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## Teaching and Researching “The Politics of Race” in a Majority White Institution

*Byron D'Andra Orey*

It was the beginning of the fall semester, and first-year students had just reported for freshman orientation. It was a normal workday for me, “research as usual.” I parked my car, strapped on my backpack, and began my trek to the office. New students scurried to orientation sessions and others walked with an unassuming self-assurance. Along the way, a single word rang through the air, bringing my brisk pace to a halt. That word was *diversity*. My eyes settled on a group of parents and freshmen led by a university tour guide. “Yes, the university is full of diversity,” the tour guide shouted, as he competed with the construction overhead. I immediately became interested in the rest of the tour guide’s script since diversity is an issue that I attend as part of my research agenda. I stopped long enough to hear him say that the student body population included students from South Dakota, North Dakota, and many from various parts of Nebraska.

Hearing the tour guide’s script did two things: First, it reminded me that my perspective on diversity is very different from the university’s perspective. Second, it reminded me of the academic environment in which I work. As I will discuss in this chapter, based on my socialization pattern, diversity for me primarily focused on efforts of inclusion along the lines of race and gender. Residents of this region, however, because of their socialization, think of diversity in other ways, since race is virtually a nonexistent issue.

In this chapter, I outline some of the challenges faced by people of color who teach at traditional white institutions (TWIs). In addition, I offer proposed

remedies to address such challenges. Given that the primary foci of Research I universities are research, teaching, and service (generally in that order), this chapter places special emphasis on these categories.

## Teaching Race in a Majority White Institution \_\_\_\_\_

As an African American growing up in Mississippi, I learned firsthand of the inequities confronting large segments of the African-American population. My undergraduate days were spent at what one expert witness in a Supreme Court case addressing such inequities phrased, "the worst public university in Mississippi." On the other hand, I also had the privilege of attending and ultimately teaching at the flagship university of the state. The disparities between these two universities were extreme. One university was predominantly black (approximately 99%), and the other university was predominantly white (approximately 90%). The predominantly white university possessed superior resources; the predominantly black university possessed inferior resources. With this firsthand knowledge of discrimination, I decided to further my education for the primary purpose of fighting racial inequality. As a result, my teaching and research are a direct function of my convictions and efforts to unveil and expose racial injustices within the United States.

Teaching students about race and politics at TWIs has proven to be a challenge. But, to be fair, teaching American government/politics in general (without focusing on race) proves to be problematic for any instructor because everyone "thinks" that they know politics. For example, I recall sitting at a luncheon amidst an interdisciplinary crowd when one of my colleagues, and very close friend from another discipline, gave his theory of how the Democratic presidential candidate would be elected. His source, unfortunately, was Bill Maher, former host of the now defunct television show *Politically Incorrect*. Admittedly, I actually enjoyed the few episodes that I watched; however, this is a very unreliable source for receiving a credible perspective on winning the Democratic primary. Typically, we political scientists turn to presidential or election scholars. Similar to my colleague, students are often uninformed and enter my classes with what are considered to be "doorstep" opinions (i.e., made up on the spot). I describe these opinions in the "overview" section of the first page of my freshman Power and Politics syllabus as follows:

Unfortunately, similar to the Monday morning (Sunday morning for college football fans) quarterback, politics is a field whereby many citizens have self-proclaimed themselves as experts, depending on which beauty salon/barbershop or

bar they frequent. Hence, this course seeks to reduce the number of “doorstep” opinions by teaching students how to systematically search for the truth (i.e., carve away as much residual to get as close to the truth as possible) as it relates to the field of politics. The course will also place strong emphasis on positivist questions, which address “what is?” as opposed to questions based on the normative approach, which address “what ought to be?”

