

# Community Colleges, the Racialized Climate, and Engaging Diverse Views Through Intergroup Dialogue

by Chaddrick Gallaway, Research Assistant  
Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher, OCCRL Director

Following the 2008 election of President Barack Obama, the United States' first Black president, many questioned whether we entered a post-racial society (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2015). However, the murder of Trayvon Martin on February 12, 2012, placed a spotlight on salience of race, racial inequality, and racism. A national conversation ensued as President Obama expressed his concern and how it resonated with him, stating, "If I had a son he'd look like Trayvon; when I think about this boy, I think about my own kids." Acts of violence and police brutality resulting in the deaths of unarmed people of color are a national issue, increasingly commonplace, and not isolated events, as evident in the deaths of Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Gardner, Sandra Bland, and countless others.

## Race Matters: Changing Demographics and College Campuses

Systemic racism permeates every facet of society. The issues that people from marginalized communities face do not disappear when they step on a college campus. There is a racialized reality on campuses. From the killing of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown that launched the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and sparked the galvanizing of the Concerned Student 1950 group at the University of Missouri to protest racism on campus, to open displays of racist acts as white supremacists penetrated the University of Virginia doing Nazi salutes while chanting, "White Lives Matter," "You will not replace us," and "Blood and Soil." In recent years, the growing racial antipathy that has surfaced on college campuses has resulted in student activism (e.g., BLM) to challenge hostile hallways and chilly campus climates. There is mobilization among student groups on all sides of the racial divide that has come to the surface. Hence, a heightened discussion of racial issues is occurring on campuses across the nation.

Educators must be ready to understand how to have conversations about race and other social identities and be prepared for them when they occur. As over half of all African-American and Latinx students in higher education are enrolled in community colleges, policies and programs that promote racial parity are crucial. Previous research illustrates that one means to affirm diversity is by diversifying faculties to be more representative of the student population (Bower, 2002; Harvey, 1994; Smith, 2015). Yet, African American and Latinx faculty remain disproportionately underrepresented on 2- and 4-year college faculties (Harvey, 1994; Kelly, Gayles, & Williams, 2017; Turner, 2015). Faculty and students of color contend with racism and discrimination in academia as a microcosm of society, resulting in differential racial ideologies and strained race-relations (Bowman & Smith, 2002; Orelus, 2013). The literature documents

how "chilly" campus climates and racially charged obvious and subtle encounters can be harmful to members of marginalized, racially minoritized communities in particular to transitioning to higher education, student outcomes, and faculty/staff satisfaction and retention (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera 2008; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Stevenson & Zamani-Gallaher, 2016). These conditions amount to what Branch (2001) labels a discriminatory campus climate.

In consideration of the legacy of racism and discrimination endured in society and postsecondary contexts, the tenets of critical race theory (CRT) are an instructive framework to use to examine the environment and experiences of faculty, staff, and students of color at community colleges. CRT's approach engages in exposing patterns of racial exclusion and exploring more subtle, but just as deeply entrenched, racism that manifests in postsecondary contexts (Bowman & Smith, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Additionally, racial battle fatigue as a practical extension of CRT (Smith, 2010; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Stevenson & Zamani-Gallaher, 2016) reflects the subtle and overt discrimination experienced by students, faculty, administrators, and staff of color and how the manifestation of its ongoing impact results in psychological, behavioral, and physiological racialized strain on marginalized groups. The vast majority of 2- and 4-year institutions of higher learning are historically and predominantly white institutions with campus climates that create racial battle fatigue for many people of color (Smith, 2010).

There is a need to center the institutional climate for diversity and the racialized environment at community colleges given the noticeable gap in the literature. There are a range of compelling interests and cause to discuss

There are a range of compelling interests and cause to discuss race, racism, and race relations, especially at community colleges given the critical mass of students of color enrolled.

race, racism, and race relations, especially at community colleges given the critical mass of students of color enrolled. Hence, how are community college educators dealing with issues of diversity emerging on campus, and how do they address unrest as exhibited in society and on campuses? The topic of campus diversity, student unrest, and activism has been scant in the 2-year college literature. Intergroup dialogue (IGD) could possibly mitigate such conditions at community colleges. However, little to no attention has been paid to studies or community college programs that incorporate IGD in response to addressing campus climate concerns and race relations at the 2-year college level.



## Creating Critical Social Awareness through IGD

IGD is a practice used in higher education that encourages student engagement across cultural and social differences to stimulate/promote students learning about social-identity based inequities, while showing the importance of everyone's role in social justice issues (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013; Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). IGD has grown into its own facet of diversity education due to the need to prepare college students to live and work in a diversifying world. It is predominantly defined as an approach used to get students from different social identity groups to communicate using face-to-face facilitated interactions over a sustained period of time (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). During IGD sessions students work to understand their similarities and differences based on their social identity makeup, along with understanding how inequalities exist for certain groups of people, and also how the students should work together in order to improve relations between privileged and minoritized groups.

