

Democracy's College

Critically Examining Whiteness and Explaining and Addressing Racism

Announcer Sal Nudo: Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series, a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. We encourage you to learn more about our office at occrll.illinois.edu.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Welcome to Democracy's College podcast. Today, we have a very special guest—with us is Dr. Nolan L. Cabrera. Dr. Cabrera is an associate professor of educational policy studies and practice, also is affiliated with the American Indian Studies program, the Mexican American Studies program, and the Social, Cultural, and Critical Theory program at the University of Arizona. Thanks for being with us today.

Nolan L. Cabrera: Thanks for having me opening up this important space.

Eboni Zamani Gallaher: Well, what I'd like to do is to start with some of your earlier work, if you will. You've challenged, over your career, the issues of racial diversity as universalistic and have really called us to question the *absence* of unveiling whiteness, which has so often reproduced White hegemony as well as racial and inequity. So I'm wondering if you can share with our audience why you feel it's necessary that we critically analyze whiteness in explaining and addressing racism.

Nolan L. Cabrera: There's *a lot* in that question, so I hope I get to all of it. But with respect to racism, whiteness is a very fickle beast. It's very agile. It's constantly moving and morphing and shaping in different ways. And I think that while some of our dear friends and colleagues who have done some important work around diversity, broadly defined, that their work hasn't directly engaged issues of race and racism. There's now becoming more of emerging, but when I started doing the work, they were definitively different. You were either diversity or critical race theory and never the twain shall meet. And I understand why that was, as we had talked about before, that when you're defining affirmative action in the Supreme Court, they're not going to hear anything about race and racism.



But the problem is we have these high-minded ideals in higher education that's supposed to be bastions of democracy and against totalitarian and tyrannical regimes. Well, you can't have democratic institutions and system inequities and

systemic oppression at the same time. Those are necessarily incompatible ideals.

And so I really wanted to ask that question: Where is race and racism? And some really important scholarship had come out in the early, mid-2000s around critical race theory. And critical race theory being one of the first really race-forward, race-centered components of higher education scholarship. But the difficulty with that—not the difficulty—I want to be really careful because I don't want to be talking out of turn. It's more like, let's think about these as complimentary analyses, not as competing analyses.

If you're using critical race theory to elevate the racialized experiences of people of color with respect to racism and how it affects the apartheid acknowledge, microaggressions, campus marginalization, those are the *effect* of racism, but we don't have the cost. So you need both to have a holistic picture of how racism operates on college campuses.

And so there is a sort of ambiguous norm of whiteness that was creating the racial marginalization. The critical race theorists were documenting, extensively documenting. And so, my work was trying to really continue in the vein of being really race- and racism-forward but flipping the script and seeing what is causing this, and also understanding that because racism is so endemic in society, a lot of the interpersonal work is largely unconscious.

And so a lot of actually really well-intentioned White folks are doing *foul* things racially, but without even realizing it. And what was interesting was most of the folks, when I wanted to start doing this, were like, "Why would you do that?" Like, if it's unconscious, they're not going to be able to talk to you about it. But what's interesting is when you get White folks talking about race and racism, this stuff starts coming out really quickly. You can see it very, very, very clearly. They don't realize that it's racist; otherwise, they probably wouldn't be so forthcoming with it, but it's right there just bubbling right beneath the surface.

And now with the rise of Trumpism, and I don't want to have it be *only* about what the Tribe Called Quest refers to as the Agent Orange—sorry, I love that little term of phrase. Because he's more, again, the *symptom* and not the problem, because remember a lot of this stuff was bubbling just beneath the surface. We get a Black president, all of a sudden the Tea Party comes out, and then it was just bubbling, and now it's kind of coming to a boil even more and more and more.

And so, once he's out of office—thank God that he's going to be out of office—we have *a lot* of work to do because the realities of racism in society reared its ugly head in a very real way. And we came to realize this is a much bigger endemic and systemic problem than we ever realized 10, 15 years ago. Or let me put it this way: that White folks realized; folks of color realized it a long time ago.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: There was so much in that response and really good stuff. And so what I want to do is before moving into our next area of conversation is to actually touch a little bit on affirmative action since you did make mention of it in your response. For as long as affirmative action has been around, it's been contested. And so, there've been numerous anti-affirmative action groups over the years and with one thing pretty much in common, that being to try to erase race from college admissions.

And so that there's a way in which there's interest-convergence when we think about different groups relative to college admissions and the role of affirmative action, so that if it's gender based, then it's okay, but that White women aren't any less oppositional to affirmative action if it's race-conscious, as one example. Or that the remedy is to say, "Well, let's just have class-based, economic-based forms of affirmative action." But again, that does not necessarily remediate and mitigate the effects of racism and/or sexism by just doing a class kind of race- and gender-blind version.