By focusing on empirical evidence from a positivist approach, rather than a normative approach, students are forced to support their intuitions or general notions with facts. This approach helps to minimize the use of emotions during contentious discussions. In some cases, such a demand poses a problem for students because the evidence they find does not comport with their prior notions, particularly on issues regarding race. This might cause a student to reject the incoming information altogether, regardless of the source. Such behavior is known as cognitive dissonance, and it has been defined as an “inconsistency among related beliefs” (Jones & Gerard, 1967, p. 42). According to Jones and Gerard, this inconsistency leads to a “motivation to do whatever is easiest in order to regain cognitive consistency or consonance among beliefs” (p. 42). Hence, because the student is unable to engage in intellectual discourse at the level of abstraction presented by the black professor, he or she will simply dismiss the presentation as inaccurate, mythical, or simply false.

In some cases, when the student lacks the intellectual capacity to defend his or her perspective, it is even possible that the student might become irate and disrespectful. Political scientist Evelyn Simien (2003) uses the term “spirit murder” to describe the challenges faced by black women who teach issues related to race. She defines spirit murder as “hundreds, if not thousands, of negative experiences whereby undergraduate and graduate students pose inappropriate challenges to black women in the professorate on account of such personal characteristics as their age, race, and gender” (p. 10). She adds that such challenges include “loud outbursts, the use of profanity, abrupt exits, suggestive comments, and insolent email messages” (p. 10). Admittedly, as a male, I have rarely been challenged to such an extent. I can, however, offer anecdotal evidence of class disruptions that can fall under the spirit murder rubric. On one occasion, I confronted my Public Issues class about not mentioning oil as a potential explanation for the United States’ decision to go to war with Iraq. I asked the students whether I was the only one who saw the big pink elephant in the room. One student blurted out, “Are you blind?” I found

the comment to be disrespectful, given my authoritative position in the classroom. There was another case when I asked the students to perform an exercise in class. One student asked whether the class had a "moral obligation" to complete the assignment. Similarly, after placing an assignment on the blackboard, one student cried out "This doesn't make sense!" Although I was disturbed by the student's disruption, I maintained my composure and informed her of her right/option to leave. Based on her decision to stay, I asked the student to see me after class. In our brief discussion, I informed her that at no point in *my* class was she to interrupt or question my pedagogical approach. After she apologized, I allowed her the opportunity to read the instructions for the assignment from my instructor's manual. So, I would argue that I, too, have been a victim of spirit murder, although I concur with Simien that it occurs more often with black females when compared to other instructors.

Based on my conversation with other faculty (both black and white), combined with my own experiences, I have concluded that students simply do not respect faculty of color as much as they do white faculty. This proves to be most problematic when the topic is race. My assessment is that students perceive the perspective of the black instructor as rooted in bias simply because of the instructor's race. From a psychological perspective, the student observes the stimulus (the black instructor) and responds to the stimulus, rather than the facts. Regardless of the rigor involved in presenting empirical evidence, a sense of doubt will always lurk among some students.

The following commentary provides the context for the rest of this chapter. In response to a university newspaper article titled "Professor Teaches Diversity Disparities," which focused on my use of diversity in the classroom, a disgruntled student responded with the following letter to the editor:

A fine and necessary topic. I am concerned that students who enroll in what they think is a course in political science and government know they are really signing up for a course in racial sensitivity. This type of deceptive advertising is nothing new to UNL [University of Nebraska-Lincoln]. If you sign up for an English course you are more likely to be required to attend a gay/lesbian teach-in. As an undergraduate, I was less interested in what my professors thought about social topics and more interested in learning something about the course described in my catalog. I am fascinated that not only do professors have the extra class time to insert these ancillary topics, they seem to be the primary focus for the semester. Perhaps a fair approach would

be creation of a department for these professors and be open and honest about their intent. This way students would not be ambushed. I realize this sounds terribly insensitive but grant me the same latitude of diversity of thought you expect for yourselves. *Crazy Dave*

Crazy Dave's statement serves as the epitome of the type of misperceptions held by some students who attend TWIs. According to these students, any deviation from their worldview is a disservice because it is inconsistent with what they know about the subject matter.

