such as distinguishing behavior, discretionary power, and cumulative impact, to help understand their roles as anti-racist allies. Washington and Evans (1991), focusing on gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues, went further in giving their readers concrete behaviors, encouraging self-education, action, and awareness-raising, in an effort to understand allyism and therefore create allies.

Peggy McIntosh wrote the landmark piece on White privilege in 1988. She encouraged a generation of student affairs professionals and educators to examine their own privilege. She tied White privilege directly to racism and encouraged acknowledgement of this privilege. Her work continues to give countless individuals reason to move from anti-prejudice, to a more comprehensive anti-racist world. This view incorporates not only the existence of individual racism, but also "invisible systems conferring racial dominance on [the majority] group from birth" (p. 81). Those who wish to be allies and have not had an opportunity to read these authors are highly encouraged to do so, though an in-depth review of the material is not possible in the scope of this paper.

The long-term goal of all these authors, we believe, is to create a world where equity exists and racism does not. They wish to create a truly multicultural community, one that incorporates, respects, and celebrates the

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differences between us all. Until this end is achieved, it is generally accepted that support services for People of Color are important to the success of those people in the face of individual and institutional racism. On predominately White college campuses across the country, multicultural centers exist to provide this support, to be a safe space, and to create a community for Students of Color. Other “multicultural affairs” offices exist whose primary purpose is to provide educational opportunities for the entire campus community. These offices, while important, are not the focus of this writing. Multicultural centers, throughout this article, will refer to the former definition.

As student affairs professionals focus more on how White individuals can be allies, how to create a truly multicultural community, and how to retain a safe space for Students of Color until all spaces on our campuses are safe, we believe a question naturally arises: What role do White individuals have within these safe spaces? Specifically, do White individuals have a potential role as staff members in multicultural centers? If so, potential benefits include active role modeling for other White individuals in anti-racist work. However, employing a White staff member also runs the risk of violating the safe space. This article uses the experiences of the director of one such multicultural center, the African, Latino/a, Asian, Native American (ALANA) Student Center at The University of Vermont, and a White graduate student working at that center, to explore the role of White individuals in such communities. Particularly, what are the benefits, costs, and challenges both to the Community of Color and to the individual who is working as the only White staff person in such a multicultural center?

Context

In our view, the purpose of the Center and others like it is to provide academic, cultural, and social support to Students of Color; to advocate for Students of Color, and represent their perspectives wherever appropriate. The University of Vermont ALANA Student Center is unusual in that, unlike many college advocacy centers, it supports more than one racial/ethnic group. Because of this, it seems appropriate to us that the staff be representative of the different backgrounds of the students served.

In addition, incoming ALANA students appear to be from increasingly multicultural backgrounds as time goes on. Their families are racially and ethnically mixed, their school experiences are more multicultural and there is an openness and inclusiveness about them that seems different than just a few years ago. Even students whose experiences are more mono-cultural possess an openness to others. Further, they are not about to limit their participation on campus to a multicultural center. They are interested in exploring and taking part in all areas of campus life. They create safe spaces where they live and challenge those who are openly hostile and ignorant; they talk about their experiences and feelings to anyone who will listen. Therefore, as students change and become more culturally diverse, we must reexamine the ways that we, as student affairs administrators support them.

Timothy:

When I was applying for graduate study in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration and the requisite assistantships, I had the opportunity to interview with the ALANA Student Center. Though I greatly enjoyed the experience, and in fact, would have preferenced this position as my top choice, I never actually expected to receive an offer. I knew even then that the ALANA Student Center focused on supporting Students of Color at a predominately White university. I believed, not only that they would prefer to have a Person of Color in the position, but also that they were well justified in their preference.

Sandra:

The interview process was exciting. There were several Students of Color who were interested in the assistantship. They all had impressive résumés. They had all been active at their former institutions doing ally work, creating programs, educating Residence Life staff, and being change agents. The presentation of their resumes was polished and the staff and I were impressed.

There were a few majority students who were also interested in the assistantship. They all said the right things and had some awareness of the inequities that Students of Color deal with on a daily basis. However, one stood above the rest. He presented a very impressive résumé. Not only had he been actively engaged in the usual

activities: resident assistant experience and leadership training; he also had facilitated workshops on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues, served on a Holocaust Awareness committee, facilitated campus-wide groups on gender communication and served on (and led) his college's Multicultural Leadership Retreat. His advocacy/ally work supported women, People of Color, and those with religious beliefs outside the mainstream. His grade point average was high and it was clear that this was an exceptional student and person.