But that said, we again, seeing this uptick and interest, it kind of ebbs and flows, it's ever constant, but can you talk to us a little bit about why is this remaining the ultimate goal in terms of getting this case a return to the Supreme Court and trying to argue that this is now a policy that is putting both White and Asian American students at a disadvantage?

Nolan L. Cabrera: So, you're saying, why do people like Ed Blum keep pushing this forward?

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Yes.

Nolan L. Cabrera: Because they're racist, not to be too base and coarse. Well, they're also rich and bored. He has the luxury of picking these kinds of fights and being like, "Oh yeah, Abigail Fisher, you look a great person to be a plaintiff against UT Austin's affirmative action despite your horrible grades and mediocre test scores, you really should have gotten in because your family got in. It's so bad you had to go to Louisiana State."

I mean, the White entitlement around that is obnoxious because it's not just about that. And I use White entitlement intentionally because at every admissions cycle, you end up, you know, *Good Morning America* has on some White kid who got rejected from Penn or Harvard or Berkeley or Dartmouth or whatever it is. Actually, Berkeley is a bad example because they don't have affirmative action, but, you know, highly competitive institutions. And they're like, "Well, look at my scores and I had perfect grades, but if I had just been a Black lesbian, I totally would've gotten in." And they always pen some pithy response, pithy op-ed in their local paper, and it's just beyond obnoxious. But again, it's that entitlement to space. It's what whiteness scholars refer to as ontological expansiveness—that is, that White folk tend to operate as if all space should be and would be open to them.

Let's flip that on its head really quickly. Where is the narrative of the kid from the south side of Tucson, a barrio community, Title 1 schools, who busted their butts, took advantage of every single opportunity that they possibly could despite more limited opportunities than you would see even on the other side of town, on the north side, the White side of town. Where is *Good Morning America* going to that kid who applied to Stanford and got rejected? What, their dreams don't count? Their dreams don't matter? But that's, again, that White entitlement.

Let's set the record straight about this, because affirmative action has been painted as kind of this, like, radical, socialist, redistributive program. In the 60s, remember that was a *moderate* compromise between left and right. The right keeps pushing so far that it seems like this radical thing, and it's not. And the other problem is that we think about it as a panacea for all racial issues. That like, if we just have affirmative action in place, everything will be hunky dory. And no, no, no—it's an importance, but it's a *small* component of the largest fear. That's the bigger issue is that all of a sudden affirmative action becomes like, "Oh, if we just have this in place or if we take this away, everything will be amazing," and that's both naive and not true.

And then the last part about class-based affirmative action. I think you were really astute to reframe the issue because in terms of numerical representation, the number-one beneficiaries of affirmative action are White women. I mean, that's just empirical fact. And yet their relationship to affirmative action is really, really complicated because if they see themselves as beneficiaries of it, or potential beneficiaries of it, then they actually support the program. But if it's only a race-based thing, then they're like, "Oh, no, no, no, no, we can't do that." Because politically, class-based is seen as, you know, we should have class-based affirmative action *instead* of race-based affirmative action.

I take a different approach to it because I think that, actually, we should have gender-, race- and class-based affirmative action. Not "or" but "and." But then the problem is if we only do class-based affirmative action, yeah, we'll do a great job of bringing low-income White kids into campuses, but it's not going to do anything for low-income minority communities because classism and racism, from an intersectional perspective, are mutually constituted, *but* they aren't the same thing. Race and class exist in different spheres, just as gender and race support each other in terms of defining and structuring inequities, but they aren't the same thing. So you can't have just one locus of oppression and think that that's going to get the job done. And so what'll end up happening is that the whiteness will end up meaning that more White kids in a class-based affirmative action program will rise up and not so much other minoritized peoples. So, it's more that we have to think more complexly about these issues.

But whenever I see someone ask about class-based affirmative action, my BS meter goes off because it's usually not an honest question. It's just class-based affirmative action in order to *undo* race-based affirmative action. And I

completely reject that as a premise all the way around. It should be an and, both as opposed to an either, or.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: I hear you. Yeah, some of my work around affirmative action corresponds in terms of findings with respect to that. When there is affirmative action, more broadly speaking, where it's not nuanced and it's just, "Do you favor or disfavor affirmative action?" You know, you of course see where the most oppositional group are White males, followed by White females. Most supportive: folk of color. But when you unpack it and you look at it more granularly in terms of what is your level of support or disfavor for class-based, gender-based, race-conscious? Then you start to see some interesting dynamics play out, and that's where, in terms of hypothesis-wise, where I said, "I don't know that White woman would be any less oppositional if it were just gender-based versus race-based versus class-based, but let's test this out." And just as oppositional when it was the race-conscious but more supportive than White males when it was class-based and gender-based or general, where it was thought to be inclusive of class, gender, and race.

