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The Race to End Racism: Is the Academy in the Race?

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Disclosure: I am neither Black nor White. I speak as a bit of an outsider to this particular issue because I am of mixed Keetoowah Cherokee and White ancestry, appearance, and identity. Some of the arguments below may apply to Latinx and Native Americans, but in my experience, I have seen the greatest amount of institutional racism directed towards African Americans, thus my focus is primarily on African American hires in predominately White institutions.

When moderns think about the status and progress of African Americans in the greater society, there's an old saying that goes like this: In the American South, they (meaning White folks) love the person, but hate the race. In the North, they love the race, but hate the person. During my many years in and out of private educational institutions of higher learning, I have observed that the academy has taken on the latter disposition; they (the mostly White Academy) love the idea of ending racism, but are quite indifferent to the individual Black person, especially as a colleague. While educating the classroom to the horrors of the Michael Johnsons (Ferguson, MO) and Trayvon Martins (Sandord, FL) the position is clear: "We must end racism." But look around the seats of power. How many African American people are actually even in the room to contribute to this vital discussion?

The Academy has a long way to go, regardless of what it may think about itself, in order to develop a core value of diversity. The statistics bear this out: only 5.3% of the full professors in the United States are African American, Hispanic, or Native American (Jayakumar, Howard, Allen and Han).[1] With those statistics in mind, who do you think is making the decisions to

hire African Americans as colleagues and administrators? As a result of the lack of representation, the systemic nature of the academy and individual institutions often do not change in perspective or complexion.

Speaking of complexion, I have noticed the thrill of White colleagues and White administrators when a person of color is hired who thinks more like themselves than a person of color who thinks differently than they. Isn't one of the benefits of diversity to garner various perspectives, different than the other? The arguments concerning racial equity in the academe is much more complex than color. We all wear blinders. We all see from our own experiences and social values first, so we need each other for a fuller, more educated view.

The rationale given for not hiring Black people as colleagues is never focused on race, even though, from many persons of color perspective, it is all about race and systemic racism. How can we claim to be enlightening our student co-learners when we hide from the truth of our own systemic racism? As a participant/observer in the academe, I wish to focus on a few simple points so we may avoid common mistakes in our current thinking concerning the racist system in which we all participate.

1. **Begin with Integrity.** Much of the academy was formulated and constructed on social values during periods when Black people were enslaved, disparaged, marginalized, and outlawed from common humanity by White people. The racist institutional character of American institutions has taken on an anti-Black flavor meant to advance White folks and hold back Black folks. The best starting point is to admit this reality, discuss it openly with humility, and realize that every hire, though it may have other concerns, is innately about race.
2. **Set Goals for Final Hires.** While it is nice to think about having a final round of diverse candidates to choose from, in reality many Black candidates find themselves "out-diversified" by people from other sorts of diversities. If you lack a Black colleagues in your institution, then make and state the choice at the beginning of the process; "we are seeking to hire African Americans to fill a particular weakness in our perspective and also as a purposeful balancing towards racial equity, since we know White preference was built into the current system and it resulted in keeping Black candidates out." (Check with your AAO and HR department on making such a statement and maintaining your statement's legalities).
3. **Encourage, but Don't Presume, Diverse Opinions from New Hires.** While this may sound counterintuitive to everything I have just written, new hires need to know they are respected both for their academic expertise and for their particular views on the subject. I have seen colleagues discount a colleague of color's achievements because they believe they can only do for example, "the African American viewpoint." Hiring an accomplished person of color most often means they had to excel in the "generalized subject matter" (read White normalized subject matter) and go beyond it in order to develop additional perspective. Think of it as not hiring a "left-handed" person but rather as hiring someone who is ambidextrous.
4. **Create an atmosphere of Appreciation and Retention.** Newly hired faculty and

administrators of color need mentors or small groups of likeminded people with whom they can share freely. For a number of reasons, faculty and administrators of color must take on roles and burdens not necessarily assumed by the White population. These include: difficulty find and adjusting to housing, becoming the unofficial advisor/counselor to students of color, taking on additional committee work because they need POC representation, the isolated feeling of simply not relating to the cultural milieu and not being related to.

In the age in which we currently live, there is now very open discussion concerning White Supremacy in many areas of life that has been absent in the past. Predominately White institutions will be the richer for having open, balanced approaches from various viewpoints to deal with the ever-present concerns of traditionally racist institutions. We cannot have these discussions when African Americans and other people of color are not empowered with an equal seat at the same table.

[1] *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 80, No. 5 "Racial Privilege in the Professoriate: An Exploration of Campus Climate, Retention, and Satisfaction" (September/October 2009) Ohio State University.

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