



# Eight Actions *to* Reduce Racism *in* College Classrooms

BY SHAUN R. HARPER AND CHARLES H. F. DAVIS III

*Faculty members sometimes unknowingly or inadvertently contribute to a racist climate in their classrooms. But they can take steps to address racism more effectively in their teaching.*



**L**ast year, at dozens of colleges and universities across the United States, students protested institutional unresponsiveness to pervasive issues of racial inequity. Most media attention disproportionately focused on the popularity of the protests as opposed to the actual issues underlying campus unrest. For example, instead of deeply exploring the experiences that ignited demonstrations among students at the University of Missouri, journalists wrote mostly about the football team's threat to cancel its game against Brigham Young University, the potential financial implications of the team's activism, and the eventual resignations of the system president and the chancellor of the university's flagship campus. Similarly, news coverage of protests at Yale University concentrated less on students' frustrations with the university's climate of racial exclusion and more on e-mails about potentially offensive Halloween costumes and perceived threats to free speech.

It is important for faculty members to understand that students were protesting racism. It is also essential that professors recognize how they, often unknowingly and inadvertently, say and do racist things to students of color in the classroom. Student uprisings were as much a response to negative experiences with their peers and administrators as they were expressions of frustration with the cultural incompetence of their teachers. Students of color did not suddenly start experiencing racist stereotyping and racially derogatory comments, disregard for the thoughtful integration of their cultural histories in the curriculum, and threats to their sense of belonging in college classrooms during the 2015–16 academic year. We know from our work as scholars at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education that these problems are long-standing.

College presidents, provosts, deans, and other institutional leaders hire researchers from the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education to spend three to four days on their campuses doing racial climate assessments. At some places we are asked to focus on racial and ethnic differences

////////////////////////////////////  
**SHAUN R. HARPER** is a professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, founder and executive director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, and president of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. His e-mail address is [sharper1@upenn.edu](mailto:sharper1@upenn.edu). **CHARLES H. F. DAVIS III** teaches in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is also director of higher education research and initiatives in the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education. His e-mail address is [chadav@upenn.edu](mailto:chadav@upenn.edu).

among faculty and staff members in their feelings of inclusion, respectability, and opportunities for fair and equitable professional advancement, as well as on racial tensions in workplace settings. But on most campuses, administrators ask us to assess the racial climate for students—feelings of inclusion and belonging across racial and ethnic groups, the extent to which students interact substantively across difference, where and what students learn about race, appraisals of institutional commitments to fostering inclusive environments, and characterizations of the supportiveness of classrooms and other spaces. We have done these studies at more than thirty campuses across geographic regions and institutional types, ranging from Portland Community College to Princeton University.

Presented in this article are eight actions faculty members must take to respond more effectively to racism in college classrooms. Findings from our center's student-focused climate studies inform these recommendations. To be sure, eight simple acts will not completely eradicate or even sufficiently address the classroom-related experiences that students of color consistently describe in our focus-group interviews. Nonetheless, participants in our studies say it would greatly improve their experiences if their professors did the following eight things.

***1. Recognize your implicit biases and remediate your racial illiteracy.***

Students we interview almost always tell us the majority of their instructors (sometimes including faculty members of color) are insufficiently skilled to teach learners from a range of racial groups and cultural backgrounds. As explained in Shaun R. Harper's forthcoming book, *Race Matters in College*, faculty members are byproducts of their own educational upbringings. Too few of us were ever afforded opportunities to discuss or meaningfully learn about race in our K–12 schools, undergraduate studies, or doctoral programs. Consequently, there were not enough opportunities to examine and correct the ways we have been socialized to think about the racial “other” or to develop the skills we would ultimately need to teach contemporary college students. Furthermore, too many of us entered the professoriate having taken, at most, only one formal course on college teaching in our graduate programs—and in most instances, that course did not focus nearly enough on race, raise our consciousness about our implicit biases, expose us to authors of color and texts from different cultural points of view, or equip us with the range of skills needed to manage racial conflicts that occasionally occur in classrooms.

