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White Student Affairs Practitioner’s Role in Actualizing an Antiracist Environment  
Patrick G. Lovelace

This article is meant to serve as a resource for white student affairs practitioners to continue to consider their role in engaging in anti-racism work by learning about both theoretical and practical tools. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory, this piece examines the way racism is used as a tool by those with power to marginalize and harm Black individuals and communities people specifically through a higher education and student affairs context. Using existing research and practice that requires the self-examination of whiteness by white people, this piece will hopefully engage practitioners in considering ways to leverage whiteness as a tool to interrupt oppression and domination in systems and interpersonal actions.

Keywords: higher education, student affairs, race, racism, anti-racism, whiteness, white supremacy

Patrick or Pat is a Boston native who learned to love education by engaging in co-curricular out of the classroom learning. He finds his joy in life with the relationships that are cultivated with others. He loves learning about different life experiences and points of view to better inform his professional practice and personal values.
White Student Affairs Practitioner’s Role in Actualizing an Antiracist Environment

In the United States, there has been a recent uptick in racial justice reckoning in the wake of the summer of 2020, which included a global pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the murders of George Floyd, Ahmed Aubrey, Breonna Taylor, and countless other Black and African-American people (Stebleton & Buford, 2021). These murders were not isolated. These murders were not anomalies. They directly result from societal and systemic racism that plagues our world and country. There is an imperative responsibility and role for all in dismantling systems of oppression that dominate and marginalize black and brown individuals and communities and educating their students about justice, equity, and liberation. Higher education and the professional field of student affairs are no exemption from racism.

The primary role of student affairs staff is to provide support, uplift, and enrich the overall student experience at higher education institutions. Student affairs practitioners often find themselves in high-capacity student-facing rules where they have opportunities to influence and impact a student’s experience (Moran, 2001). Practitioners have a choice on how to influence their impact. This is through letting their personal or institutional values guide and inform their practice and is critical to providing a holistic learning experience. White student affairs practitioners need to understand this power dynamic to critically analyze the way race and racism manifest in higher education and the overall student experience. Through this analysis, white practitioners have an imperative to inform their work through a racial justice and equity lens (Tevis et al., 2023). Individuals and institutions cause harm either intentionally or passively by engaging in policies and practices that have been proven to be detrimental and dangerous to students of color (Garcia et al., 2021). Together in our respective spheres of influence we have the opportunity to build the capacity to understand our own identities and how they influence our practice, dismantle systems of oppression, and use our whiteness as a tool to build platforms for access, equity, and justice. This paper will explore theoretical frameworks in which white student affairs practitioners can examine their practice and impact when fostering a just and anti-racist campus environment. It will also explore individual and institutional responsibility to make this dream a reality.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this paper is to implore white student affairs practitioners to re-examine their understanding and efforts in the realm of anti-racism and justice in relation to their everyday lives and professional practice. Ideally, this piece will provide practitioners with language and frameworks to view their work through a lens of equity and justice. Along with helping them gain a better understanding of the ways of racism and oppression manifests at their institutions for students through both systemic and through interpersonal relationships. White student affairs practitioners and staff should know how to not only be supportive of students of color so they have an enriching,
meaningful, and safe experiences in higher education but also be institutional change agents for cultivating a better-racialized education climate than the one that currently exists. The conversation started before this piece and will continue after this piece as a critical component of equity and justice work is engaging in lifelong learning and unlearning about power and privilege.

**Positionality**

Like all people my social identities directly influence the ways I navigate life and all the systems it encompasses. Some of my identities that are most salient to this are my whiteness, being a cisgender man, my queerness, my size, and my neurodiversity. They are the facets of my being that affect my engagement and impact with individuals and institutions. I am still learning and will always be unlearning the ways my identities uphold privilege. This manifests in my career through my interactions with students as they are all engaging with their education through their own lived experiences related to their own identities. I hope to be someone who is learning with students and constantly expanding my capacity and understanding to work with and support students of different identities of my own and continue to work towards a more equitable and justice-oriented society.

I chose student affairs as a career because it is where I found my love of education. As a learner, I have always struggled with my relationship with the classroom and the Academy. I was never a super successful student and never really enjoyed being in academic settings. It wasn’t until my undergraduate experience that I really found joy in learning through co-curricular and experiential opportunities through student involvement and out-of-the-classroom experiences. Through this engagement, I was able to connect with current student affairs administrators and higher education leaders in whom I saw myself and saw themselves in me and I learned about the field of student affairs. I want my career to be a love letter to transformational education providing access and opportunity for different types of nontraditional learning giving any and all students who want to grow and enrich their lives the chance to do so and empowering them to cultivate their own educational journey.

