

# Disrupting systemic racism of employees in higher education for non-whites



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## Disrupting Systemic Racism of Employees in Higher Education for Non-Whites

### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the role that White administrators and colleagues can play in disrupting systemic racism in the supervision of people of color in student affairs, specifically within higher education. The primary goal of the study is to gain insight from the perspectives of people of color, how racism and bias in the supervision of people of color could be disrupted and what role, if any, White people can play in that disruption. Following a critical race theory (CRT) framework, the study will outline how White people can effectively engage in dismantling the current system in order to interrupt oppressive patterns of behavior. This study will utilize qualitative research and follow a CRT framework. The research conducted will include qualitative interviews with participants who identify as student affairs professionals of color about their past and present experiences with workplace racism, how they believe inclusive places of employment could look, and what role White individuals in administrative or managerial positions can play in contributing to an inclusive environment.

## Disrupting Systemic Racism of Employees in Higher Education for Non-Whites

People of color who work in higher education are experiencing bias and oppressive treatment from White supervisors. There is a long history of racism in higher education (Thelin, 2011). Connections between Ivy League institutions and slavery found that much of the wealth that came through the <https://assignbuster.com/disrupting-systemic-racism-of-employees-in-higher-education-for-non-whites/>

founding families of early colonial colleges was a result of slavery (Wilder, 2013). Additionally, Patton (2016) summarizes systemic bias in higher education in higher education when she writes about the revelation where humans were horrifically mistreated for causes of institutional advancement and financial stability. At present, the documentation and literature that illuminate the experiences of higher education staff employees of color is still growing, specifically on predominantly White campuses or under White supervision. This study will focus specifically on higher education, where non-Whites have reported their experiences with microaggressions (Museus & Ledesma, 2015), and feelings of isolation (Gardner, Barrett, & Pearson, 2014). When characteristics associated with Whiteness are the standard, the racism and oppression that come with that can go unseen and therefore unrecognized by Whites, which then shroud diverse perspectives. Honest intentions can and often do miss the mark, especially when they are rooted in a desire to be helpful without first understanding systemic oppression and listening to the stories that non-Whites have to tell. With many Whites paralyzed with fear of being deemed a racist, it can be easy to misstep or stay silent for fear of misstepping.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to look at the active roles White people can play in interrupting and dismantling systems of racial autocracy in higher education, specifically racism and oppression that is present in the management and supervision of people of color in higher education student affairs environments by non-Whites. One of the main goals is to gain insight, from the perspectives of people of color, in reference to what White people

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can do to engage in dismantling systems of oppression. This study will focus specifically on the experiences that professionals of color who are employed or have been employed in student affairs, have with bias and racism in the supervision they have and do receive and how that can be interrupted by White managers, colleagues and supervisors, if at all. The goal for this study is to gather information to be used as a guide for White people in higher education, remarking on the experiences that fellow employees who are non-White are experiencing with racism and bias in the workplace, how Whiteness is a key contributor to this, and what White individuals can do to dismantle systematic racism in higher education.

### Research Questions

This study will aim to address the following research questions:

1. How do non-White higher education professionals describe the role of White people in the framework of dismantling oppression, if at all?
2. How can bias in the management and supervision of professionals of color in higher education be both disrupted and broken down?
3. What background information is necessary to fully understand the relationship between a White supervisor and person of color, specifically in the confines of higher education?
4. How do we define racism, bias and microaggression in the context of Whites managing and in administrative roles, to non-Whites in higher education?
5. What role do Whites play current in the disruption and dismantling of systemic racism of employees in higher education?

## 6. What are the historical and present roadblocks that prevent progress on this subject?

### Literature Review

Although a historical perspective on higher education within the United States brings forth a reminder of its racist and oppressive roots a look at more recent campus climates highlights that this issue is still very prevalent. Utilizing over 15 years of research on campus climate, Harper and Hurtado (2007) presented an analysis that was rife with themes of “ exclusion, institutional rhetoric rather than action.” In addition to highlighting the issue itself they also found that there was little to no understanding of where the problem originated from, a clear understanding of it, or what to do about it. Pilkington (2013) echoed this sentiment by drawing attention to seemingly progressive faculty who inadvertently perpetuate White values, even when consciously seeking and putting forth an effort to create more inclusive spaces. Critical White studies, Critical Race Theory and an in-depth look in to supervision of non-Whites, offer a starting point for understanding the learned invisibility of Whiteness and therefore, the challenges faced when addressing it.