Students who possess Crazy Dave's resistance to diversity are sure to translate their disenchantment into negative evaluations of the course. While I generally get good evaluations, I used to dread having to read written student evaluations. Despite the fact that 95% of them were constructive, I'd remember the 5% that were not. Each semester I would read at least one comment saying that "the professor focused too much on race." However, when I asked a good friend to survey my evaluations, we found, to my surprise, some very constructive comments. The point is that instructors should watch that they do not grant too much weight to students like Crazy Dave. In short, do not take teaching evaluations too personally; it can be a psychologically draining process.

Additionally, I have often heard black instructors (and women) indicate how students seem surprised at how much knowledge the instructor possessed about a topic. On student evaluations, students often say the professor was "extremely knowledgeable about the subject matter"; or "the professor really knew her stuff." These comments can be taken two ways. On the one hand, one of my black colleagues believes the student was really impressed with the teacher's performance in the class and simply stated this. On the other hand, some colleagues indicate that students probably entered the course with low expectations because of their stereotypes of minorities and women. Admittedly, I somewhat straddle the fence on this issue. Assuming, however, that students possess low expectations of minority or female instructors, there is a high probability that the instructor's teaching evaluations will suffer.

Given the potential bias associated with this process, one should not rely solely on this method of evaluating one's teaching. As a result, additional means of documenting one's teaching should be considered, and I offer two such options. First, a teaching portfolio can be composed that includes a self-assessment of one's teaching. For example, an instructor can examine whether certain assignments assist students in preparing for exams when compared to other assignments. The portfolio forces the instructor to outline his or her

goals and objectives as they relate to teaching. Second, the instructor can ask a colleague to conduct a peer evaluation of his or her teaching. In addition, it is probably a good idea to include some senior faculty (or at least tenured members) in the evaluation process.

Using alternative methods to document teaching does not eliminate the use of teaching evaluations, it simply provides a more complete picture of one's teaching. For example, teaching evaluations can be a valuable tool for receiving feedback early in the academic school year so that students' needs can be addressed. Also, research reveals that instructors tend to receive higher evaluations after students have been granted an opportunity to provide their input for enhancing the course. Overall, student evaluations are one of many tools that can be used to assess one's teaching.

### Researching Race in a Majority White Institution \_\_\_\_\_

My teaching and research philosophies are deeply rooted in my efforts to expose social, political, and economic inequalities within the United States. The early stages of my research have focused exclusively on the political attitudes and behavior of whites. This research examines the impact of the so-called new racism in explaining white support for racially conservative candidates, opposition to racial policies, and racist symbols. The new racism has been defined as a combination of individualism and anti-black affect; that is, the notion that blacks do not ascribe to the Protestant work ethic of self-help. This type of racism is argued to be different from old-fashioned racism, which is based on the attitude that blacks are biologically inferior to whites. In one study, I used these concepts to examine the impact of both the new racism and old-fashioned racism on white college students' support for the Confederate flag in Mississippi. The results indicate that white support for the Confederate flag can best be explained by old-fashioned racism.

In recent years, however, I have expanded this research to include the attitudes of black racial conservatives (i.e., blacks who are conservative on racial policy issues) toward other blacks. In particular, I apply survey items that have traditionally been used to measure white resentment toward blacks to now examine black intragroup resentment among black racial conservatives (e.g., Clarence Thomas, Ward Connerly). While there is nothing new about this phenomenon, there is currently a lack of research in the political science literature to explain such attitudes and behavior. This void poses somewhat of a problem for me. First, similar to my prior work on white racism, this is a very contentious topic. Hence, it is possible that peer reviewers will not judge the

work objectively. Second, the concept is likely to be dismissed as atheoretical, despite the countless efforts to provide theoretical support for the work.

