

Can the Academy Live the Work and Walk the Talk? Lessons Learned from a Long-Term Faculty Dialogue about Racism

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Creating a learning environment that is effective for all students and faculty is central to the mission of colleges and universities. Adequately addressing diversity-related issues on campus, however, is becoming more challenging. It is well-documented that growing diversity on campus promotes academic and social growth for college students.¹ In fact, an intellectually rich and engaging learning experience is more likely at higher education institutions that recruit and retain students from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, primarily because they bring equally diverse experiences and viewpoints to the classroom dialogue. Yet, there is a paucity of clearly articulated policies that support faculty and staff by substantively addressing diversity-related issues beyond a level of “awareness” of race and culture.² In order to make good on the promise of a diverse learning environment, it is imperative that faculty receive the support they need to systematically raise and successfully address curricular policies and practices that honor, and therefore engage, all students in the pursuit of academic excellence.

This paper will highlight lessons learned from a case study of an eight-year seminar for faculty and staff on racism at a small, private college in a large Northeastern city. The “antiracist seminars” explicitly focused on racism at the personal,

professional, and institutional level. Rather than a top-down initiative instituted in reaction to a campus crisis related to race, these seminars developed from a bottom-up initiative that began with faculty and staff who prepare college students to become educators and social workers in urban settings.³ The findings will show that much of the work done in these seminars helped faculty and staff unearth their beliefs and biases, and helped them develop ways to assist students in doing the same. Consequently, these educators have become more intentional in integrating race-related issues into their curricula. Moreover, faculty and staff have begun to work with the institution in its initial phase to create a systematic effort across all departments to promote an effective, diverse learning environment.

Supporting Faculty as Change-Agents

Peers are the primary agents of socialization for students in college, but faculty may have a more important role in influencing students' attitudes by determining the norms of the campus environment.⁴ Values and attitudes held by faculty can create a positive normative environment that can improve the climate for diversity. For example, activist faculty who promote relationships and interactions across racial and ethnic groups in classroom discussions have a positive effect on students and their commitment to work toward racial understanding.⁵ Since faculty attitudes and values are reflected in their teaching, it is important for faculty to be aware of their own attitudes as they work to understand its effect on pedagogy and on the students they teach.⁶

Faculty understand the importance of their role as “gatekeepers” of the curriculum, yet do not necessarily take an active role to incorporate diversity-related readings into their coursework.⁷ They may need guidance in how to make pedagogical and curricular changes in their teaching. Recent quantitative research at a large university reported by Mayhew and Grunwald (2006) indicates the influence of academic departments and the value of faculty workshops to promote diversity awareness and the need for curricular change. Many colleges provide valuable guest speaker series and workshops. Yet such short-term initiatives do not necessarily promote trust and in-depth dialogue that can lead to a deeper understanding among a diverse group. Typically, college campuses do not hold faculty forums that invite sustained dialogue on diversity or race, and faculty and staff have few or no opportunities to develop relationships or trust, or to engage in difficult discussions about racism.

Since the 1980s, colleges have undertaken campus-wide initiatives as a response to earlier racial tensions on campus. A variety of strategies, intergroup dialogues, and speaker series have been implemented to address these tensions. The problem with these approaches is that they tend only to help individuals address their own personal experiences with racial prejudice. In order to address racial issues more systematically, faculty must acquire the requisite knowledge and skills, through professional development, to equip themselves as change-agents in creating effective learning environments for diverse groups of students. Experiencing complex social dynamics with peers from different racial, cultural, gender, and economic backgrounds sets in motion an imbalance, or what Piaget called a *disequilibrium*. From a Piagetian perspective, disequilibrium is desirable in that it fosters questioning and learning.⁸ Yet literature on diversity in higher education has not thoroughly explored how college campuses might address and benefit from this inevitable disequilibrium, not only for students but also for faculty.