Nolan L. Cabrera: Well, and let's not forget, let's back up one thing real quick because I always like blowing up the arguments real quick, because remember these affirmative action debates are always about fairness. It's unfair, it's unfair. But of course we're the snowflakes. Anyway, that's beside the point. But if we're talking about fairness, then why is nobody suing Harvard over legacy admissions? Why is nobody suing Stanford over legacy admissions? And that's actually numerically bigger than the affirmative action admissions, but it's like we don't talk about that. And again, that's why I kept saying my BS meter keeps going off if it's really about fairness. And don't pretend that you don't know. If you know a lot about affirmative action, you also know about legacy admissions. Don't give me this nonsense.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Oh, it's picking selectively your nepotism that you attach the fairness meter.

Nolan L. Cabrera: Exactly, exactly, exactly.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Well, this conversation obviously is showing a clear racial politics at play. And one of the things I've always appreciated about your work is this constructive criticism of that. And so, there was work that you did some years ago, an article with colleagues that was in the *Urban Review* that I always appreciated. The title of it was, "If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress: Transformative Youth Activism and The School of Ethnic Studies." And within this, I'm wondering if you would take a little bit of time to talk to our audience about, again, we've just had a conversation about the attempts to dismantle race-conscious forms of affirmative action, but that there's also been attempts to dismantle relative to any kind of curriculum that challenges the traditional White canon in terms of ethnic studies programs and the like, that there's demonstrations or opposition. And I want you to talk to us about, again, kind of the politics of identity and pedagogy within some of what is contested, and in the response, particularly of youth of color, collegians of color, around

coalescing, galvanizing, and becoming student activists in response to these challenges.

Nolan L. Cabrera:

Yeah, really what's happening right now is we're living out of sort of a renaissance of ethnic studies that was demanded by activists in the 1960s. And I got a first-person view of the racial politics around that because, and this is more of a K-12 issue, but it's percolated all the way throughout K-12, higher ed, all this stuff. The Tucson Unified School District, in the mid-2000s, had the largest and most comprehensive K-12 ethnic studies program in the country. It was very race-forward. They were unabashed about it. You had students reading the classic Delgado and Stefancic *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. They wanted to racimize the community and create what they call barrio scholars, students who were from the community but theorizing about their community, the lived conditions.

One of the things that just blows people away, and if I'm talking to an education audience, it makes sense; when I'm talking to a general audience, no one gets it. But you had teenagers reading, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which most of my grad students don't want to do. But, you know, you had 16-, 17-, 18-year-olds. And what was beautiful about it was that they could, even though it's highly abstract, they could make sense out of their lived conditions. Yeah, he was talking about Brazil, but it applied to their backyard.

And so it was just an incredible, beautiful program that they had created. And the state superintendent of public instruction, Tom Horne, did *not* appreciate that you had these unabashed, unafraid, self-determined kids who were just, "We're going to do this. We are going to fight for our studies. We don't appreciate the racism of the state." And he came out and he started framing them, publicly framing them, saying that this is anti-American, it's anti-Western. There was always a subtext. Very rarely would he explicitly say it's anti-White, but he would frame it in this way.

And this would just piss me off to no end because in every single one of his public statements, he would say, "When I was at the March on Washington with Dr. King ..." And I'm like, you were an 18-year-old Canadian immigrant who just got accepted to Harvard. You have no record of civil rights. You were not at the March. Like, don't give me this nonsense. If we go back and we ask people of that generation who was at the marches, like, people have done studies of this. It's like 10 million people would have been at the March. And it's like, we know that's not true. We know some kid from suburban Oregon is not going to be out there. That's just not happening. But again, he's like, "And I believe that in his philosophy I'm being judged by the content of our character, not the color of our skin is my guiding philosophy. And therefore ..." And it became this decades-long, protracted struggle to eliminate, at the time, the most successful ethnic studies program in the country.

What happened, though, was that we had to have sort of a reckoning in K-12 and higher education about what constitutes ethnic studies as a result of all the

controversy that was going on in Tucson. Because there would be these demands for ethnic studies.

And remember that a core component of that was not just to have a diversified curriculum and to have more Brown and Black, indigenous people in the curriculum, but also to have connections to the community, to break down that binary between the ivory tower and the grassroots; to acknowledge the knowledge that was created outside of the ivory tower and then bring it in, saying that our communities have been creators of really rigorous knowledge basis for millennia.

And because a lot of that had devolved, especially in the 80s and 90s, that if you just studied the voting patterns of Hispanic people, "Oh, okay, we'll put you in ethnic studies." But there wasn't the critical edge to it. There wasn't, like, "Where are your analyses of racial inequities, et cetera, et cetera." And so we've had to reconcile with that.