Timothy:

I was greatly conflicted about the position as I waited to hear. Though, as a White person, I had developed an understanding of many social justice and anti-racist issues and actively worked with many causes, who was I to presume that I understood the day-to-day experiences of these students? Should a negative, racially motivated incident occur, what student would want to come to me for support? For that matter, what student would want to come to me for support in any circumstance? Isn't being in a place with others who understand one's experiences to a greater degree without explanation the very reason students go to such a center?

Sandra:

While I openly valued working with a diverse staff, there had recently been some changes and there was no majority person working with us at the time. The staff was very impressed with several of the applicants and was able to create a list of four students that they felt would be good colleagues. It was much more difficult to arrange the list in terms of first through third choices. Timothy's name was on that short list. We were wealthy with choices.

As we sought a final ranking, I asked the staff which person would push them the most to learn and grow. The answer was unanimous. We were all clear that given his previous experience, his knowledge of ally models and student development, his clear commitment to social justice issues, and his clarity about his own privilege, that we would learn the most from working with Timothy. We decided his experience would be an amazing addition to the collective skills of the group.

Timothy:

I continued to ask my questions while I waited. When the call came offering me the position, I was quite surprised, but eager to give my best efforts to the job. Over the year and a half since my hiring, I have learned a great deal and must admit that many of my questions have not been laid to rest. However, I have come to see that there is rarely a clear cut answer to any of the questions which originally troubled me.

Benefits

Among the greatest benefits of Timothy's placement in the ALANA Student Center has been, we believe, an increase in undergraduate White student involvement as allies in the community. Though these students have always been present, the placement of a White staff person in the center validated that these students did, in fact, have a place in the community when they came to it with honest questions and a desire to join rather than simply visit the community.

Timothy:

Though the full-time staff of the ALANA Student Center are likely more knowledgeable in presenting on the issues surrounding allyism, due to their personal and professional experience, I find that, presumably due to my age and race, I am more likely to be asked to present to majority students. A faculty or staff member may turn first to the full-time staff, but student organization leaders and resident assistants usually come to me. They, like their group members or floor residents, are more likely to listen to me. I have the privilege of being outspoken, demanding, even angry, without being seen as "the angry Black man or woman," speaking "only for my personal interests." In essence, I have the privilege of being heard. The benefit of being White and asked to speak on these subjects (because of my position at the center) is undeniable and I believe that I have a responsibility to use this privilege.

Sandra:

If we recognize that members of the majority group have what Ralph Ellison (1999) described as a more "acceptable mask" in our society and have more opportunity to speak, then we need to also recognize that we

have power in our majority allies when we give them permission “to speak for our condition from inside [that] only acceptable mask” (Ellison, p. 271). Injustice affects us all and we should use our mask of privilege to advocate for those without that privilege in a given identity. By employing a White staff member, the urgent need for underrepresented groups to have knowledgeable allies has been lessened. There is now a role model for undergraduates who care about multicultural issues and are in the early stages of ally development.

Sandra and Timothy:

We believe that immersion in a Community of Color is undeniably the best way for a White person to understand other cultures and the inequity of privilege that exists. This understanding is vital to becoming a strong ally and immersion affects the transition in two ways. First, the White person begins to understand what it is like to be a minority because they are, in essence, the minority in that setting. Secondly, by surrounding her or himself with the community, they experience it more fully and begin to understand cultural differences beyond the heroes, food, fashion, and holidays perspective. Without immersion, it is difficult for a majority person to move beyond a superficial understanding of basic differences.

Therefore, encouraging White students to be a part of the community, not just an occasional visitor is vital to creating allies. Not only is this beneficial to the White student, but Students of Color, we believe, are far more likely to rely on the support of White allies who come to the Community of Color, rather than offer them a place in the White community. An ally who says, “if you ever need anything feel free to come and ask” may be sincere, but is far less effective than the ally who says, “if you ever need anything, I am right here, with you both physically and metaphorically.” These benefits have certainly been true for Timothy, as he has become immersed in the UVM ALANA community.