Here a brief anecdote may be instructive. In one project I conducted a systematic analysis employing all 52 states where at least one African American was elected to the state legislature. The purpose of the research project was to determine if the creation of majority-black legislative districts increased the number of black legislative committee chairs. Upon reviewing the manuscript, one anonymous reviewer stated, "I am a bit put-off by the racially tinged statements made throughout the article. . . . The author(s) need to be careful about bringing in 'anecdotal evidence' in a scholarly manuscript, otherwise it comes off as a 'politically correct' article that has an ax to grind." These comments were rather surprising, given the methodology—most of the article relied heavily on hand-computed probabilities and was a systematic analysis. More important, there were only two anecdotes within the entire paper.

Here, I caution other scholars with similar research interests against submitting their work solely to mainstream journals. It is imperative that one consider all avenues for publishing his or her work. This is a very effective strategy if one seeks useful feedback for enhancing his or her research. I have been very judicious about circulating my work on black intragroup resentment for fear that it may be misinterpreted. Someone could conclude from my initial findings that if blacks do not like other blacks, then why should society continue to consider white opinions toward blacks? For example, Voss (2001) wrote,

A surprising number of white Anglos report negative stereotypes about both Asians and Hispanics. This news may not be as dismal as it sounds, since Hispanics (as well as blacks) are more likely to criticize their own group in this way than white respondents are. (p. 224)

Hence, I have worked extremely hard to frame my research so as to not warrant such claims.

One way to receive feedback, and at the same time get work published, is to first "leak" the work to a more specialized journal. I have invoked this strategy by submitting some of my work to journals that specialize in black politics. In one case, within a week of the work's publication, a colleague I had not talked to for about 10 years called to inform me that this work had generated a number of sidebar conversations in his department. Having done work in this area himself, he was also very instrumental in pushing me in the direction of finding this piece a theoretical home, thus making it more marketable for mainstream journals.



## Publish or Perish

Participation and visibility in the execution of the business of the institution is important for the collegial well-being of the African American scholar. Of course, the danger of serving in too many roles is ever present for Black faculty. They are expected to serve as counselors, advocates for Black students, and represent the minority voice on their campuses . . . (Butner, Burley, & Marbley, 2000, p. 458)

Similar to teaching, conducting research in a majority white institution can also pose a challenge to black instructors. The most important focus at a Research Extensive university is research, which is reflected in the age-old adage "publish or perish." For example, 50% of my job is dedicated to research, 40% to teaching, and 10% to service. Unfortunately, as indicated by Butner et al., black faculty members are often consumed by service and teaching responsibilities, so their research suffers.

Although I have focused on the challenges of teaching and researching at TWIs, I will add that it can also be professionally rewarding. Lincoln, Nebraska, is approximately 2% black. I argue that in cities where the population is overwhelmingly white, say 80%–90%, it often means that social distractions will be kept to a minimum. As an assistant professor, fewer opportunities for distractions translate into more opportunities for work. To be fair, I have admittedly oversimplified this scenario; for all work and no play makes for a dull life. It also increases the probability of burnout. I recall my first year in Lincoln, Nebraska—I managed to work on eight projects, of which four were submitted for publication. I found myself possessed with an adrenaline flow that kept pushing me to do more. Ultimately, I realized that I was attempting to replace my social deficits with work. While some may see this as a good cost, one should protect oneself from burnout.

If one is placed in a position where his or her social life is limited/virtually nonexistent, I suggest taking advantage of the "time" (again, as protection from burnout) by engaging in the art of multitasking. Admittedly, I was unaware of the fact that I was multitasking until I mentioned to a friend how I would get bored with one project and initiate another. As a result, I accumulated more projects than I could have imagined. This was not completely a negative trait since it allowed me the opportunity to increase my productivity. One of the problems that can occur, though, is the exertion of too much time and energy in the initiation of a new project, instead of taking the time to complete a nearly finished old project. Either way, the accumulation of work is a good thing. In other words, once you take the time to dot the i's

and cross the t's on the nearly finished projects, you can resume the newly developed project. If you tend to get bored quickly, I recommend the multi-tasking strategy.

