

EDUCATION LIFE | ED TALK

Fighting Racial Bias on Campus

Interview by SANDRA STEVENSON FEB. 2, 2017

Shaun R. Harper has been at the center of the racial debate of the past year — first, as protests illuminated the concerns of students of color, then as the Trump triumph emboldened some to commit overt acts of bias, particularly against Latino and Muslim students. In his new book, “Race Matters in College,” due out in June from Johns Hopkins University Press, he provides a pathway for campuses struggling with these very issues. A leading scholar on racial equity in higher education, Dr. Harper will in July be leaving the University of Pennsylvania, where he founded and directed the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, and joining the University of Southern California, where he will teach and start up a similar center with big ambitions. One priority is a survey to assess the racial climate on the nation’s campuses.

What is your reaction to the environment on campus following the Trump election and inauguration?

The uptick in reports of racial bias reinforces my argument as to why it’s so important that colleges and universities be responsible for white students having access to a proper course of study in race. I was also struck by how many white people on college campuses were shocked to learn that there was so much racism in America. In fact, I use the election to address in my book why even the most educated white people were so naïve and blind to the realities of race.

What prompted you to write your book?

I saw this as an opportunity to help people understand that universities didn't just all of a sudden become racist. They've been racist and exclusive from the start. I wanted to call attention to both the problems and the opportunities. When I say the opportunities, I mean the opportunity to actually force higher education institutions to follow through on their commitment to diversity.

What makes you think universities breed racism?

On most predominantly white campuses, people of color are overwhelmingly represented in food service, grounds keeping, custodial roles and fairly low-paid secretarial roles; and they are tragically underrepresented among tenured faculty members, deans, provosts and presidents, people who are in power. This sends a message to black and Latino students that they aren't really valued. To their white counterparts, their expectation is that people of color work at the lowest levels of the organizations they lead. For example, the guys on the field are black men, but the coaches, commissioners and top executives at the N.C.A.A. are overwhelmingly white men. There is some real asymmetry there.

If universities fail to address these issues in a meaningful way, what are the long-term effects?

White people never thought before about their own underpreparation to even think about race, talk about race, and achieve racial equity. Companies and newsrooms say they want to achieve racial diversity but don't know how. This is extremely consequential for our democracy. Our conversation about race in higher education has to start to include white people and pay some attention to their preparation, because otherwise, we're going to continue to see an oversupply of white people in leadership positions in all sectors of our society and our economy. These are the people who will eventually shape public policies and teach future generations.

What about the diversity training campuses are offering? Doesn't that help?

The one-time talks during freshman orientation, regardless of whether it's an hour or all day, do not provide a deep enough course of study in race and diversity. It has to go beyond orientation.

In your book, you see diversity issues incorporated in the curriculum. That includes math. Explain.

Race studies continue to be incredibly compartmentalized. Ethnic studies programs tend to still be the only place where people can find a meaningful course of study on race. We absolutely need ethnic studies courses. But we also need for race and diversity to be thoughtfully integrated across the curriculum.

There's a real opportunity to get young people excited about math when you can situate the word problems in contexts that are culturally familiar to them. If you're teaching accounting, it might be that you have people learning through pro bono work with a local organization that serves communities of color.

How important is it that colleges and universities change their approach to educating students?

What actually happens in college to prepare people for citizenship in a racially diverse democracy? I want students to hold their universities accountable for making good on the promises that are found in mission statements and elsewhere about commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and so on. And I don't want it to just be students of color. I want white students to also hold their professors accountable for not sending them into the world as what I term accidental racists.

Interview has been condensed and lightly edited.

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