Recognizing one's implicit biases is a crucial first step; the seven other actions we recommend rest heavily on this one. Project Implicit at Harvard University offers free online tests that help reveal how we have been socialized to view people from racial backgrounds that are different from our own (see <https://implicit.harvard.edu>). Results from these tests could be useful to faculty members, as they might reveal deeply held assumptions that play out in embarrassing, destructive, and sometimes hurtful ways in college classrooms. In addition to simply identifying biases, professors must also work in purposeful ways to acquire racial literacy and learn new teaching methods. Ten great books that can help faculty members do this are listed at the end of this article. We recommend reading race-focused publications and discussing them in groups. Faculty members in a department would benefit from talking with one another about ways to deliberately integrate into their teaching practices many of the recommendations that experts have published.

Attending sessions at conferences outside of one's discipline that are focused on student success and teaching diverse learners (for example, NCORE—the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education) will expose faculty members to content and strategies they will have encountered nowhere else along their professional journeys. Our center offers Penn Equity Institutes, five-week virtual education experiences for twenty faculty members within a department or school or across a campus. Institute participants learn how to talk more comfortably and honestly about race with their colleagues, foster racially inclusive classroom environments, and employ a range of other skills that student participants in our climate studies tell us they wish their professors had (see <http://www.penninstitutes.org>).

***2. Don't be surprised when a black male student writes well.***

Media we have consumed throughout our lifetimes inescapably shape ideas and expectations about particular racial groups that we bring to classrooms. For instance, young black men are commonly portrayed as rappers, athletes, and criminals—rarely as scholars. Given this, black men and other students of color in our studies tell us their white professors are too often visibly surprised when they make thoughtful statements in class. Instructors also accuse them of cheating when their papers are well written and they perform exceptionally well on exams. In our conversations with them, a surprising number of faculty colleagues have justified these actions by saying,

“Students from these backgrounds typically don’t do well in my courses.” That does not mean every student from that racial or ethnic group is incapable of success; to assume so is racist.

### ***3. Stop expecting the Latina student to speak for all Latinos.***

When urban ghettos, poverty, or just about any issue pertaining to people of color arises in classroom discussions, professors and peers expect the person of color to be the spokesperson. Expertise is presumed, which often results in students of color being forced to teach their professors and peers about race. Having to represent an entire diaspora of people (an expectation also placed on Asian Americans and blacks) is daunting for Latino students. Also troubling to them is the assumption that every person from a particular racial or ethnic group grew up in the inner city or in poverty.

### ***4. Quit thinking all Asian American students are the same.***

Illinois State University professor Nicholas Daniel Hartlep writes masterfully about the “model minority myth”: the presumption that all Asian Americans are math and science geniuses who do not require any academic support or resources. Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) participants in our climate studies consistently tell us their professors and others do not acknowledge the racism they experience because AAPIs are usually at the top of enrollment, performance, and attainment metrics, at times ahead of white students. These statistics, however, say nothing about their experiences. They also mask troubling educational outcomes among Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Samoan, and other AAPI groups. Institutional actors routinely fail to disaggregate data and distinguish ethnic, class, language, and cultural differences among AAPI students. Also, lower-income AAPI students tell us they are usually not selected to work in professors’ labs or collaborate with faculty members on research projects; we hear the same stories from many of their Native American, black, and Latino peers.

### ***5. Be aware that stereotype threat may be occurring among some students of color.***

Renowned psychologist Claude Steele introduced the term *stereotype threat*: the anxiety and resultant behavioral response that ensues when a student of a socially stigmatized group encounters stereotypes that those outside the group hold about them. Steele’s research shows how stereotype threat can negatively affect academic performance. The lone Native American student who wishes to contribute to class discussions

may be rehearsing over and over in her head what she is going to say because she recognizes that her white professor and peers are likely to attribute her statement to all Native Americans. Moreover, she is aware that many whites do not usually view her people as intelligent and think she was admitted to the university only because of affirmative action. Hence, whatever she says has to be eloquent, perhaps perfect; this pressure distracts her. Meanwhile, her white classmates are saying whatever they want and benefiting more fully from their engagement in class discussions.

