2021

Reimagining an Antiracist Career Center Based on the Professional Identity Development Model for Black Students and Students of Color

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In this paper, I will start by articulating my audience and positionality in order to ground where I enter this scholarly conversation on the topic of Black student engagement with career services in the college context. I will then examine the ways professional standards have largely been exclusionary for Black students and students of color. Next, I'll offer my own professional identity development framework for students with minoritized racial identities. Finally, I will conclude my paper with a list of demands for the change agents who are well-positioned to define professionalism at colleges and universities: The National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE), professionals in offices of career services, employers, and future researchers.

Keywords: antiracist, anti-Black, professionalism, career services, Black, professional identity development

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I am who my ancestors fought for. I am who they dreamed we could become. I am a young, Black, queer boy with so much life to live and so many things left to do. I am JAKE Small (he/him), a proud scholar-practitioner with something amazing to say!

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Dedication

This article is dedicated to Black students and students of color (SOC) who bravely persevere through college contexts that were never designed to serve them. You are the capable and magnificent future leaders who are paving a path for countless young people of color to come. I salute your courage and proudly stand with you as a Black scholar-practitioner hoping to give voice to our struggles as a community and highlight our unique and individual experiences. Although this paper is dedicated to Black students and SOC, I hope it may reach a broader audience of change agents inside and outside of the field of higher education.

Positionality Statement

I am called to acknowledge that this paper is being authored and will be published during numerous and compounding social justice crises in our nation. Firstly, the Black Lives Matter racial justice revolution founded by Patrisse Cullor, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi has reached a new level of national and global recognition. The Black Lives Matter movement serves to secure a more equitable and just life for Black global citizens and is in response to a national and global disregard for Black lives and Black bodies. Secondly, our world is amidst a violent fight against the most formidable modern-day pandemic. The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has taken millions of lives and drastically altered the way we exist inside and outside of educational contexts. Of the lives lost, socioeconomically disadvantaged folks are among the most severely impacted. Thirdly, the insurrection on the US Capitol that took place on Wednesday, January 6th, 2021 further highlights the need for deep healing and restoration in our nation. The riot, which is being called a failed coup, was motivated by the white nationalist ideals of our 45th United States president.

As educators, our work both reflects and is reflected by the socio-cultural contexts at play around us. We affect and are affected by the national and global landscapes we exist in. My professional philosophy leverages critical theory and transformative justice to positively impact my work and the communities I serve. I respond to the social justice crises of our nation and world with a dynamic approach. Grounded in equity and social justice, my professional focus on antiracism work supplements my lived experiences as I strive towards uplifting transformative and innovative cultural practices. I operate with a praxis of love and liberation to decenter oppressive organizational ways of being, knowing, and existing. My

educational experiences have foregrounded restorative practices as a way to inspire intercultural competence and establish commitment to social justice. My greatest skill is my ability to orchestrate opportunity by building strategic partnerships and mobilizing individuals to act collaboratively. I am a transformational leader with an eagerness to pioneer culturally responsive practices while leveraging community. It is a privilege to critique the racist practices of colleges and universities especially when we, as Black intellectuals and Black scholars, are minoritized, marginalized, and over-policed continuously. It is a privilege to contribute to scholarship at a time when many folks are simply trying their best to stay alive.

I am a Black student and graduate career counselor at a predominately white-serving institution. I operate first-hand from within the very professional landscape I intend to reimagine. The mere act of reimagining an antiracist career center is one of self-preservation. This paper represents my own therapeutic healing as well as scholarly activism. I intend both to call out racist practices as well as offer new ways of operating that affirm students who have been historically compromised, harmed, or traumatized. Naming my personal, social, and professional identities allows me to continue from a place of power, love, and liberation. I fear not the ways authoring this work may impact my academic, professional, or relational standing but instead am inspired by the ways this scholarship may ease and affirm the existence of other Black professionals and professionals of color.