Finally, we believe that having the majority perspective present is beneficial in and of itself. It provides a fuller overall perspective, one which more closely reaches our ideal of a truly multicultural community. As mentioned above, this truly multicultural community would be one with the presence of equity and the absence of racism. In this community, each voice would add to the collective to create a fuller perspective, without overshadowing other voices.

Concerns, Costs, and Challenges

Timothy:

My initial questions about my position at the ALANA Student Center remain, to a great degree, today. I still wonder, when a racially-motivated incident occurs, if a student will be comfortable coming to me for support. I do believe they will be more comfortable because of the relationships I have developed and the behaviors I have exhibited. However, they still might prefer to speak with a Person of Color and there is one less in this center because I am here. Even if a major incident does not occur, aren't there times when one becomes so tired of dealing with this system that all they want to do is go to a place where people understand without explanation? These costs are, at least, difficult to assess until they arise. The ease and brevity it takes to write these questions down does not do justice to their complexity. However, the primary costs may lie in the challenges below, if unmet.

The challenges which met me in this position were many and often seemed to take the form of an irresolvable paradox. It became apparent to me early on that, like McIntosh (1988) suggested, I had to constantly reexamine my own White identity to be effective in understanding students. What was I assuming about the students based on my own identity? How did I treat them differently than White students? When were these different treatments valid and when were they simply stereotypes? The challenge was examining my own identity while not focusing on myself.

Sandra and Timothy:

The greatest challenge in this position, we believe, relates to the benefits of immersion discussed above as well as this examination of the staff member's White identity. Though a White staff person will learn much from immersion, she or he must constantly remind her or himself that as soon as they step outside the multicultural center's door, she or he is once again in the majority and that is a privilege which ALANA students do not possess. White allies' understanding of the experiences of Students of Color will always be limited. The White

staff person must also be cognizant not to focus on self-learning while continuing to grow. Continued development is vital to success in the position at the center, but anytime he or she puts self-learning above the needs of the students, he or she is taking away primacy from one of few places on campus in which those students' experiences are not secondary. The staff person can thus be, arguably, contributing to the problem of marginalization. This is a constant danger, though not an insurmountable one.

In addition, the White staff person will likely be constantly challenged in her or his credibility. It is a frequently heard observation that one of the largest difficulties for professionals in student affairs is that each year a new set of students arrives and we must start from scratch in many areas. For White staff working at multicultural centers, the primary way this difficulty arises relates to the concept of distinguishing behavior. Cross, et al. (1991) describe distinguishing behavior as that behavior which differentiates a majority ally from other majority group members.

Timothy:

In essence, I must constantly be working, in good situations and bad ones, to show that I am not just another White person. I must distinguish myself from others who do not think about the experiences of People of Color or work to end injustice. Green (2002) writes of her own child, "[White teachers] had instilled in him a distrust of White people that became his initial reaction to anyone he did not already know" (p. 30). This sentiment is prevalent and justifiable in Communities of Color and I believe it is my responsibility to earn their trust, not their responsibility to give me the benefit of the doubt.

Sandra and Timothy:

We believe it is important to note that behavior can be distinguished both through role modeling anti-racist behavior and through a demonstrated commitment to other social justice issues. Students today are savvy in many ways and the Student of Color often realizes that racism is not unlike sexism, homophobia and other forms of oppression.

Sandra:

Once hired, Timothy volunteered to collaborate with the other departments in the Diversity and Equity Unit, which includes the Women's Center, LGBTQ&A Services, and the Center for Cultural Pluralism. I was no longer the one on the staff with the most knowledge of Judaism or Paganism. As students became aware of Timothy's involvement outside the center, I believe it positively impacted their trust level.

Sandra and Timothy:

The flip side of the distinguishing behavior challenge is that students are likely to test a White staff member more than a Person of Color until behavior has been distinguished. This testing behavior has been highly present in our experience. Students asked both pointed and subtle questions about Timothy's employment at the beginning of his term. One of the most pointed examples came during the first ALANA Community Meeting of the year, a meeting which the graduate assistant has traditionally facilitated.