### ***6. Meaningfully integrate diverse cultures and peoples into the curriculum.***

Put plainly, students of color are tired of reading one-dimensional literatures that exclude their cultural histories and fail to acknowledge their humanity. They want authors and texts from diverse perspectives to appear on syllabi and be substantively engaged in class. Many instructors are familiar only with the racially exclusive scholarship to which they were introduced in their doctoral studies and the mostly white scholars their fields privilege and celebrate as experts. Hence, they tend to teach those texts and authors. There are expert professors of color in just about every academic field. There also are white scholars who conduct research and publish routinely on people of color. Faculty members should assign publications these professors have written and invite their recommendations of other works that might be included. One way to do this is through an external review of syllabi from courses offered in a department. The department chair could send packets of syllabi to experts in the same field at other institutions and ask colleagues to assess the inclusion of diverse perspectives and offer recommendations for improvement.

### ***7. Responsibly address racial tensions when they arise.***

Participants in our studies say they are disappointed when moments of racial tension occur in classrooms and the instructor frantically responds by immediately shutting down conversations. Many students actually see these moments as potentially powerful learning opportunities, specifically for the offending student. But in most instances, students of color are left alone to grapple with their classmate’s racially offensive statement or action. They wish their professors knew how to make better educational use of these moments. They also want faculty members, at minimum, to hold white students accountable for saying outrageously offensive things. Censorship and disciplinary action are not what they tell us they desire. Instead, they want



white classmates at least to be challenged to think critically about how their statements affect others. Several NCORE sessions focus on practically addressing racial tension in productive ways, as do modules in our Penn Equity Institutes.

**8. Recognize that you and your faculty colleagues share much responsibility for racial inequities.**

Analysts usually attribute racial inequities in persistence and performance to students' insufficient preparation for college-level academic work, to disengagement and a lack of student effort, and, sometimes, to the erroneous assumption that white people are genetically smarter. Students of color repeatedly tell us in climate studies that a more expansive set of factors and conditions lead to their underachievement: racist encounters in classrooms, culturally exclusive curricula, low faculty expectations, and comparatively fewer opportunities for substantive engagement with white professors outside of class, just to name a few. University of Southern California professor Estela Mara Bensimon and her colleagues in the Center for Urban Education developed the Equity Scorecard, a dynamic collaborative inquiry and institutional change process that helps faculty members and administrators discover how their practices help sustain racial inequities in student outcomes (see <http://cue.usc.edu/tools>). Participants in our studies want their instructors to assume greater responsibility for achieving racial equity goals; the Equity Scorecard could be enormously useful in this regard.

**CONCLUSION**

Exclusionary classroom experiences and racist encounters involving faculty members are among the many racial problems college students have been protesting. On several campuses they were asking institutional leaders to invest more resources in cultural centers and multicultural affairs offices, hire more professors of color, and retain and elevate the status of ethnic studies programs. But they were also asking their instructors to be less racist and to become more highly skilled at teaching diverse learners—the same things they say when we ask in interviews what they expect from their institutions. Lists of demands from last year's protests confirm that students of color are calling for greater representation in the curriculum, as well as more culturally conscious and racially literate teachers (see <http://www.thedemands.org>). In addition to the actions recommended above, developing racial literacy from publications and attending conferences are critically important to creating safer, more inclusive classroom environments for diverse learners. Without substantive investments from college

faculty, racial climates will surely worsen and institutions of higher education will continually fall short of making good on diversity-related promises conveyed to students through mission statements, in presidential speeches and admissions materials, on websites, and elsewhere. ■

**RECOMMENDED BOOKS**

Bensimon, Estela Mara, and Lindsey Malcom. *Confronting Equity Issues on Campus: Implementing the Equity Scorecard in Theory and Practice*. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2012.

Dowd, Alicia C., and Estela Mara Bensimon. *Engaging the Race Question: Accountability and Equity in U.S. Higher Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2015.

Harper, Shaun R. *Race Matters in College*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming.

Hartlep, Nicholas D. *The Model Minority Stereotype: Demystifying Asian American Success*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2013.

Museus, Samuel D., and Uma M. Jayakumar. *Creating Campus Cultures: Fostering Success among Racially Diverse Student Populations*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Quaye, Stephen John, and Shaun R. Harper. *Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Smith, Daryl G. *Diversity's Promise for Higher Education: Making It Work*. 2nd ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.

Steele, Claude M. *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2011.

Sue, Derald Wing. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010.

Sue, Derald Wing. *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015.