In their design principles to improve campus climate for diversity, Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1999) argue that faculty “need assistance in dealing with the social conflicts, stereotypes, and misconceptions among diverse groups of students that are likely to manifest themselves in the classroom.”⁹ As they guide classroom discussions, faculty must be able to pose questions that will promote proactive (not reactive) learning that addresses issues related to diversity. Such discussions can help open the doors of students’ minds and increase their ability to listen to multiple perspectives. In turn, students become better equipped to develop as effective professionals working in diverse environments. The literature lacks descriptions of how college faculty are supported in this challenge. Faculty need support that promotes self-awareness about their own attitudes and biases, and how those effect their teaching. Such support also should focus on concrete strategies to manage classroom dynamics.¹⁰

Evolution of the Antiracist Seminars

The antiracist seminars began in 1998 and continue today. This author is a longtime participant of the seminars and conducted this research as a participant-observer; thus, the seminars are described in the first person. The college that holds these seminars prepares students to become professionals who work primarily with children and families, such as teachers and social workers. When the seminars began, the college collaborated for two years with a private

preK-8 school and its newly formed Center for Antiracist Education. This collaboration offered education faculty, who also were supervisors of student teachers, a forum to explore antiracist education with a well-known diversity educator. The college's student body at that time consisted predominantly of white women, and there was a clear need to help students develop cultural competencies and sensitivity to the needs of a diverse population of children in an urban setting. One goal of the seminars was to help students become effective, culturally responsive professionals within an increasingly multilingual, multiracial, and multicultural society. We explicitly chose the name *antiracist seminars* to focus on race rather than on other areas of diversity (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, religion, class). In our experience, conversations on race were more difficult than conversations on other diversity issues and were more readily sidelined in favor of discussing the other issues. We believed identifying racism as our focus would eliminate this tendency. Additionally, singling out race helped illustrate critical race theory and highlighted the perspective that race is in the forefront of social policy analysis in the United States.¹¹ Rather than accept the prevalent notion that our politics and laws are guided by a colorblind attitude of equal merit, we understood that—not unlike other categories, such as gender or class—race is a social construction with a system of oppression that is cultivated and maintained.

After two years, the college's collaboration with the private school ended and the second phase of the seminars began. In the second phase, the seminars expanded to include faculty from departments other than education. An outside facilitator for the group needed to be hired, so funding became paramount. Varied sources within the college were tapped each year. As a condition of funding, the college required that the seminars be more broadly offered to the community. For the first time, a decision was made to open the seminars to staff as well. An announcement was sent to the college community at the beginning of each new semester, welcoming all faculty and staff to participate, with the caveat that regular attendance to the monthly meetings was important. We found from experience that if participants did not consistently attend, it was difficult to build adequate trust and cohesion within the group. This small college has an average of 85 faculty and 120 staff. Participation in the seminars typically included about 15 regularly attending faculty and staff at monthly two-hour meetings. Using the most recent year as an example of the group's racial makeup, there were six white faculty and staff, and seven faculty and

staff of color (African-American, Caribbean, Latina, and Asian). The diversity of faculty and staff was essential to the quality of our dialogue. Newly hired faculty of color often found their way to the seminars; either they were told about the seminars in the hiring process or read about the seminars at the beginning of each semester when invitations were extended.

Month to month, the seminars addressed current events, classroom dilemmas, and complex personal and professional social interactions. Sometimes we talked about how to be effective in our profession and our community. The facilitator's role was to help engage participants at whatever level they could participate. At times, people became uncomfortable as they looked for advice. We sometimes worked in affinity groups, to help relieve discomfort and fear, yet found that collectively unpacking a complex situation was valuable. Some of the questions we asked ourselves included, Was this comment racist? Was it meant to be humorous? Was it just indicative of the speaker's ignorance? If so, what do we need to do to promote understanding? What should the response be? Our intent was to explore how to be effective in a multiracial society and how not to perpetuate racist or other stereotypes.

The group was perceived by some in the college community as being "all talk" or "therapeutic," and as failing to publicly demonstrate evidence of the seminar's effectiveness. We came to realize that there was, indeed, a therapeutic nature to conversations involving race, bias, discomfort, challenging stereotypes, and unpacking the sometimes difficult and confusing racial bias we had faced personally and professionally. The perceptions about the seminars were difficult to dispel, particularly since the group did not regularly take an active, visible role in leading workshops, college-wide discussions, or events related to antiracism. Instead, the work occurred in individual classrooms and with individual students or within individual departments.

Lessons learned and policy implications from this long-standing seminar will be discussed by illustrating points with quotes from the data. Data from this case study is based on multiple sources: annual evaluations of the program, questionnaires, individual interviews, and document analysis of eight years of meeting notes. Although the sample group is relatively small—13 faculty and staff—we illustrate what was learned from objective, in-depth data analysis of questionnaires, interviews, and annual evaluations. This case study was

framed by the following questions to participants:

- In what ways has participation in the antiracist seminars affected your personal and professional growth?
- How does your work in this group affect your role with students?
- What is it about the group that has sustained it for eight years?
- What factors contribute to this conversation and what factors detract?