## Identity, Privilege, and the Foundations of Intergroup Relations

The Program on Intergroup Relations was founded at The University of Michigan in the late 1980's (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013). Its focus is to provide students with tools to dialogue and investigate their own social identities as well as other social identities and their role in institutionally and structurally based oppression, power, and privilege by taking diversity-of-education-based courses (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001; Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler & Cytron-Walker, 2007). Diversity-of-education-based courses, known as IGD classes, are offered in a litany of topics such as race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, religion, sexual orientation conflict, etc. IGD provides a structured environment for students to dialogue on social identity while earning college credit. During IGD, students are expected to complete weekly academic and anecdotal readings about that week's topic, while also participating in multiple exercises that are used to garner personal experiences that are related to the dialogue topic.

## Educational Goals of IGD

An overarching goal of IGD is to close gaps of conflict between diverse social identity backgrounds by building common ground between groups of people (Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2014). Bringing IGD to a college campus is one way in which we can bring people (college students) together in order to communicate and hold conversations about issues that showcase why it is difficult for people of different social identity groups to coexist, bridge, build, or find common ground. IGD seeks to raise consciousness, aid in finding common ground across differences, and promote social justice through individual practice. Consciousness raising within IGD seeks to raise the consciousness of all dialogue participants when it comes to understanding their own privilege and oppression as well as that of others. For a true dialogue to occur everyone in the dialogue must understand how their own social group plays a role in privilege or oppression (Cabrera, 2014; Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2014). In terms of relationship building, bridging people across differences is important to building relationships across two or more social identity groups that have historically been in conflict (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). For example, this could be students bridging a connection across race (white people and people of color), gender (men, women, and gender nonconforming), or religion (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Atheism). Due to IGD's focus on people's individual learning, along with their social identity group membership, how participants interact positively or negatively to each other affects the relationship of bridge building. It is important to note that IGD recognizes the

IGD seeks to raise consciousness, aid in finding common ground across differences, and promote social justice through individual practice. Consciousness raising within IGD seeks to raise the consciousness of all dialogue participants when it comes to understanding their own privilege and oppression as well as that of others.

relationships people forge based off their social identity group memberships (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). The most important factor in bridge building is building a strong magnitude for sustainable communication. This means that in order to have a strong, dialogue filled, rigorous conversations around social identities there has to be a stamina built up for these conversations.

IGD is also designed to strengthen individual and collective capacities to advocate for social justice (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007; Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2014). This goal is made possible because of dialogue participants opening themselves up and challenging their preconceived notions around privilege and oppression through consciousness raising, along with building bridges across differences. After completing the dialogue process participants should have a raised awareness around social identity issues and because of their consciousness raising a commitment to social change. The importance of bridge building is that it provides participants inside and outside of social identity groups with the capacity to not only challenge and improve intergroup relations within systems/structures but also promote the importance of sustainable and equitable outcomes. All of these goals inside of IGD are reached by the use of a sequential model that is based on working through multiple stages of social identity development:

- Stage 1** – Group Beginnings: Forming and Building Relationships,
- Stage 2** – Exploring Differences and Commonalities of Experiences,
- Stage 3** – Exploring and Dialoging about Hot Topics, and
- Stage 4** – Action Planning and Alliance Building (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007).

While this model is framed in stages, social identity development is not static and stepwise but fluid in nature. IGD attempts to raise awareness of personal identity, oppression, and privilege through critical conversations about social justice and social identities across difference. IGD has many implications for practice, programming, policy, and future study in relation to the community college context as it can offer insight into the conditions that generate and maintain racially hostile conditions not directly addressed or overlooked. IGD is one strategy that may illuminate institutional inequities and campus climate concerns and may aid in informing what approaches could mitigate race-related stressors for racially minoritized communities on campus.

## Closing Thoughts

What are the consequences of little faculty diversity at 2-year institutions? What strategies can community colleges implement to reduce the racialized role strain and racial microaggressions faced by people of color on campus? How can IGD be incorporated to facilitate culturally congruent campus contexts? These are contemporary concerns yet have been perennial problems at many colleges. According to Burke (2013), there are five steps in order to provide an enriching diverse climate on community college campuses. The first step is to understand what diversity means for the context of your college and community. The demographics of students along with their “cultural similarities and differences” will shape how a community or group of people will define and shape cultural norms. Because community colleges are instrumental in providing a strong educational voice within each community, community colleges can have important role in shaping cultural norms not only on campus but also in their surrounding communities. Paying attention to diversity matters, actively being inclusive, and engaging in equity-minded practices on community college campuses are important in providing culturally responsive and welcoming campus environments.