Sandra:

I began the 2001 academic year feeling protective of Timothy and not wanting him to be slighted in any way. I knew that the students would test him, want to know if he was genuine and could be trusted. Would he understand the slang? Would he accept them and not be critical? Did he "get it" in terms of subtle racism and understand their experience somewhat? At the first ALANA community meeting when Timothy was facilitating, the students were quite rowdy, challenging Timothy to keep the meeting in order and, for lack of a better term, sparring with him somewhat. I felt as though I should intervene and I interrupted him and took on the facilitation. The next day he informed me that he could take care of himself and that he was more than capable of handling the testing that the students might attempt.

Timothy:

In fact, I felt that this testing was only an appropriate trial I should undergo in order to earn the students' trust. This was their safe space and they had a right to screen those within it to be sure they were there for non-selfish reasons.

Sandra and Timothy:

The White staff person's manner of being a community member inherently relates to another challenge. The White staff person, respectful of the purpose of the multicultural center, needs to understand her or his position as a "guest" in the advocacy center. There are times when he or she will need to be absent from gatherings and conversations, allowing the voices of the Community of Color to be the only voices.

The final challenge we wish to discuss involves those times when the White staff member may feel most accepted and most worthy of being in her or his position.

Timothy:

There have undoubtedly been times when I truly felt part of the community. At these times, I have felt a dangerous pride. I have become a part of the community, I have distinguished myself from other majority persons. If I do not check this train of thought, it is easy for me to begin to think I am better than most majority people. It is easy for me to begin to expect gratitude for the work I do from those in the community. This sort of liberal pride instantly distances me from the Students of Color and prevents potential White allies from seeing me as a role model.

Sandra and Timothy:

Humility is key and the ally must challenge her or himself to always remember that no gratitude should be expected. Allyism is not a gift to People of Color, rather it is a moral responsibility as a person born to some unearned privileges who is committed to anti-racist work. This is not to say that students and fellow staff do not show their gratitude, one simply must remember that what is being done is what we hope someday will be normal, unremarkable behavior for all White people and that gratitude must not become a condition for the work.

Conclusion

Sandra:

If I were again asked if I thought that a majority person could serve as an advocate for ALANA students in an advocacy center, I would respond that the right person could be very good at it. The attributes of said person would include a demonstrated commitment to social justice issues, an awareness of their own privilege, an awareness of their own ally development, familiarity with Whiteness as an identity, and, most of all, a comfort level with their own self which allows for comfort with others. Finally, they must have the ability to articulate why they choose to do this work and why it is important for White individuals to do anti-racist work.

I don't think the questions regarding the role of White staff will go away. I continue to keep my ear to the ground listening for sounds of community discontent. One person brought many of the "right" attributes. However, this does not make me take it for granted that everyone can do that. Also, if the campus climate should change, it would be imperative that I reexamine my thoughts regarding this issue.

Timothy:

In the end, I believe that White staff at multicultural centers have the potential to create much needed change. The benefits outweigh the costs if the person is willing to be humble, to constantly examine her or his own perspective, to put the needs of the community before her or his own, and to expend energy on the challenges discussed above. It may be impossible for a White person to work within these constraints at all times. I have certainly not been perfect in my time at the ALANA Student Center. However, if we want to create a truly multicultural community on our campuses and in the world we must begin to role model such communities.

Sandra and Timothy:

This is, of course, only one story and one which has been largely successful. However, the literature of student affairs and related fields has little in the way of such experiences. Multicultural centers that have employed White individuals in work study, graduate, and full-time professional positions, could contribute much to our understanding of allyism. In addition, those centers that have consciously chosen not to employ White individuals have much to contribute. Further writing from those with related experiences is highly encouraged.

White allies, who wish to commit to this type of work, should not be afraid to apply for such positions, though they should not, we believe, ever begrudge such a center that chooses to hire a Person of Color. We cannot know the situation and needs of students until we are immersed in the communities they create and therefore cannot expect such positions even if we see ourselves as qualified. This logic lays some responsibility on those who make hiring decisions to examine their communities and ask if the benefits will outweigh potential costs in their own situations. This is a question which will need to be constantly examined. However, if a fit between a White applicant and a Community of Color exists, the benefits can be profound and deep for all involved, despite the risks and challenges. We have the opportunity to role model a respectful community that is supportive across difference, in which majority individuals are committed to equity, and in which we establish a common ground vital to the future of the Academy and the world.

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