Now that we have created all of these tasks, strategies for "getting things off your desk" must be employed. The first strategy that I suggest is to submit one's work for presentation at a national, regional, state, or local professional conference, or simply arrange a lecture on the subject matter to be delivered on campus. This strategy will keep the project on the instructor's radar screen because a deadline is now associated with it. This is very important depending on the number of projects one has. Choosing to present the project as a lecture on campus also allows one to address the service component and it provides feedback on the work. Most conferences are set up whereby there is a discussant who reads the papers and provides feedback. Similarly, the questions asked during a lecture presentation may help one to improve the work.

Additionally, one should also consider including multiple authors on a project. I have been successful in finding scholars with similar research interests to assist me in completing a project. My strategy has been to choose from a pool of junior faculty who are also struggling to achieve tenure and a host of "hungry" graduate students, with mixed results. At times, I have attempted to include graduate students who possess excellent research and writing skills. However, it has been my experience that unless they are one of your students attending your host university, your work may become a victim of the "out of sight, out of mind" phenomenon. This is less likely to happen with colleagues; however, given the pressures of the tenure clock, colleagues are often confronted with their own research agenda. Nevertheless, it is always good to invite others who do very similar work to help ease the load. I offer this advice with one caveat, however. Since some departments may frown upon a research record that is dominated by multiple-author publications, you should know the expectations of your department before following such a strategy.

## Providing Service to the Community in a Majority White Institution

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In most Research Extensive universities, the service component/demand of one's job is very minimal (in my case 10%). As discussed earlier, however, people of color often allocate too much of their time in this area. One way to address the service component is to seek out community service organizations. This will not be difficult for people of color, because it is more often the case that they will seek you out. Dating back to Du Bois's (1903) notion of a "talented tenth" (p. 87), black faculty members have been charged with

the responsibility of assisting in the uplifting of the community. So it is not unusual for them to be asked to assist in a proposal writing exercise or research project as it relates to the community or be invited to give talks and speeches. Similar to the research component of one's job, the instructor should be careful not to overcommit himself or herself. These projects can be very time-consuming, and while in many cases necessary, the responsibility should not be shouldered by untenured faculty members. Therefore, one should suggest that they would be better equipped to serve the community after achieving tenure. This does not by any means suggest that one should not participate in these much-needed projects; however, one should be very careful *not* to become overburdened with such responsibilities.

Let me explain. One year, during Martin Luther King, Jr. week, I was asked to join two other senior colleagues in a campus forum on reparations. Although the subject of reparations falls under the much broader topic of my primary research, black politics, by no means is it an area for which I possess expertise. However, despite advice by colleagues not to get bogged down in too many service activities, I found it impossible to turn down a request made by a senior colleague (and former chair). In preparing for this event, I found myself allocating at least two weeks of research time. This occurred at the beginning of the spring semester when I was preparing to teach a new course for the first time.

Additionally, during the same time that I was preparing for the Martin Luther King, Jr. presentation and "prepping" for the new course, I had also agreed to read and evaluate a manuscript for a book publisher. To be fair, I had agreed to undertake each of these responsibilities a few months in advance of their deadlines. But I did not take into consideration that the book manuscript's deadline was at the end of the fall semester in mid-December. At that time, I found myself in the midst of wrapping up the semester and was simply too burned out to meet the deadline. Knowing that the publisher had granted a grace period, I decided to drive from Lincoln, Nebraska, to Jackson, Mississippi, for the Christmas holidays, with every intention of finishing up the review. Put simply, it did not happen. I enjoyed my holiday like everyone else, with one caveat. I had agreed months prior to participate on a panel in New Orleans, Louisiana. I drove to New Orleans and then on to Lincoln, Nebraska, with the intention of arriving the day before classes, which was not a good idea because I had not completed either the review or the presentation. Although I had nibbled at each of these projects over the break, I was unable to multitask these projects into completion. Ultimately, they were completed, but at a cost—I was almost burned out before the semester ever got started. The moral here is to "Just say no!" You will have ample time after earning tenure to help the community.

