

## **Addressing White Privilege in Higher Education**

China Jenkins, Houston Community College System, TX

*Jenkins, Ph.D., is the manager of Faculty & Instructional Leadership Development in the Institute for Instructional Engagement & Development.*

### **Abstract**

White privilege is a rarely acknowledged or addressed issue in higher education that negatively affects the success of students of color. This literature review surveys the relationship between white privilege and higher education, defines white privilege, identifies its impact on higher education, recognizes ways white educators perpetuate it, and theorizes how educators may resist it.

### **Introduction**

It is widely accepted that racism is supported and sustained in American higher education institutions (Hubain, Allen, Harris & Linder, 2016; Harris, Barone & Davis, 2015; Smith, 2015; Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010; Manglitz, 2003). Sensoy and DiAngelo (2009) defined racism as a systemic form of oppression that influences cultural, social and political structures and also institutionalizes and perpetuates beliefs, norms, and an unfair allocation of privileges, assets, and control among whites and people of color. According to Smith (2015), “Much of U.S. history embeds privilege for whites...in...access to higher education” (p. 10). White privilege is part of the substructure of racism; the “hidden infrastructure” that imperceptibly guides and propels all aspects of the educational process: from admissions to student retention, and even the curricula (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010).

White privilege is a rarely acknowledged or addressed issue that worsens the dynamic between white educators and learners of color. Because racism and white privilege are permitted to exist in American higher education institutions, whites have the advantage in succeeding academically, while people of color are placed at a disadvantage. The purpose of this literature review is to survey the relationship between white privilege and higher education. This review examines the literature to define white privilege, identify its impact on higher education, recognize how white educators perpetuate it, and theorize how educators may resist it.

### **Defining white privilege**

Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) landmark article regarding white privilege is frequently mentioned in the literature on race because it brought the notion of white privilege to the forefront. She characterized white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets that [whites] can count on cashing in each day, but about which [they are] ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (p. 291). White privilege, therefore, is the counterbalance to racism, a system that disadvantages people of color (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2010).

McIntosh (1988) listed some common privileges as: being able to choose one’s company, shopping without harassment, seeing positive representation in the media, not having your actions represent the whole of your race, and being considered “civilized”. The characteristics of the privileged, as described by Wildman and Davis (1995), “define the societal norm, often

benefiting those in the privileged group and...privileged group members can rely on their privilege and avoid objecting to oppression” (p. 53). As an outcome, whiteness is normalized, becoming the standard to which all non-whites must conform. This “traversing and learning the norms of white culture” results in students of color consigning “their own culture to the margins” (Harris et al., 2015, p. 26).

### **The impact of white privilege in higher education**

White privilege is a major factor in the teaching and learning process, especially where there is a white professor with students of various racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2002) stated “race often remains invisible to the privileged white majority in academia, and racism in this setting is characteristically shrouded in rational discourse” (p. 19). White privilege is so pervasive, it is invisible to white professors who unknowingly exert their dominant views, beliefs and their ways of knowing as the norm. Consequently, learners who behave differently from the “norm” are seen as deficient and are marginalized (Chubbuck, 2004; Hollins & Guzman, 2005). Colin and Preciphs (1991) noted:

For White Americans, the curricular content has always reflected their sociocultural and intellectual histories and their worldview. Thus, they have been socialized to see themselves in a positive-primary mode and non-white racial groups in a negative-secondary mode (p. 64).

Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey (2010) authored an article exposing the racist processes that benefit white graduate students and hinder international and native students of color. Their research substantiated assertions the application process, curriculum, and general student experiences of higher education institutions were influenced by race. The authors explained although research has demonstrated the MAT and GRE graduate entrance exams have been shown to be inaccurate predictors of student success and racially, socioeconomically and linguistically biased to the disadvantage of students of color, most universities still use them as a key requirement for admission. Furthermore, they argued the climate of the school, departments, and class structure also impacted the retention of students of color. They detailed how factors such as accessibility to graduate assistantships (faculty decisions based on their belief in the student’s potential), a lack of support from white students and faculty, and the lack of seeing themselves represented in the curriculum and in the faculty were key reasons for the disproportionate dropout rate of students of color.

According to Lund (2010), educators and learners of color are required to adjust to the standards and educational expectations set by white educators and learners, or risk being seen as less successful. They are also required to change their perspectives, actions and beliefs to the status quo, while white educators and learners maintain it. Students of color also deal with “racist stereotyping...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” (Harper & Davis III, 2016).

### **How white privilege is perpetuated**

White privilege perpetuates its power with faculty and students in the classroom and in academia at large. Lund (2010) noted white educators have neither the responsibility to learn about racism or privilege, nor the requirement to address it, and still can be considered nonracist.

Additionally, she expressed white educators are perceived as more competent and trustworthy than their colleagues of color and receive better treatment and reviews from their learners. White educators see themselves, their cultural values, and Eurocentric theoretical frameworks represented in their curriculum and do not have to consider or teach different cultural paradigms.

Even when educators intend to be culturally sensitive, if they do not foreground whiteness as the center, it will support white hegemony (Chubbuck, 2004). One of the ways white educators can create “diversity” classes that reinforce dominant racist ideologies is by having classes focus only on individual white acts of racism, such as stereotyping (Gorski, 2006). This strategy weakens efforts towards equity by focusing on changing hearts without changing the dominant systems that disseminate hegemony (Gorski, 2006). While racial sensitivity is admirable, anti-stereotype curricula do not lead to institutional change, nor do they produce changes in pedagogy (Banks, 1993).