What Did We Learn from Sustained Seminars about Racism?

Faculty and staff consistently reported that the context of a cohesive, supportive group was a critical factor in helping them move beyond heightened awareness of racism, to taking an active role in raising issues of racism directly with students in and out of classrooms. Additionally, individuals in the group became increasingly more involved with institutional initiatives related to diversity and began to help shape the college's strategic planning and goals.

Discussing Racism Is Difficult and Requires Relationships Built on Trust

Discussing race, head-on, is difficult, and it is challenging to get to any depth of understanding. This is particularly true for a group that is racially mixed and has different individual histories and experiences with racism. Data revealed the discomfort that some participants experienced as a result of the conversations. One facilitator's style was direct, instructional, and pushed faculty to confront racism, particularly in classrooms and schools. A white faculty member reflected on those first years in a recent interview, remembering a steep learning curve as she began to understand white privilege.

I was never in a comfort zone coming to this group. ... I was stressed because it would challenge me in ways I had never been challenged. Increasingly it felt like I became the over-privileged white woman. I did not like the role. (May 2007)

The discomfort faculty and staff experienced required help from the facilitator in order to slowly build a level of trust and support within the group. The group's cohesion was a key factor in supporting the group personally and professionally in understanding racism. One faculty member likened building trust to building a foundation, brick by brick.

I think we have been in a real slow process to come together as a group and to be more trusting as a group and I think a lot of the activities have been bricks in the foundation for that. So sometimes it feels like we are just moving a couple of bricks, but actually I think this is important foundation-building.
(June 2006)

White faculty and staff learned from their colleagues of color to recognize how ingrained racism is in our institutional and social structures. Faculty of color might describe a scene or conversation that felt racist to them personally, often adding that such encounters were not uncommon. White faculty often were surprised at what they heard and could not understand how such a comment could be made at the college. Sometimes these comments could be explained by ignorance, thoughtlessness, or perhaps humor; regardless, racist-sounding comments on a college campus among colleagues and students are troubling and difficult to discuss. Faculty and staff of color were willing to share some of their uncomfortable interactions on campus in order to enable white participants to learn and become advocates (“white allies”) in racial understanding.

The anti-racist seminars have heightened my awareness of racial issues in the classroom and the society as a whole. It is the only place to discuss how this highly sensitive, difficult and critical issue of racism is unintentionally perpetuated because white educators do not know how to examine their teaching and management practices for racism. ... I feel strongly that this is not something most of us can do on our own and that the support and critical lenses of the participants in the group helps deepen the process. (May 2003)

The antiracist seminars provided an intergroup dialogue that supported exploration of sensitive issues around race with like-minded faculty. As educators, participants found a direct link between awareness of racism and teaching practice.

What did faculty and staff of color learn from their interactions with white faculty? This question was not explicitly posed to participants, but one faculty member of color offered the following in her description of why she attended the seminars.

It was insightful ... on how NOT to have a conversation about race. It helped me to anticipate where the sticky points were or where [white] people were not ready to go.

The second [reason why I attended the seminars] is that it helped me to figure out where my white students were going next or coming from [based on what I learned from my white colleagues]. (March 2007)

For future research, an important follow-up to this case study would be to address the specific question of what faculty and staff of all races learned from each other. This kind of information might help inform why discussions on race are difficult and to clarify for participants the purpose and possible outcomes of these conversations.

According to the participants, the following statement best describes the antiracist seminar's long-term discussion of racism:

We have built ourselves as a cohesive group with trust so that even if we do not get to all the racist issues in the monthly seminars, we can find each other outside of the meetings for further discussion.

Participants used the group as a source of trustworthy support, both during and between the monthly meetings. Many times, due to faculty and staff workloads, not everyone was able to make each meeting, but participants found each other at other times to extend their discussions.

Forming a cohesive group built on trust and relationships was critical to the success of the antiracist seminars. It is unusual to have this kind of forum on a college campus, yet it was instrumental in forming a corps of faculty and staff who developed personally and professionally, and who helped move the institution along in its efforts to create an effective and diverse learning environment.