### Whiteness

If we are to unlearn racism, we have to first understand what Whiteness is. O'Brien (2001) offered the analogy of Whiteness as the disease that upholds systems of White supremacy and racism, which is the symptom. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) noted there are a multitude of compelling arguments for considering race as the root for understanding inequity. While

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the term “Whiteness” was first used in 1920 (Ladson-Billings, 1998) it is difficult to conceive that he was the first individual to write about the practice of valuing White individuals over non-Whites. It is a social construct (Ladson-Billings, 1998) of power and supremacy (DiAngelo, 2006) that is systematically linked to White privilege and dominance (Wilder, 2013). Whiteness not only represents the way people understand their roles within society but even more, is representative of an entire way of life through which people view the world and Whiteness has been at the center of standard in the United States since its colonization (Bell, 2000). Whiteness is upheld through a framework which supports the central theme of White supremacy that is continually reproduced by normalizing, invisibility, and deeply engrained socialization (Thelin, 2011). Lastly, since Whites do not have to talk or think about race because White is the norm (Bell, 2000), Whiteness is considered invisible because it has come to be accepted as normal in the United States (DiAngelo, 2011).

### Critical Race Theory

Often referred to as the original critical race scholar, Derrick Bell (1995) described critical race theorists as scholars who are “ideologically committed to the struggle against racism, particularly as institutionalized in and by law” (p. 898). CRT began in law as scholars initially began studying the repercussions of race and racism on law and policy (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solórzano, 2002). The work of Bell and other critical race theorists planted CRT’s roots through asking questions about the role of the law as related to oppression and bias (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

From there, critical race theory was able to place race and racism at the <https://assignbuster.com/disrupting-systemic-racism-of-employees-in-higher-education-for-non-whites/>

center of research, drawing in scholars who were committed to disrupting racism and racist systems (Iverson, 2007). Critical race theory affirms that racism is a permanent and consistent experience for non-Whites in the United States (Hiraldo, 2010) while recognizing race as a social and political construct, not simply a biological label (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Solórzano et al. (2000) noted, “ Racism is about power, a form of power that people of color—that is, non-Whites—in the United States have never possessed” (p. 61). Using the five tenants, as a vehicle, CRT challenges meritocracy, colorblindness, equal opportunity, and White privilege, while centering social justice (Patton & Bondi, 2015). In higher education, the foundation of CRT includes the must for the recognition of racism as central and something permanent to the storytelling of the individual experience. (Patton & Bondi, 2015). Critical race theory is different from other frameworks because it tries to foreground bias and oppression methods while simultaneously challenging traditional structures. (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

### Supervision/Management

The supervision of an employee in higher education goes well beyond the simplistic management of daily work. It is often much deeper and involves elements of onboarding, professional development and evaluation (Broido, 2000) and believed that when done correctly, supervision leads to individual accomplishment, overall organizational achievement and professional advancement. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) created a guide which outlines the core competencies deemed necessary for success as a higher education professional. Within the

Organizational and Human Resources section there is emphasis placed on <https://assignbuster.com/disrupting-systemic-racism-of-employees-in-higher-education-for-non-whites/>

competence in supervisory and staffing practices with a majority of the text referencing the synergistic supervision model which is rooted in establishing open lines of communication, building honest and trustworthy relationships, feedback and appraisal from supervisors and the identification and support for professional development of staff (NASPA, 2015). However, the study used to make these determinations did not consider the impact of race as less than 10% of the subject were higher education employees of color (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). There is limited research on how supervision in higher education is impacted by race with much of the literature that is specific to race, bias and their role as it relates to supervision in student affairs, coming from doctoral dissertations (Jenkins, 2015). This brings to the forefront an extreme gap in existing students and documentation regarding the job satisfaction of non-Whites in higher education. Additionally Pilkington (2013), points out the lack of internal studies which lead to literature and documentation from higher education Human Resources Departments identifying the experiences of non-Whites being supervised by Whites in these roles. In his literature, Jenkins (2015) noted that looking at the job satisfaction of midlevel managers in student affairs found that African American and Latinos were more likely to leave the field. He concluded that more research on the experience of African American midlevel managers was needed, as the risk of leaving the higher education career field was notably higher than their White colleagues.

## Methodology

To access insights into racism and oppressive environments in the higher education workplace, the study will use a qualitative approach, which will be <https://assignbuster.com/disrupting-systemic-racism-of-employees-in-higher-education-for-non-whites/>



mainly comprised of one-on-one interviews with the participants. This method of data collection is important to this study because this format will offer a space for participants to feel comfortable sharing their personal stories and speak of examples of racist interactions they have been a part of or witness to be those overt or subtle. Additionally, critical race theorists think of storytelling as an essential tenant to exposing systematic and structural oppression (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Interviewing which leads to storytelling, which is the primary method of qualitative research, provides a safe space for individuals who feel they have been continually oppressed in their work environment but it also provides context that can challenge the controlling story (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This study will use purposeful sampling to identify a participant group comprised of different genders, ethnicities, races, and sexual orientations who have a minimum of 3 years of experience as a working professional in the field of higher education.