**Foundation & Framework**

Racism exists as an inherent form of oppression based on the social construct of race and racial identity. Racism, at its core, is a tool to uphold white supremacy and dominate minority racial identities (Bell, 1980). Racism “is ideologically, culturally, and structurally embedded in our society and much, if not all, of our social institutions” (Tevis & Croom, 2022, p. 250). Anti-racism is a concept that one individual can influence culture and systems by developing and supporting policy and practice that disrupts systems of oppression and white supremacy (Kendi, 2019). Three theoretical lenses to view racism, antiracism, anti-blackness, and whiteness within the context of higher education and student affairs (HESA) are Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1980) and the White Supremacy Culture (WSC) (Okun, 2016), and The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators
Inclusion aairs practitioners. That with both themselves and aairs designed the communities, norms in highlights harm, in student (NASPA) policies, fostering racism • directly at the profession is highest privilege, this repairing to meet the needs of all groups, equitably distributing resources, raising social consciousness, and repairing past and current harms on campus communities. Professional development within this competency areas assumed that student affairs educators need to understand oppression, privilege, and power before they can understand social justice. Intermediate and advanced level

...
outcomes reflect social justice oriented applications in practice and then interconnections between leadership and advocacy. (p. 14)

Using existing literature, research, and first-hand experiences, this paper will explore racism and anti-blackness as it presents itself in higher education contexts along with the role of whiteness in disrupting and dismantling oppression and white supremacy through the lens of student affairs practitioners. Education is a tool that can deepen practitioner’s knowledge and understanding of actualizing diversity, equity, and inclusion mindsets and practices in higher education institutions, along with identifying and shifting anti-Blackness rhetoric and practice in the field.

**Literature Review**

The literature surrounding racism, anti-racism, and whiteness has expanded and continues to do so as people continue navigating racialized systems and environments. The exploration of racism in HESA contexts—as well as developing policy and practices to mitigate it—is similarly expansive. Some of the concepts that will be explored include

- Defining racism, anti-racism, and whiteness.
- Exploring the roots of racism and anti-blackness in higher education to make room for new seeds of education to grow.
- Identifying ways that whiteness shows up in higher education and student affairs through interactions in interpersonal relationships with students and communities.
- Illuminating ways for white student affairs practitioners looking to be interpersonal and institutional change agents to cultivate more equitable and just higher education institutions and experiences for students.

**History of Racism & Anti-Blackness in Higher Education**

The history of the physical structure and development of higher education is rooted in racism and colonialism. Many of America’s higher education institutions were built on land that was stolen from indigenous people and colonized by European settlers (Nash, 2019). Nash (2019) explores The Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862, also called the Morrill Act (and the successor Morrill Act of 1890), which made public land available to states to sell, with the profits going toward establishing and supporting public colleges and universities. The Morrill Act specifically set out to provide education in the areas of agriculture and applied science and therefore was seen as a move away from “elite” liberal arts education. Because of this mandate, in the nineteenth century, the land-grant institutions were commonly referred to as “democracy’s colleges.” However, through a historical lens, this system raises questions about whose land the federal government was actually selling. The Morill Land-Grant College act continued the United States’ genocide and exploitation of North America’s Indigenous population and land. Beyond that, the physical buildings that make up higher education institutions
were built by slave labor, specifically enslaved African-Americans brought to America during the transatlantic slave trade era (Wilder, 2014).

Racism and anti-Black environments can take many forms, from overt and intentional actions, to harm caused by policy and poor practice. These environments lead Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) who are students to experience a lack of sense of belonging, exclusion, or even emotional and physical harm. Stewart, (2019) posed belongingness in this context as a condition produced by institutional systems and structures that include some, while excluding others. People are subject to belongingness narratives; it is not a frame of mind or attitudinal disposition alterable by psychological conditioning. In fact, being made to belong, “citizenship,” is a privilege bestowed upon those who have assimilated to ways of being and doing that have been normalized, optimized, and centered within institutional systems based on whiteness. (p. 22)