Defining of Terms

Systems, practices, and beliefs that do not resist oppression abet its perpetuation. Professionalism, as a structural set of practices, behaviors, and beliefs, abets the perpetuation of oppression in all professional communities (Borgen, 2005). To comprehensively understand the ways professional standards exclude and marginalize Black students and SOC, professionalism itself must be examined and understood. To achieve that end, we look to the NACE. As an organization, NACE serves as the "primary resource for those working with the college-educated seeking employment" (NACE website, 2020). NACE curates scholarship, develops policies and practices, revises systems, maintains partnerships, and generates revenue all with the goal of bridging the efforts and interests of colleges, college students, and employers.

In 2004, NACE appointed a task force to review and revise the publication titled "The Professional Standards for College and University Career Services" and the workbook that accompanied it. The 2006 edition of the standards and workbook were approved by the NACE Board of Directors before publication was completed. At that time, the NACE Board made a formal decision to incorporate a regular review and revision process to update the standards and workbook every two-to-three years. This review process was put in place to ensure NACE members were

being served with the latest and most cutting-edge resources. This document is made free to access by all and exists to "provide the profession with a foundation on which to ensure excellence" (NACE website, 2020). The following represents my findings after completing a comparative change analysis between the 2014 and 2019 editions of the NACE professional standards document. In my review, I highlight findings organized into various thematic groupings.

No Significant Change/Revision

Although the time between 2014 and 2019 represented some of the greatest global traction for racial justice, the NACE professional standards document was largely unchanged and unreflective of progressive ideals. There are no significant realignments towards addressing anti- Black racism or the pervasiveness of white supremacy culture in the field of career services. Professionalism is a direct symptom of white supremacy culture and the work of career services is to open transformative dialogue around this pertinent topic. NACE could have used this guiding and instructive document to uplift the traumatic racialized experiences of professionals of color; however, NACE chose to publish an unchanged document with few edits, revisions, or updates.

For example, there was no significant change or revision to the 2019 edition of the Application of Professional Standards in Career Services section of the introduction. Instead of introducing the newest edition of this document by grounding readers in relevant context, the section is largely a word-for-word reproduction of the 2014 edition. Additionally, the Organization, Management, and Leadership section of the document is unchanged and has no mention of the racial disparities in professional leadership positions. I highlight these sections because each of the topical areas could easily realign to serve an anti-racist agenda. NACE is uniquely positioned to urge colleges and employers to reevaluated the way they lead and manage offices of career services. Lastly, there was no significant change or revision between 2014 and 2019 in the Financial Resources section of the document. Although much of the final publication was unchanged, unrevised, and unedited, failure to realign NACE with the urgent needs of anti- racist activism in these named sections demonstrates an ignorance that favors oppression and the continuation of racism.

Most notably, I assert that there is no significant change or revision of the NACE-defined mission of career services. With each publication, NACE is able to influence the way student affairs professionals in career services define their relationship with their work. Amidst a national and global racial revolution, NACE publication reviewers ignored the ways professionalism contributes to white supremacy culture. The revision process was an opportunity to foreground racial justice and begin to effect change on the front of social awareness and accountability.

"Diversity" as a Buzzword

Throughout the 2019 publication of The Professional Standards for College and University Career Services, the term "diversity" is used in a shallow and superficial manner that fails to accomplish the depth of urgency around tending to racial injustice. Rather than acknowledging the historic and current failures of professional communities to uplift BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) professionals and students, this publication uses "diversity" as a buzzword. The buzzwording of "diversity" dilutes its meaning and relevance.

For example, in the Access, Diversity, Equity, And Inclusion section of the 2019 publication, reviewers included the following: "Career services should recruit, hire, and retain a diverse staff" (p. 47). Companies and organizations often conflate using the word "diversity" with supporting racial justice. However, diversity does nothing to tend to racial injustices because of how vague the word can be interpreted. A diverse staff can be achieved by employing folks with different academic backgrounds, areas of expertise, pedagogical praxes, etc. In fact, using ambiguous language such as this is dangerous because it gives the false sense of inclusion.