Gaining tools in facilitating identity-based conversations to engage across difference is an important skillset. As colleges increasingly struggle to deal with the complexity of race, identity, diversity, equity, and inclusion, it is incumbent that institutions of higher education provide opportunities for students, staff, faculty, and administrators to develop collaborative means of actively dealing with the dilemma in difference. The racial tensions playing out in the larger society at present are not segregated from racialized struggles on our campuses, 2- and 4-year alike. It is essential that campus climate and racial diversity considerations not be relegated to recruitment and retention alone but that expectancies that embed ethos of care advance racially just and equitable learning imperatives.

As colleges increasingly struggle to deal with the complexity of race, identity, diversity, equity, and inclusion, it is incumbent that institutions of higher education provide opportunities for students, staff, faculty, and administrators to develop collaborative means of actively dealing with the dilemma in difference.

## References

- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2015). More than prejudice: Restatement, reflections, and new directions in critical race theory. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 1(1), 73–87.
- Bower, B. (2002). Campus life for faculty of color: Still strangers after all these years. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 118, 79–87.
- Bowman, P. J., & Smith, W. A. (2002). Racial ideology in the campus community: Emerging cross-ethnic differences and challenges. In W. Smith, P. Altbach, & K. Lomotey (Eds.), *The racial crisis in American higher education: Continuing challenges for the twenty-first century* (pp. 103–120). Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Branch, A. J. (2001). How to retain African-American faculty during times of challenge for higher education. In L. Jones (Ed.), *Retaining African Americans in higher education: Challenging paradigms for retaining students, faculty, & administrators* (pp. 175–191). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Burke, L. H., Jr. (2013). Why we can't wait: Diversity planning in community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 37(11), 839–843.
- Cabrera, N. L. (2014). Exposing Whiteness in higher education: White male college students minimizing racism, claiming victimization, and recreating White supremacy. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 17(1), 30–55.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Gurin, P., Nagda, B., & Zúñiga, X. (2013). *Dialogue across difference: Practice, theory and research on intergroup dialogue*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Harvey, W. B. (1994). African American faculty in community colleges: Why they aren't there. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 87, 19–25.
- Hurtado, S., Alvarado, A. R., & Guillermo-Wann, C. (2015). Thinking about race: The salience of racial identity at two- and four-year colleges and the climate for diversity. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 86(1), 127–155.
- Hurtado, S., & Ponjuan, L. (2005). Latino educational outcomes and the campus climate. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 4(3), 235–251.
- Kelly, B. T., Gayles, J. G., & Williams, C. D. (2017). Recruitment without retention: A critical case of black faculty unrest. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 86(3), 305–317.
- Locks, A. M., Hurtado, S., Bowman, N. A., & Oseguera, L. (2008). Extending notions of campus climate and diversity to students' transition to college. *The Review of Higher Education*, 31(3), 257–285.
- Orelus, P. W. (2013). The institutional cost of being a professor of color: Unveiling microaggression, racial [in] visibility, and racial profiling through the lens of Critical Race Theory. *Current Issues in Education*, 16(2), 1–10.
- Parker, L., & Lynn, M. (2002). What's race got to do with it? Critical race theory's conflicts with and connections to qualitative research methodology and epistemology. *Qualitative inquiry*, 8(1), 7–22.
- Schoem, D., & Hurtado, S. (Eds.) (2001). *Intergroup dialogue: Deliberative democracy in school, college, workplace and community*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Smith, D. G. (2015). *Diversity's promise for higher education: Making it work*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Smith, W. A. (2010). Toward an understanding of Black misandric microaggressions and racial battle fatigue in historically White institutions. In E. M. Zamani-Gallaher and V. C. Polite (Eds.), *The state of the African American male in Michigan: A courageous conversation* (pp. 265–277). Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
- Smith, W. A., Allen, W. R., & Danley, L. L. (2007). "Assume the position...you fit the description": Psychosocial experiences and racial battle fatigue among African American male college students. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(4), 551–578.
- Stevenson, T. N., & Zamani-Gallaher, E. M. (2016). Racialized and gendered experiences of African American female faculty at public community colleges. In P. A. Pasque, N. Ortega, J. C. Burkhardt, & M. P. Ting (Eds.), *Transforming understandings of diversity in higher education: Demography, democracy and discourse* (pp. 180–201). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Turner, C. S. (2015). Lessons from the field: Cultivating nurturing environments in higher education. *The Review of Higher Education*, 38(3), 333–358.
- Zúñiga, X., Lopez, G. E., & Ford, K. A. (2014). Intergroup dialogue: Critical conversations about difference and social justice. *Intergroup dialogue: Engaging difference, social identities and social justice*, 1–24.
- Zúñiga, X., Nagda, B. R. A., Chesler, M., & Cytron-Walker, A. (2007). *Intergroup Dialogue in higher education: Meaningful learning about social justice*, ASHE Higher Education Report, 32(4). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Chaddrick Gallaway may be reached at [gallawy2@illinois.edu](mailto:gallawy2@illinois.edu).  
Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher may be reached at [ezamanig@illinois.edu](mailto:ezamanig@illinois.edu).