Despite this advice, there are some cases when the instructor of color is expected to provide expertise in resolving conflict within the academic community. For example, during the 2004 fall semester, a Confederate flag was spotted in the dormitory window of a student on campus. An African-American woman complained to the dormitory director that the flag was offensive to her. During the next week, the owner of the flag and the young lady exchanged a couple of letters in the campus newspaper. While letters supporting the position to keep the flag were submitted to the paper, no one submitted letters supporting the African-American woman's perspective. Enter me. Typically, I have attempted to avoid campus-related conflict in my efforts to fulfill my duties of research, teaching, and service responsibilities delegated by the university and the community. However, I believed it was my duty to respond to this issue. Some of my published works, as well as my ongoing research, are directly related to racial attitudes and the Confederate flag, and I felt compelled to offer the student some assistance. I thought, to quote a prominent civil rights activist, "If not me, then who? If not now, then when?" Unfortunately, this thought comes to mind *very* frequently when black faculty are sparse. It took me about three to five days to write an editorial to the local newspaper providing an expert perspective. But while I received a few "way to go" comments from colleagues, and there was even one "convert" based on the letter, the flag remains a permanent fixture in the dormitory.

## Conclusion and Recommendations \_\_\_\_\_

In this chapter, I have outlined some of the challenges confronted by instructors of color who teach the politics of race at traditional white institutions. In addition to providing a few closing remarks, this section will delineate some recommendations for ameliorating some of the challenges discussed here.

I first suggest that departments attempting to diversify their faculty consider hiring more than one person of color. While I was contemplating whether to accept my current job, I was contacted by a woman of color who told me that she had just accepted a position to teach in the same department. Her phone call was very influential in my decision to take the job. At the time, there was one person of color on the faculty, and the addition of both me and this woman created an unusually high number of blacks in a small department of 14. While the woman has since left the university, her presence was extremely important in helping me make the adjustment to a racially homogeneous teaching environment. I can vividly recall the times when I would barge into her office, and she the same, recounting the challenges of the day. On some days when we saw one another, a look of despair on either of our faces

led to an invitation to "take a seat on the couch." In taking this seat, we were able to express verbally the challenges faced during the course of the day. In sum, having someone around who not only looks like you, but who can empathize with you about some of the challenges confronted at TWIs is very important for your survival as a junior faculty member.

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed the great demands placed on people of color to perform community service and service within the academy. Such demands pose a serious problem in academia that needs to be acknowledged by higher ranking administrators. This problem is particularly challenging at Research Extensive universities. People of color are called upon more often for their expert opinions on issues pertaining to racial matters because of their low numbers on campus. Even though my area of expertise is racial attitudes and legislative behavior, I am often asked by my colleagues in the academy or citizens in the community to discuss issues that are beyond the scope of my expertise (e.g., reparations). Such requests can become overwhelming and demand an enormous amount of time that otherwise could be allocated to research. It is imperative that administrators recognize the burdens placed on faculty of color, as they relate to serving the academy and the community. One suggestion for ameliorating such burdens is to either reduce the teaching responsibilities or the research requirements for people of color who are faced with such challenges. In short, people of color should be given more credit for the countless hours spent performing service. Junior faculty members are particularly vulnerable to overextending themselves in the area of service. As a result, chairs and deans should protect junior faculty by reducing their service responsibilities.

Mentorship is also very important in understanding the need to carefully manage one's time as it relates to service. While my department has given me a formal mentor, I have also inherited an informal mentor, my exercise partner. Currently, I exercise with one of the senior colleagues from the department, and during these workout sessions I receive valuable advice. In fact, during our treks to the gym or while working out, I am often reminded to be careful about overindulging in service activities. While it does not reduce the volumes of requests that I receive, this advice is a reminder that research is my first priority.

In closing, the most important recommendation I can offer is directed, not to administrators, but to faculty of color. While attending a conference sponsored by the Compact for Faculty Diversity, I was reminded by one of the guest speakers that balance is the key to survival for both students and faculty of color at traditionally white institutions. A balanced lifestyle should be first and foremost.

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