### Research Design

This study will utilize qualitative research focused on interviewing the participants about their experiences with microaggressions and overt racism in their higher education places of employment. The interviews will be conducted one-to-one, in person, and allow a safe space for storytelling and examples of experiences to be detailed.

### Sampling

As stated above, the sample for this study will be a participant group comprised of different genders, ethnicities, races, and sexual orientations who have a minimum of 3 years of experience as a working professional in <https://assignbuster.com/disrupting-systemic-racism-of-employees-in-higher-education-for-non-whites/>

the field of higher education. Sampling persons of color will be important to this study because at present research exists which discusses this subject from the viewpoints of White people. The gap in the research is exposed when it looks at this subject from the perspective on non-Whites. Patton and Bondi (2015) note that in order to disrupt and break down oppressive systems a decentering of Whiteness needs to occur which at present, is the historical norm for institutions of higher education. By interviewing non-Whites about both their experiences with racism and bias in the supervision they receive or have received as well as their perspectives on how White administrators and managers can contribute to disrupting this experience, we stand to gain insight into how White people can aid in effecting change.

### Instrumentation

This study will utilize qualitative research but also be integrating CRT framework as a guide. Hiraldo (2010) identifies the five tenets of CRT to be:

- The centrality of race and racism as a permanent component of American life.
- Dominant ideologies such as neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and meritocracy must be challenged.
- The centrality of experiential knowledge of non-Whites is central to understanding racial inequality.
- A commitment to social justice.

- A transdisciplinary perspective puts race and racism into a historical context.

According to Je (2007), the belief that racism is pervasive within society is rooted within CRT and in reference to education, or higher education, CRT attempts to challenge traditional archetypes and seeks to separate discourse on race, gender and class by shining a light on how these social infrastructures impact their non-White communities.

### Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The data for this study will be collected through the one-to-one qualitative research interviews. The interviews will be conducted in person, one-to-one in a safe environment where the non-White participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences with bias and stories of oppression in higher education. This study is an opportunity for those participating to become part of growing research in this field, which can lend itself to creating a larger plan for disrupting systemic racism and dismantling the current environments that foster oppression. While there may be no immediate direct benefit to persons of color who participate, their participation could help others in the future in un-learning racist behaviors and practices. The data is reliant upon the truth telling of non-Whites and their experiences and ideas on how this disruption could begin to take place as well as the truth telling of Whites in managerial and administrative positions and how they currently believe they impact these environments.

### Protection of Human Rights

If exposed, the information within this study has the potential to create a hostile work environment and even lead to the indirect dismissal of the participants if those individuals who are being spoken about obtain the data. The data that is collected during the course of the study will be kept confidential and stored securely and will be destroyed after the study has been completed in full. Aliases will be assigned to each volunteer participants and those they speak about so all identifiable information such as participant name, participant titles, place of employment, and name(s) of employers, and will be stripped. You may request a copy of this study directly from the researcher when it is complete.

## Discussion

Much of the information that currently exists on this subject is from the perspectives of White individuals. The current literature does not seem to acknowledge the limitations of having an oppression-free structure that has been defined by a predominately White group. For example, Broido (2000) remarks that, “ Social justice allies are members of dominant social groups who are working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based on their social-group membership.” At present, the loudest voice and perspective regarding systemic racism in higher education is coming from White people. Additionally, Patton and Bondi (2015) point out overwhelming the limitations of centering White voices in a conversation of allyship.

The results of this still will serve as a guide for non-Whites to feel empowered and seen in their current oppressive environments while offering

Whites a realistic and truthful depiction of what is happening on higher education campuses across the country. The results of this study are not intended to blame but to illuminate an issue that is minimized while guiding those in positions of power with the necessary tools and ideas to put forth change. There is importance in both the documentation of this study as evidence surrounding systemic racism in higher education as well as importance surrounding the action that can be taken with its results.

## Conclusion

Student affairs is a profession that claims to value inclusion, diversity, and social justice, yet student affairs professionals of color report experiences with pervasive microaggressions, bias, and racism in the workplace (Jenkins, 2015). Further, there is a well-documented history of students of color experiencing widespread racism and microaggressions on college and university campuses across the United States (DiAngelo, 2006). As a career field, the path of employment within higher education is not currently living up to its touted values of diversity, equity, and social justice. Using the information from this study, efforts to dismantle workplace racism could be put in to action and a climate that is truly conducive to diversity could begin to take shape. Relationships between White supervisors and non-White employees could begin to root their relationships in trust and from there open an honest and open dialogue surrounding race, identity and inclusion.

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