More subversive than not using explicit anti-racist language is the commodification of Blackness represented in the 2019 edition of the document. While completing the comparative change analysis between the 2014 and 2019 NACE publications, the most egregious act of performative allyship happens on the cover page. The 2014 edition of the publication has three white or white-passing individuals represented. The 2019 edition has two individuals: one who I assume to be white or white-passing and the other I assume to be Black. Using a Black face to present as supportive to Black communities is incredibly ignorant and blatantly disrespectful.

Professionalism is Racist

Professionalism is largely reflective of white supremacy culture. Jones and Okun outline the parallels between white supremacy culture and the traditional practices of professional organizations (2001). Perfectionism, sense of urgency, defensiveness, paternalism, and power hoarding make up just some of their observations on the characteristics of white supremacy culture which show up in organizational leadership. All people who have internalized whiteness fear the crumbling of white supremacy culture because they are invested in using white ways of being as a survival tactic, leveraging it for power.

Colleges and universities meet students at a crucial time in their professional identity development. Student affairs professionals must take on the initiative of disrupting the oppressive nature of professionalism (Hoberek, 2002). Much of this work should be done in the ways that offices of career service engage students in

career readiness education rather than professionalism education. This is more than just a matter of semantics. Professionalism education perpetuates and reinstates the rules that keep some folks out (Jaunarajs & McGarry, 2018). Career readiness education encourages students to be critical thinkers and experts of their own experiences (NACE, 2019). There are ways to achieve professional development and advancement without abetting white supremacy culture. The work of unveiling professionalism as an oppressive system will require the collective commitment of the entire academy, all students, as well as employers. The field of student affairs is uniquely positioned to effect cultural changes and reimagine the rules we teach students about professional norms.

Overview of Racial and Cultural Identity Development Model

Professionalism is born out of racism, washed in anti-Blackness, and rooted in oppression. Therefore, professionalism is ill-suited to support professional communities of color. Before I may submit a professional identity development model for Black students and students of color, it is first important to ensure a thorough understanding of Sue and Sue's (2003) racial and cultural identity development model. Sue and Sue's 2003 model comprised five distinct stages which inform the model that I present. Similar to their model, the model that I submit recognizes race as a social construct that impacts social experiences and carries sociopolitical implications. Although race is socially constructed – and can therefore be socially deconstructed – it also synergistically impacts professionalism as a separate yet intertwined social construct.

The five stages of the racial and cultural identity development model represent the nonlinear progression that individuals with non-dominant racial and cultural identities may experience. In the *conformity* stage, individuals internalize aspects of whiteness and develop an affinity with white ways of thinking, being, and existing. In *dissonance*, individuals begin to recognize that their experiences are contrary to the experiences of white peers. In *resistance and immersion*, individuals actively reject white culture and begin to learn about their own culture and cultural group(s). In *introspection*, individuals strive towards a balance between the dominant culture and its ideologies and their own racial heritage. The final stage is called *synergistic articulation and awareness*. This stage is characterized by an individual's deep interrogation of their own knowledge as attributed to various life experiences. An individual in this stage will begin to accept themselves and their racial/ethnic/cultural identities. My professional identity development model for Black students and students of color is informed by the scholarly wisdom that has come before me. While professional identity is developed alongside other salient identities, it presents unique obstacles especially for students with marginalizing racial and cultural identities.

Professional Identity Development Model for Black Students and Students of Color

The professional identity development model for Black students and students of color utilizes a nonlinear progression through five distinct stages. Although the model is applicable to all students of color, it foregrounds Black students in a way that acknowledges the unique history of capitalism in the United States of America which was created to commodify Black bodies in the slave trade. I submit the following model as my attempt to articulate how Black students and students of color experience professionalism.

