

# Challenging the Norms of Whiteness

## European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness

This workshop was designed to invite participants to explore and reflect upon how educators can increase awareness about, and take action to transform, institutional barriers that thwart the development of inclusive and diverse academic communities. It is our assumption, developed in the course of seven years of inquiry as White scholars into the nature of Whiteness, that identifying ways that cultural and epistemological bias informs institutional norms can lead to systemic solutions and new practices. Participants had the opportunity to explore their own biases and ways of thinking as well as those that are common in higher educational settings. They were invited to consider how these ways of thinking may manifest in practices in their classrooms or their institutions that result in *de facto* exclusion of diverse perspectives.

In our work, as White scholars and educators we often found it difficult to even perceive institutional and structural forms of racism, precisely because the ways of thinking which we have come to associate with our Whiteness privileges the role of the individual and ignores or diminishes the role of institutional structures. To consider forms of racism and bias at an institutional level meant that we had to think differently about our collective actions in institutions. While we struggled to learn more about our individual racism and bias, we simultaneously had to consider how our collective “way of being” could make our institution less inclusive, no matter what our particular individual racism and biases might prove to be. We began to see an epistemology of Whiteness, or a “system of thought” that contributed to how White people view the world.

In understanding the purpose of the workshop it may be useful to reflect on the relationship among three related often conflated characteristics: Whiteness, dominant systems of thought, and power and privilege. We have come to see that these three features are overlapping but not identical. That is, not all White people share the system of thought and may be or may experience themselves as powerless. Nor are the dominant systems of thought exclusive to White people. The exercise of power within the social *status quo* may require the use of the dominant systems of thought, though of course the exercise of the power of resistance does not.

We do not mean to suggest that race is the sole or even necessarily the most significant historical factor in the construction of these norms. However, we come to these questions having given deep consideration to the role that Whiteness plays in the historical formation of these norms and aware that the exclusionary impact of the practices that manifest them falls heavily on people of color.

Consistent with our reflections on the emphasis that the dominant ways of thinking place on the individual, we see that often strategies for enhancing diversity in predominantly White institutions emphasize attending to and changing individual attitudes and behaviors. Such interventions are indeed crucial in creating change. However, creating institutional norms that foster inclusive environments requires assessment of systems of thought which goes well beyond individual behaviors. These ways of thinking often manifest in institutional norms and practices that can create educational environments that privilege those who are familiar with and comfortable with the culture and exclude those for whom it is either alien or incompatible with their values. It is these systems of thought and the institutional norms that were the focus of our presentation.

Those of us who have seen success in academic environments are likely to be well versed in the dominant systems of thought whether we are conscious of it or not. These often unstated values, epistemologies and practices reflect the historical legacy of the European university model. Simultaneously they often exclude values, epistemologies and practices associated with marginalized

peoples and cultures. An important first step is to increase our awareness that the institutional practices that we take for granted are embedded in a singular system of thought.

Part of the challenge in identifying these systems of thought and their manifestations lies in the nature of the ways of thinking themselves. First, one of the features that we have come to identify with whiteness is an emphasis on the importance and significance of the individual. So it is not surprising that solutions to problems in such an environment address themselves to individuals first. Another feature is the tendency to universalize the particular, that is to presume that the dominant system of thought is the best or the right way of being and thinking. Both of these tend to make the impact of the mind set invisible to its practitioners.

In the workshop itself we gave a variety of examples, beginning with the changing use of gendered personal pronouns which we have witnessed over the course of the last thirty-five years. The use of masculine pronouns to represent all humans was an invisible institutional practice with an implicit bias that often resulted in female scholars and students feeling excluded and less than. Such was the impact of this practice and its underlying assumptions that one member of our collaborative recalls being flattered when she was told that she “thought like a man.”

This example underlines the point made earlier that such normative practices are not solely or even necessarily the result of racial identity formation. While our emphasis is on the identification of norms that are associated with Whiteness, for the purposes of the exercises in the workshop, we did not limit participants to this realm. Rather we stressed the value in developing capacity to identify taken-for-granted norms and imagine the possible impact of practices based on them.