Facilitation Is Crucial to Form and Lead the Group

An outside facilitator was crucial to help the group orient its discussions to race. Various strategies were used that helped the group get into in-depth discussions. The facilitator's strategies also were excellent models for faculty to learn from

and use in their own classrooms with college students. Facilitation strategies helped keep the focus, particularly if the conversation became uncomfortable or when the group slid into related conversations off the topic of race. Distractions detracted from the group conversation on race. At the same time, the development of trust contributed to the group, even though comfort could not be guaranteed. It was critical to have an experienced facilitator manage these dynamics and help the group notice and understand what was happening.

Facilitation strategies included posing questions, forming affinity groups, and asking participants to rank comments to understand what they, as individuals and as a group, found important. As educators, participants learned from the facilitator's model and applied some of these strategies to their own classrooms.

It has helped my teaching in the ways in which effective and creative facilitation strategies have been used by the facilitator to guide the group experience. (June 2004)

... I plan on applying it next semester. Jane had us do [an activity] on privilege. She gave us a worksheet with questions about privilege. It allowed us to bring our own understanding on privilege to the conversation instead of having her define it up front. We worked in small groups, to sort out ways we felt privileged in our lives and within the institution, and how at times we didn't feel privileged. (June 2006)

The same faculty member went on to explain specifics about how this activity heightened participants' awareness about different types of privilege (financial, gender, religious, and race).

We had three people coming from three different places in their understanding; one woman said she had not thought of anything other than financial privilege. It was enlightening for her to think of it in other terms as gender privilege, religious privilege, heterosexual privilege and race privilege. When we debriefed with Jane she talked about her intention not to define privilege and eventually wanted to talk about white privilege, but did not put that up front because it can frighten people or silence them early on. (June 2006)

This faculty member, like others, experienced the facilitation strategies firsthand and then considered how these could be applied to teaching college students. They wanted a facilitator who modeled methods for conducting intergroup dialogues that were proven effective and could be directly implemented in their own classrooms. As faculty and staff internalized what they learned about racism and applied it to their own cultural identity, they seemed to become more comfortable bringing this information to students via readings, class discussions, and one-to-one interactions.

Enacting Effective Learning Environments Means Moving Beyond Just an Awareness Level

Issues of racism often have been sidelined in our culture until a moment of crisis. Efforts to help faculty and students gain racial understanding must be proactive and must be focused on developing a productive learning environment—both in and out of the classroom. At the college, a long history of exploring multiculturalism already existed, with repeated discussions over the years unpacking what this meant for the college’s curriculum and how it applied to the preparation of new professionals. Faculty and staff who chose to be involved in the antiracist seminars wanted to target these efforts by addressing issues and strategies that could enhance the effectiveness—the attitudes, the behaviors, and the performance—of new professionals working with children and families marginalized in society.¹² The seminars became a place to develop the language and skills necessary to help college students challenge the predominant focus in educational theory on deficits, since this often was applied to children already disadvantaged because of ability, race, or socioeconomic status.

Participants in the seminars wanted to move their students beyond mere awareness about racism, to a level of transformation that required action and explicit changes in their classrooms. Faculty and staff rated the following statement as describing the most important effect of the seminars:

I am more deliberate in bringing up the issue of race in my classes and encouraging students to consider how and when race might be a factor in the work they do and in their own behavior. Faculty prioritized the act of raising racial issues in the classroom as a critical outcome of their work.

I generally found that those sessions which focused directly on our work as educators were the most beneficial. The seminar has continually pushed me to examine my own assumptions and biases around race and class particularly. I feel more comfortable raising issues involving race in both my seminar and supervision. Because the seminar involves classroom management and parent issues, I have broadened my readings and discussions to include both culturally and developmentally appropriate practices. (May 2003)

I listen and respond to students more carefully now in terms of an anti-racist lens. I seek and use new readings for classes that relate/connect to teaching for social justice. I view the world in new ways (seeing issues of race and systemic racism everywhere) which impacts how I relate to any course material. (June 2004)

One of the key results of the seminars is that faculty have begun the work of addressing their own beliefs and behavior, and are developing ways they can help students address interpersonal issues that carry undertones of racism. We know that diverse learning environments promote the learning of critical thinking and interpersonal skills that are essential to preparing professionals and leaders. Faculty and staff must learn how to create such optimal learning environments and must develop skills to guide complex conversations, thus modeling the very values and skills we want from our students. Faculty have not successfully addressed the policy issues and institutional structures that would alleviate the disadvantages students face because of their race. This would require collective action and perhaps repositioning ourselves on committees with policy-changing power. Additionally, this will require collaborating with students on their behalf.