The first stage of the professional identity development model for Black students and students of color is *adoption*. During this stage, Black professionals and professionals of color begin to learn the rules of professionalism. Professional standards are taught either explicitly or implicitly. During *adoption*, new professionals are figuring out the traditional expectations of an employee. Expectations will include restrictions on attire, language, behavior, as well as guidelines around timeliness, productivity, communication, and overall engagement with work. During this stage, young professionals of color are not yet questioning the ethical or cultural grounding in which these rules exist. Instead, the world of work is seen as something completely separate and distinct from other worlds the individual occupies. A professional of color navigating *adoption* may begin to realize that the rules of professionalism do not reflect them or their cultural practices; however, addressing that dissonance is not yet within their scope of concern.

The second stage of the model is called *achieved assimilation* and is characterized by the individual's realization that the professional world is different from other worlds, made up of different rules, and structured to support folks with dominant racial and cultural identities. To exist in the different worlds, Black professionals and professionals of color may create different lives that contradict one another. Individuals in this stage will perfect the art of code-switching and even develop entire personalities to align with their professional world of work. Rather than abandoning their Blackness or culturally minoritized identities, professionals in this stage will learn to master performing two distinct versions of themselves. The first version is the most authentic and was created as a reflection of the cultural spaces they were raised in. The second version is born out of self-preservation and exists only to safeguard wellness while navigating the whiteness and white supremacy culture embedded in professional ways of being.

The third stage of the model is *dissonance* and closely relates to Sue and Sue's description of dissonance in the 2003 racial and cultural identity development model. During this stage, individuals begin to question why their experiences are not represented in the rules of professionalism. Rather than blind assimilation,
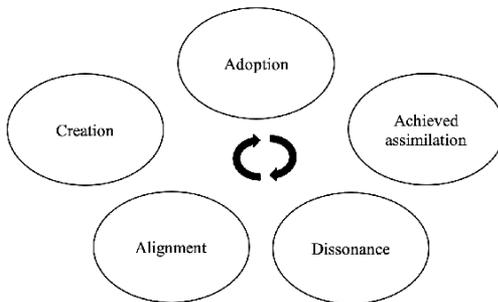
a professional of color in the *dissonance* stage may observe that and even criticize why professional language, attire, and overall behavior feel so closely aligned with Eurocentrism. Individuals in this stage may also begin to realize that white peers have an easier time navigating professional expectations. A professional of color experiencing *dissonance* may compare their racialized experiences to white professionals and question the inequity that inherently exists. During this stage, individuals can expect to become frustrated by not being fully welcomed into worlds of work. Needing to wear a whitewashed version of oneself might become exhausting and even impossible during this stage.

The fourth stage of the model is called *alignment*. Individuals in this stage will begin to experiment with demonstrating their racial and cultural identities at work. Authentic existence may take shape in the clothing, accessories, or hairstyles one wears, foods one eats, or practices one enacts while at work. Although the harsh lines between the world of work and other worlds are beginning to blur, an individual in *alignment* is not yet sharing their cultural practices with others – it is solely for themselves.

The fifth and final stage is called *creation* and is characterized by a Black professional or professional of color's desire to create self-sustaining systems that create structures of safety for other professionals of color in their world of work. Whereas *alignment* is the bringing in of cultural practices to create a comfortable working experience for the individual, *creation* centers community care. An individual in the *creation* stage may prioritize revising recruitment strategies and retention efforts of a company to uplift BIPOC folks and their narratives. It may be of importance for an individual in the *creation* stage to share their personal or cultural practices with their office in order to generate a shared celebration of racial diversity. The *creation* stage is not without its own frustrations. Often times, Black professionals and professionals of color will not be compensated for their additional labor in creating racially affirmative practices or calling out injustice.

Table 1

Professional Identity Development Model for Black Students and Students of Color

Adoption, achieved assimilation, dissonance, alignment, and *creation* represent the five stages of the professional identity development model for Black students and students of color. Professionals of color experience professionalism in unique and difficult ways. I submit this model adapted from the racial and cultural identity development model to help clarify the ways we, as Black professionals, move through worlds of work.