We do not have answers to many of the questions that raise here and which were raised in the workshop, but we do feel that without a dialogue about the institutional barriers to diversity, our academic communities will continue to consciously and unconsciously create barriers to inclusion. Our actions will continue to be out of alignment with our espoused values, and we will only perpetuate the discrimination, racism and biases that each one of us suffers from today.

In our own work and in the course of the workshop we identified a number of normative practices in higher education that have impacts on both faculty and students. Here is a partial list with some discussion to illustrate our points:

**Individualism:** We noted the significant value which is placed on being lead or sole author/principal investigator. In many institutions faculty who chose to teach collaboratively with others may find themselves experiencing invisible penalties because it is presumed that “shared” work in the classroom lightens the burden of preparation and assessment. We are aware that this bias towards sole authorship manifests itself in attitudes towards collaborative student work as well, despite much current emphasis on team learning. Often faculty, departments and institutions require additional products to ensure the participation of each individual student. Students and faculty whose cultures emphasize collective practice may find that the norm of individualism results in their feeling invisible and devalued.

**Dualism:** The emphasis on either-or thinking appears to us to remain dominant, whether in the debate mode encouraged in classrooms or in the true or false structure of examinations. We see it manifesting equally in the characterization of scholarship where quantitative and qualitative (or hard v. soft) are often described as oppositional, with one side privileged. This reduction to two opposed options often eliminates other options, prevents the exploration of complexity and limits discussion. The elided perspectives are most likely to be those least represented in the environment, i.e., those held by those not of the

dominant culture. Students and faculty of color may feel invisible and uninvited. Those who come from cultural perspectives that value agreement, consensus and complexity may find themselves left out of the conversation.

**Solution orientation.** This orientation towards answers rather than toward inquiry may also show up in an emphasis on attention to content as being superior to participation in process. The impact of this norm on issues of inclusion is direct: often when institutions seek to address “diversity” they see it as a goal to be achieved rather than a process in which to engage. The result is that the “problem” is identified (typically poor recruitment of faculty or students of color), goals set (usually in numbers) and the presumption of success attaches to the meeting of those goals. The result is frequently that recruitment emphasizes people of color who share the dominant way of thinking and that those who do not feel invisible and either fail or leave. This may be seen as justification for the disproportionate numbers of white students and faculty or may result in the identification of a new “problem” thus extending the cycle.

**Narrow definitions of the knowable and of knowing:** The organization of knowledge handed down by the historical university and enhanced by contemporary budgeting practices typically divides knowledge into separate, distinct and often unbridgeable categories. Certain forms of knowing are privileged and considered right, while others are considered as lacking rigor and/or validity. The manifestations of this norm may be among the more pernicious. Challenging them often goes to the heart of the purpose of an educational institution. The manifestations most comfortably identified as exclusionary might be those that attach to interdisciplinarity. Faculty are described as dilettantes if they cross fields rather than become narrow specialists and may face challenges in recognition, promotion and tenure. Students may find themselves barred from taking courses outside their major or in disciplines seen by their own as less than.

**Universalism:** The presumption that we all agree on just about everything, especially what is privileged and what is not. Universalization of a single perspective may manifest in such blatant ways as the structuring of the institutional calendar such that certain religious holidays are always observed while those who practice other faiths must seek accommodation. Even when such accommodation is considered routine, the impact is an additional burden on those faculty and students who do not participate in the dominant faith and may be made visibly different as a result. This norm may manifest in more subtle ways such as the articulation of appropriate classroom behavior, manners of speech, dress, etc.

We might include: Competition, efficiency, constructions of time, emphasis on quick thinking, and many more. It was not our intent to identify certain practices as appropriate or inappropriate, rather to ask participants to become more aware of the consequences of their underlying system of thought and the practices that may flow from them. You are invited to expand the list of possible norms as you engage in this consideration.

The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness fosters research and learning about White Supremacist Consciousness. Collective authorship under one name reflects our understanding of the way knowledge is constructed. Members came together originally through a cultural consciousness project at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco; members are Carole Barlas, Elizabeth Kasl, Alec MacLeod, Doug Paxton, Penny Rosenwasser and Linda Sartor. Further information about the ECCW can be found at [www.eccw.org](http://www.eccw.org) and inquiries are welcome via email: [collaborative@eccw.org](mailto:collaborative@eccw.org)