What Can Institutions Learn about Offering an Antiracist Seminar for Faculty and Staff?

Other institutions should be aware of three key themes about offering antiracist seminars. First, to reach a level of thoughtful effectiveness, the seminar group needs time to reflect before moving to action. This careful reflection provides time for self-exploration that eventually affects the participants' teaching, their roles in the college, and ultimately the institution. Second, the seminars should

be one of several professional development opportunities embedded in the infrastructure of the college. Third, sustained dialogue over time is essential to establish trust and mutual understanding among faculty and staff.

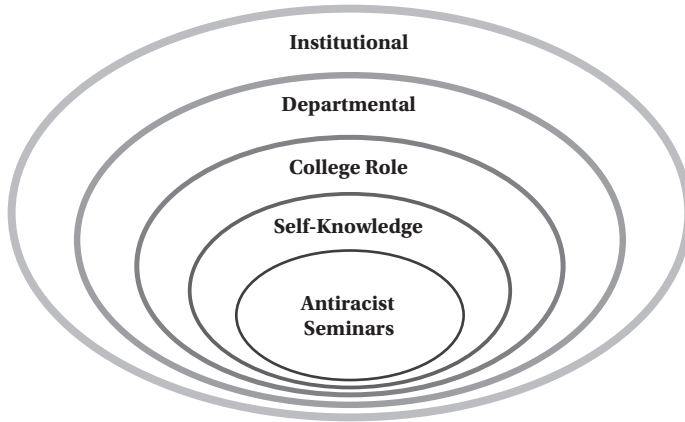
Reflection Informs Action

In the long view, the learning that took place in the seminars can be described in steps. A first step included building trust and forming relationships among the faculty and staff. There was some pressure by the institution for the group to take the lead in organizing campus events related to diversity; instead, in the first years, the group made an explicit effort to be more reflective than action-oriented. A second step involved reflection and dialogue that promoted racial and cultural understanding. This reflective stance included reading, discussing, exchanging ideas on teaching, confronting students and peers about their thinking, and exploring one's own race and culture. A third step saw faculty and staff move to action. These actions included researching ways to reach students with limited experience with diversity. Faculty and staff rated the following as the most important goals inspired by the seminars:

We need to continue to explore how better to reach young people whose experience has been limited, how to help them learn to teach when a class is culturally diverse. We need to do research in our classes and with our students, and to share our data and findings within and outside the college.

The growth of this group was influenced by the culture of the individuals and the college at multiple levels. These influences are similar to the ecological model outlined by Bronnfenbrenner.¹³ In the diagram in Figure 1, the antiracism seminars sit in the inner circle of concentric circles, providing a context to engage in conversation about racism that evoked a state of disequilibrium for the participants. As individuals, and eventually as a group, these conversations increased our self-knowledge and heightened our awareness about antiracist practice. Thus, the second ring becomes the participant's self-knowledge and professional development. That, in turn, influences the work that faculty and staff do in their many roles at the college (third ring), which has an effect on policies and decisions made in departments (fourth ring), which ultimately affects the institution (the fifth ring). (See Figure 1)

Figure 1: Influence of the antiracist seminars at the individual, professional, and institutional levels.



As clearly shown in the data, the seminars provided a context for a group of faculty and staff to reflect and gain knowledge, which motivated them to act—by using their roles as educators to help students understand the system of racism and its effect on the many sectors of our society. This learning was grounded in reflection and, in time, ultimately caused a ripple effect in the institution. For example, several seminar participants became key players in a community diversity initiative begun by the college president. The initiative’s activities included designing a campus climate survey and participating on committees to advise the administration. The president challenged the college to “walk the talk” and to conduct a self-evaluation that included faculty, staff, and students to understand the scope of diversity-related issues on the campus. Strategic goals that reached all corners of the campus were to be outlined once the community reviewed the data and understood priorities for the various constituencies.

Embed Professional Development in the Institution’s Infrastructure

One of the largest challenges of the antiracist seminars was their marginalized status; the seminars had to be sustained each year without an infrastructure for administrative or financial support. As Mayhew and Grunwald (2006) suggest, faculty development should be aligned with departmental and institutional

goals, so that curricular change is promoted across the campus. Providing an infrastructure for faculty development places a public value on its efforts and allows for cross-departmental conversations to develop and transform the curriculum. These antiracist seminars have never moved beyond the education and social work faculty and staff. Had there been a stronger infrastructure for the seminars, perhaps there would have been broader faculty and staff representation across all academic areas and other departments (e.g., student life, admissions, and financial aid).