List of Demands

I conclude this paper with a list of demands in the place of a more traditional recommendations section. It is beyond the point for incremental change to serve the needs of my community – professionals of color. The following demands are of the utmost importance and should be made urgent priorities by all relevant parties. I have organized demands by target audiences. The NACE section is a call-to-action for all NACE staff persons, Board members, and leadership teams. The career services section implores the action of career counselors and career services leadership teams. The employer section is with regard to any employer who may recruit college-level talent or employees. And finally, I offer demands to inform and influence further research on the topic of professional identity development for Black students and students of color.

National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)

- NACE, as the guiding professional association, must realign its mission to uplift antiracism and serve as a model for offices of career services in colleges nationwide.
- NACE must find meaningful measures to acknowledge the ways their organizational inaction has led to the harm and exclusion of Black students and students of color.
- NACE must create accountability structures that ensure the regular review of The Professional Standards for College and University Career Services is socioculturally relevant and responds to global and national conversations around racial (in)justice.
- NACE must find lasting and impactful ways to engage conversations of diversity without falling into the absentminded commodification of Black narratives.

Offices of Career Services

- Offices of Career Services must create employer education and intervention mechanisms that amplify the presence of socially just employers and hold all recruiters accountable to racial equity standards.
- Offices of Career Services must maintain employer education programs that

include video modules, online training, in-person training, passive programming, etc. around the relationship between professionalism and implicit biases.
- Offices of Career Services are the primary liaison between students and employers and therefore, Offices of Career Services must take on the training efforts that will ensure employers are creating affirmative spaces for all students including BIPOC students.
- Offices of Career Services must prioritize amplifying relationships and promoting opportunities with employers who…
    - Clearly outline social justice and inclusive excellence statements
    - Maintain Black representation at every organizational level including their chief- level positions
    - Prioritize confronting and combating the pervasiveness of white supremacy culture, anti-Blackness, racism, and other forms of bigotry
    - Make available diversity metrics, satisfaction survey responses, and social justice initiatives for students to view before applying
- Offices of Career Services must address the context of the work they do and how professional development has long served as coded language for forced assimilation into white ways of being for Black students and students of color.
- Offices of Career Services must acknowledge their failure when they are not able to recruit, hire, or retain a racially diverse staff (professional, student, temporary workers, etc.). Rates of Black students in college are higher than they have ever been. There is no excuse not to hire Black student staff members.
- Offices of Career Services must have a Black finalist or finalist of color for every position they hire for. If that standard is not met, it must be deemed a failed search and restarted.
- Offices of Career Services must create urgency around creating affirming working environments for Black staff members and staff members of color before creating a more robust recruitment effort targeted toward those populations.
- Offices of Career Services must pay Black student organizations and student organizations founded on minoritized racial affinity to attend fairs, workshops and other events.
- Offices of Career Services must hold racial affinity spaces to discuss the interplay of power, privilege, and professionalism for students to attend.
- Offices of Career Services must readily and routinely acknowledge the ways they are, have been, and likely will continue to be complicit in racism, white supremacy, and the trauma of Black students and students of color.

Employers

- Employers must undergo regular implicit bias trainings to confront their personal and organizational prejudices around race, cultural differences, and other salient identities.

- Employers must abide by explicitly outlined recruiting expectations named and maintained by offices of career services. Expectations must include restricting language that serves to harm students with minoritized racial identities.
- Employers must become and remain socioculturally aware of the ways they either impact or fail to impact global conversations around racial (in)justice.
- Employers must commit to developing sustainable practices that ensure an affirmative recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and retention process for students with minoritized racial identities.

Future Research

- Future research must further examine professional identity development for Black students and students of color recognizing the inherent added labor that must be undergone in order to secure self-preservation in white professional spaces.
- Future research must further interrogate the role of colonialism, imperialism, and hyper nationalism as tools to abet white supremacy culture in professionalism
- Future research must continue to center Black professionals and professionals of color because Black Lives Matter.

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