Anti-blackness and WSC are deeply integrated into the roots of systems and structures of how the United States operates (Okun, 2021). There are ideologies that are passed down from generation to generation that influence, dictate, and perpetuate continued racism and harm toward BIPOC and communities of color (Kendi, 2016). Drawing from Bell (1980), scholars have continued to expand on highlighting key aspects of CRT that can be used as tools to understand racism and how it manifests. Tenets of CRT outlined by McCoy and Rodricks (2015) dictate that: racism is a permanent structure of our society and world as it is critically linked to our history and the lived experience of BIPOC individuals and communities. Those lived experiences of BIPOC individuals and communities contribute to experiential knowledge and counterstorytelling, which is integral to understanding and dismantling racist and oppressive systems. Interest convergence theory cites that most, if not all, social progress for BIPOC are linked to a benefit to whiteness and white people. Intersectionality, as previously introduced (Crenshaw, 1991), holds that those who hold multiple marginalized identities experience heightened levels of harm due to the connectedness of the cycle of oppression. The idea of whiteness as property examines and analyzes the ways that oppressive systems protect against challenges to the privilege of whiteness. A critique of liberalism challenges claims of race neutrality and colorblindness as a failure to acknowledge racism, which undermines and continues to suppress the lived experiences of BIPOC individuals and communities. Using these tenets HESA scholars and practitioners are able to better understand the way in which they have been taught to uphold whiteness at individual and institutional levels (Foste, 2022).

To effectively examine racism and anti-blackness in higher education student affairs context one must also examine whiteness as a construct of power and domination (Dumas, 2017). Williams (2021) identifies multiple ways in which whiteness is used as a tool to protect white individuals at the expense of BIPOC. Through the prioritization of niceness, centering white people’s emotions over the
safety and well-being of BIPOC, and refusing accountability white student affairs practitioners continue to reproduce racism and anti-blackness in higher education contexts for students of color. Recognizing and addressing these traits is imperative to engage in anti-racism work. Through this, addressing this whiteness becomes de-centered as a tool of power and centers the lived experiences, safety, and humanity of individuals and communities of color.

**Centering the Student Experience**

Documented student experiences have highlighted the negative impacts racism can have on students both inside and outside of the classroom.

Black students at many predominantly white colleges have long complained of the racial hostility, subtle and blatant, that they regularly encounter on their campuses. Whether victims of constant microaggressions or outright verbal or physical assaults, many have stories of being called a racial slur directly or seeing it scrawled on a campus wall, viewing racist posts by classmates on social media, or sitting through a presentation by a classmate professing a white supremacist conspiracy. (Anderson, 2020)

Supporting students of color in higher education contexts is the responsibility of everyone apart of that institution, especially if the institution claims to embody a purpose of fostering a just environment and includes diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in its purpose statement. Thinking about the distribution of labor on how to go about it called into question white student affairs practitioners and their role in it. We’ve already established that racism is a form of oppression to keep white supremacy intact and a cornerstone of our society. So white practitioners and scholars are the ones who need to dismantle and disrupt racism that is negatively impacting students of color.

Contemporary colleges and universities typically have DEI statements that are meant to guide and implement practices that are anti-oppressive, specifically anti-racist, and meant to uplift historically marginalized communities and the students within those communities (Dancy et al., 2018). Just because these statements exist and are advertised internally and externally at institutions does not mean that those institutions are exempt from perpetuating oppression and harm toward marginalized communities. Garcia et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of examining the way in which student affairs practitioners engage with these purpose statements in their work with students. There’s an understanding that student affairs professionals have a different working knowledge of the student experience, specifically students of varying social identities due to the nature of the field. Going beyond just purpose statements, how are tangible outcomes being identified by institutional leaders, and how are student affairs professionals using their skill sets to actualize these? Being gatekeepers to co-curricular experiential learning opportunities, student affairs practitioners could incorporate more opportunities for students to engage in racial identity development, specifically white students, to
understand how race shows up as a power structure as they move through higher education contexts and societies.

Education to Action

As outlined by the ACPA/ NASPA (2015) competency areas for student affairs practitioners, it is crucial that “student affairs educators need to understand oppression, privilege, and power before they can understand social justice.” Education is the first step to actualizing the disruption of oppression, specifically racism. The second step is tangible and meaningful action through disrupting instances of oppression on micro and macro levels. Student affairs practitioners, especially those who identify as white, should work to disrupt individualized incidents of racism on campus as it manifests in daily student life and experiences (Briscoe et al., 2022). On a larger macro level higher education leaders and those who hold power need to be challenging current policy and practice that influence and perpetuate experiences of racism for people of color (Foste & Irwin, 2020).