White educators can perpetuate white privilege by merely acknowledging and celebrating racial diversity (Gorski, 2006). According to Gorski (2006), while recognizing the contributions of people of color can be educationally worthwhile, there are two reasons why it can become problematic. First, it permits white educators and learners to detach themselves from their involvement in reproducing the hegemonic racial structure (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). White educators who teach in this manner risk implying racism is caused by unawareness and not by issues of oppression, imperialistic agendas, and white control forced upon people of color. The act of centering on the systemic factors that trigger racism is ignored while paying tribute to the achievements and contributions of people of color (Solomon, Portelli, Daniel & Campbell, 2005).

Additionally, white educators support the status quo when marginalized groups become the “Other”, and whiteness is centered as the standard (Gorski, 2006). Solomon et al. (2005) stated:  
The continued failure to implicate whiteness in discussion of societal change enables the [educators] to effectively remove themselves from the change process, thereby re-entrenching the normalcy and centrality of whiteness and white reality systems. This enables white privilege and dominance to remain unchecked and unchallenged (p. 159).

Ignoring whiteness and its benefits is a type of denial that disallows involving white people in their oppression, subjugation and abuse of marginalized racial groups. This can happen even in discussions about white privilege if the focus is solely on how people of color are impacted by it (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). The attention then shifts from the subject to the object of racism. Usually, discussions centered around race and racism focus on people of color who are affected by it; therefore, most white people see racism only as negative occurrences that affect others instead of viewing it from a perspective of advantages (McIntosh, 1988).

### **Resisting white privilege**

There are many authors who believe the key to resisting white privilege is to expose its elusive oppressive nature and to teach learners to rearticulate the definition of whiteness (Vaught & Castagno, 2008; Zingsheim & Goltz, 2011). Colin and Lund (2010) noted this should involve developing an antiracist white identity where whites could become allies once they understood

the nature of racism. These scholars called for developing a white pedagogy that is not racist or oppressive, but contributes to the cause of racial equality (Chubbuck, 2004; Manglitz, 2003).

Various education scholars have documented their strategies for teaching white privilege to their colleagues and students: from writing journals, to creating opportunities for dialogue, to using performing arts technique to show the existence of white privilege (Canniff, 2008; Lund, 2010; Solomon et al., 2005; Vyskocil, 2008; Zingsheim & Goltz, 2011). Albeit a very important first step towards becoming culturally responsive, scholars such as Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey (2010) advocated whites become more than merely aware of the social inequalities present in academia. As Davis, Mirick & McQueen (2015) stated, “When instructors acknowledge the complexity of their social locations, including sources of privilege, they model for students a way to explore their own relationship to social power” (p. 304).

While many authors have promoted professors engaging in honest dialogue and study on racial inequalities and white privilege, others have mentioned the challenges that come with attempting to move beyond dialogue and into practice (Guy, 2009; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Alfred (2002) noted, “Educators are trying to move beyond mere conversation and into action, but they are met with uncertainty and challenges that often result in part from a lack of personal awareness, knowledge, and cross cultural incompetence” (p. 93). Because of this, other scholars have advocated the importance of white educators personally examining themselves and their role in perpetuating racism through the use of personal narratives (Davis et al., 2015; Blum, 2000; Boyd, 2008). Reading and discussing race-focused publications and collaborating to integrate culturally responsive teaching practices can help professors acquire greater racial literacy as well (Harper & Davis III, 2016).

Another way for faculty to resist white privilege is to push for more diversity in their institution, which may mean challenging some faculty and student recruitment and retention policies and advocating against unjust institutional practices. By modeling action against injustice, educators aid their students in developing “self-awareness about their own identities and access to power” (Davis et al., 2015, p. 305). Lund (2010) suggested white educators join with their colleagues of color to address evidences of institutional racism. Harper and Davis III (2016) proposed utilizing the Equity Scorecard[1] to help sustain racial equity in student outcomes. Gorski (2006) recommended white educators ask themselves difficult, thought-provoking questions such as, “Do I support diversity as long as it does not change the stability of the current social powers or my own privilege?” or “Do I try to celebrate the differences of marginalized groups while avoiding the inconvenience of dealing with social reparations?”

### **Implications for practice**

Faculty must scrutinize the foundational principles upon which they develop their teaching philosophies because it will inform them about the degree to which they are actually committed to creating equity in the classroom. Educators should examine ways to overshadow white privilege within the perspectives, paradigms and media representation in their educational materials. This requires educators to develop a cultural conscious and engage in critical reflection about the influence of culture in the class, curriculum and institution.

White educators should also be compelled to study whiteness pedagogy, which looks at how their racial identity and the ideologies they bring into the classroom affect the instructional methods and the relationships with their students (Irvine, 2003; Landsman & Lewis, 2006). Whiteness studies also investigates the link between race, power and education and demonstrates its links to oppression (Solomon et al., 2005). Whiteness studies need to be at the forefront of self-reflection for professors because the large proportion of white, middle-class faculty in American colleges and universities are not representative of the growing diversity of the student population. If educators do not embrace this notion, they will not only be ill-equipped to serve their learners, they will also fail to prepare them to be successful in a diverse society.

## **Conclusion**

Synthesizing the literature around the general topics of white privilege, whiteness pedagogy, and adult and higher education, this review was designed to provide useful information for those looking to mitigate the effects of white privilege within their institutions. Addressing white privilege is necessary and useful for aiding the success of marginalized students and preparing all students for academic success. Confronting white privilege does not occur on a whim; faculty must be equipped with the knowledge to recognize it and address it. By developing a foundation built upon social justice, ensuring the success of all students, and the desire to create and defend policies that support efforts of mitigating the effects of white privilege, educators can better serve their students, regardless of differences.

## **Endnotes**

[1] See <https://cue.usc.edu/tools/the-equity-scorecard/>

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