If the group were going to address the institution's needs, then participants felt that others, particularly staff from administration, also should be involved. Participants commented that if the seminars were recognized by the administration as a professional development opportunity, then potential additional participants, particularly staff, could get permission to take two hours each month to attend the seminars.

We are missing a whole set of administrative staff who want to participate but feel they do not have the permission or the support of their manager or supervisor to take two hours on a Friday to go to a meeting.

...We are missing a whole segment of our population here on the campus. (June 2006)

This staff participant had strong opinions that an infrastructure must be built that cuts across multiple administrative divisions in order to promote a concerted and productive institutional effort around diversity. Generally, the staff who regularly attended the seminars were those who worked closely with faculty and students and had a developed sense of how antiracist practices affected students. Staff who did not have direct contact with the students and the college's curricula did not attend the seminars and were perhaps less likely to see the significance of the seminars to their role at the college.

A professional development opportunity, such as the antiracist seminars, should be one of several choices for faculty and staff professional development. A short survey distributed to faculty asked about the type of forum they preferred for discussing issues related to diversity, antiracism, and multicultural education. The sample returning the survey was small but, from the group, 43 percent preferred

one meeting each semester, 21 percent preferred a one-day or two-day workshop, and 21 percent preferred a monthly meeting. This feedback was important when considering other kinds of forums for intergroup discussions. The antiracism seminars provided a forum that may not have been preferred by a majority of the faculty, although it clearly met the needs of a subset of the faculty.

Although administrative support is essential, autonomy for the participants is equally important. Participants need a role in decision-making about the goals, agenda, facilitator, and timing, so that individual and group needs are met.

Sustained Dialogue Is Essential

Sustained dialogue about racism and other biases provided support to the group that launched action. The college described in this study is a small college with a strong mission to improve the lives of children and families, and a long history of promoting multicultural education and working with children and families in urban settings. Despite this mission, it was not always clear to the administration how best to support faculty. The college has no office or administrator whose explicit focus is diversity issues for students or faculty on the campus. The administration should realize that for faculty and staff to achieve any depth of understanding about racism, a sustained dialogue must be provided for those who want to come to the table.

Faculty of color reported that, when they were hired, administrators told them about the long-standing antiracist seminars, perhaps to indicate faculty support and attention to racial issues. Whether or not these seminars have helped retain faculty of color cannot be proven by this case study. Personal experience and anecdotal accounts suggest that the seminars may have been a factor in retaining faculty of color. Often new faculty of color chose to attend the seminars, perhaps more so than new white faculty, and may have found like-minded colleagues there. It is possible that these seminars provided support for marginalized faculty and staff, including those of color and those who were part-time or instructors. These participants may have been more likely to remain on campus because they felt supported by the group. Additional systematic research is critical to better understand the benefits and outcomes, if any, among racial groups of faculty and staff participating in a long-standing professional development activity, such as antiracist seminars.

Conclusion

The long-term antiracist seminars provided support, developed knowledge, modeled facilitation skills, and built relationships among faculty and staff that extended beyond the monthly meetings. The seminars helped teach faculty and staff the skills and values they needed in order to convey those skills and values to their students. Unlike short-term workshops and conferences on diversity, which also have value, this sustained monthly professional development forum allowed faculty and staff a consistent place where colleagues were available to unpack dilemmas, share resources, and practice having conversations about racism. The presence of this diverse faculty corps handling diversity issues became integral to the college's newly formed community diversity initiative. At issue was not only the recruitment and retention of faculty and students of color, but also the challenge to engage the community so that it could become a welcoming and successful learning environment for all.

To fully realize the benefits of diversity, college campuses must create sustained opportunities for faculty and staff to understand how racism influences and shapes decision-making processes, and how it ultimately affects institutional policies. The seminars bridge cognitive understanding and transformational educational work. The experiential nature of the seminars allowed the group to discuss societal responses to racism and to become a catalyst for turning awareness into action. The group's cohesion empowered participants to take leadership roles in diversity initiatives at the college and provided a forum that could respond to racism-related episodes and events. Institutional support for professional development that includes a sustained dialogue on racism for faculty and staff can help the academy to begin to "live the work and walk the talk."

ENDNOTES

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