Thinking about whiteness as a tool in student affairs, practitioners can either use a tool to build barriers or they can use it to deconstruct them. White student affairs practitioners should be using whiteness to deconstruct systems of oppression to BIPOC students. Whiteness could be used to build platforms to uplift students with non-white racial identities to create a more inclusive and equitable place where white supremacy holds less power and causes less harm. The personal reflection of white people, specifically white student affairs practitioners, is critical in understanding whiteness as a power construct and tool. Tevis et al. (2023) developed the Critical Dimensions of Whiteness Model, which can be used to understand better how whiteness is used. It highlights that whiteness manifests in institutional, interpersonal, and institutionalized forms.
This model can be used as a resource for white student affairs practitioners to examine their own identity and identify ways whiteness shows up in the different dimensions of their lives, along with growth opportunities to create change for justice and equity-centered outcomes. Another tool is utilizing the Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture (CWSC) as outlined by Okun, (2016). The CWSC helps qualify and quantify how white supremacy manifests in everyday behavior. Engaging in conversations with colleagues and students about white supremacy is a critical step toward understanding and disrupting it. Naming the pervasiveness of how these characteristics manifest in high-reaching student experiences like student leadership and involvement can give students the opportunity to reflect on their role in whiteness/white supremacy culture and disrupt it (Williams et al., 2022).

One example of higher education institutions providing resources to faculty and staff regarding anti-racism resources is Columbia’s Center for Teaching and Learning, providing a toolkit for fostering an anti-racist pedagogy in classrooms. This toolkit walks faculty through five steps for cultivating this environment:

1. Self-Educate and Acknowledge Racial Trauma
2. Interrogate Your Positionality and (Un)conscious Biases
3. Address Curricular Gaps with Intentional Course Design
4. Foster a Compassionate Class Community and Meet Students Where They Are
5. Engage the Wider Campus Community and Commit to Action Beyond the Classroom
Faculty play an important role in fostering an actively anti-racist environment for students in higher education. Tools like this can support faculty in developing a holistic curriculum to adequately meet academic needs while fostering a just and equitable experience (Akamine Phillips et al., 2019).

Engaging in anti-racism work is an ongoing process. It isn’t a checkbox that will ever have a finite completion marker. Practices and understandings are evolving as we as a society continue our reckoning with the way a race has influenced the geo-political development of the world. Higher education institutions are at the forefront of the pursuit of knowledge and truth and have a role of recognizing racism within their own systems and culture along with working to address it at both micro and macro levels.

Implications & Conclusion

Racism is a systematic structure of power and domination that is deeply embedded into global society, specifically in the United States context (Kendi, 2016). Education and higher education specifically are no exemption to this and have deep-rooted connections to racism and ongoing oppression and harm to Black, indigenous people of color (Wilder, 2014). Ash et al., (2020) highlight that “for institutions to address problems of race, they must distribute power across racial lines and encourage a growth in the awareness of and engagement in addressing systems of injustice” and that extends to individual faculty and staff. White student affairs practitioners have a moral imperative and professional obligation to examine their own whiteness and what ways power shows up for them. Practitioners should learn to use their whiteness as a tool to deconstruct existing barriers and oppressive structures while creating and developing new systems that provide opportunity, access, and safety for students of color in higher education spaces. Education is the first step in reflecting on one’s own identity, power, privilege, and oppression. Through education, we can learn tools and practices that best support us in this field, actualizing anti-racist systems and environments.

Student affairs practitioners should consider exploring how whiteness is examined or not examined and ways that it might influence policy and practice that continues a cycle of harm. Beyond that, who is being included in conversations around creating diverse, equitable, inclusive, and justice-oriented environments and cultures at educational institutions? In what ways are resources being redistributed to better support initiatives that foster an inclusive space for all and center those most marginalized? How are institutional leaders and practitioners who hold white identities challenging current systems that do not support these initiatives with resources, specifically financial (Briscoe et al., 2022)? As mentioned, the conversation around racism, anti-racism, whiteness, and creating lasting, meaningful change started before this piece and will continue long after. Human beings are on a journey of learning and unlearning as we navigate life experiences. As a collective, we may never get to a point where we have an idealized culture of equity, belonging, and justice, and that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t strive for it.
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