But at the core of it, it comes back down to what Ronald Takaki talked about in *A Different Mirror*, where, at its base, and this is the preface of the book, he said, "What happens when someone with the authority of a teacher paints a picture of our history and you're not in it. It can create, to borrow from Adrienne Rich, a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing." And so the first part is providing those different mirrors for our students of color so they can actually see themselves, see their communities, see their knowledge; products of people like them as knowledge-based, basically things that White kids take for granted.

And then taking it one step further, asking, "What are the causes and consequences of systemic inequities and what are the potential solutions to that?" But that's scary because if we start dismantling White supremacy through the educational system, that also means eliminating White advantage, and White folks are scared about that.

What does that mean in terms of restructuring society? It's that same question that always happens when folks say, "What if we become *second* in terms of economic dominance?" It's like, well, and ... it's not like we go from, you know, first all the way down to 32nd or something like that. And I've never been able to find proper attribution for this, but it's that ad that you see on the internet that constantly, that when you're accustomed to privilege, social equity feels like oppression. It's not in reality, but it messes you up like that. It messes with what W. E. B. Du Bois referred to as the public and psychological wages of whiteness. Your wages of whiteness are necessarily going down.

But as James Baldwin continually reminded us, "As you let go," of what he referred to as the big lie, "it gives you the opportunity to pursue higher privileges and more robust manifestations of our collective humanity." But you have to take that step and realize that White supremacy is antithetical to our humanity, that it creates inhumanity. And we've been dealing with that for

years, but it's scary because you don't really know what's next. There's that old adage in Spanish, “Lo malo que sabes es mejor que lo malo que no sabes,” which is, “The bad you know is better than the bad that you don't know.” And folks will cling to that. White folks will cling to that because it's known, it's safe, but we have to reckon with it that it wasn't that good to start off with. We have to buttress up against the American ethos that everything is the best in this country. And talking to some of my friends outside of this country, they tend to agree that the number-one thing that Americans are the best at is saying “we're number one.” And that's basically it. You know, education, not so much; racial equity, not so much; dealing with systemic socioeconomic inequities, not so much. But saying “we're number one,” we're absolutely the number-one best at that in the whole world.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Thank you so much for your response because, again, this is, as you mentioned, not just the issue that's K-12 or higher ed, but it's a P-20 issue as we think about the politics of pedagogy and curriculum, who decides what is taught, what materials are used and the extent to which there is cultural eraser and/or lack of culturally relevant materials. And we've seen this play out time and time again.

And most recently with the current president, President Trump, calling *The 1619 Project* by the New York Times as something that is un-American and unpatriotic and wanting to create a new, what he wants to call the 1776 Commission to reinstate patriotism in schools because there's been a call to actually establish and promote some truth-telling in America's history and reconciling and reckoning, more so reckoning than reconciling, *The 1619 project*.

But again, Hannah-Jones, just wonderful, groundbreaking work, but that the president's remarks are such that it has given pause to some educators as to what they can or should do in the classroom and/or has emboldened those that want to continue to kind of codify and further entrench what is actually anti-American in terms of sex and race stereotyping and scapegoating, in many ways.

And we see this also play out with the recent executive order to combat—it's called to combat racism and sex stereotyping. But the irony, again, is that it forbids any kind of training that is inclusive of statements like color blindness or meritocracy or critical race theory or challenges to whiteness. There cannot be any mention of Black Lives Matter. If a contractor's providing professional development or trainings, then you're out of compliance with this new executive order. But given that we are in a transition period, we'll see what happens between this and the next administration. I don't expect that this order, as intended, will flourish as the Biden-Harris administration transitions in.

But having said a little bit of that, one of the things that is also kind of a manifestation of these efforts and that we see across various aspects of social life, and not just even within the Western hemisphere in terms of the U.S. or what have you, but that there's anti-blackness.

And so you've done work, again, around unveiling whiteness and also the global manifestations of anti-blackness and how this is transnational, it's transdisciplinary in terms of what we need and in terms of interventions, and that it's highly contextualized. So can you speak to us a little bit about what you see playing out and how our campuses are microcosms of what has been occurring as we've had a cluster of crises: a global health crisis, racial reckoning, economic downturn and decline, leadership crisis, climate crises, all of these things concurrent. But also, what is exacerbating each and every one of them is race, and in particular anti-blackness. So can you share your thoughts on that?

Nolan L. Cabrera:

Absolutely. So, you know, whiteness is a relative concept. That is, it doesn't exist unless there is an oppositional force, an "a core." I'm going to parse some words out here, but "a core," not "the core." And I know I'm going to maybe step on some critical race theory toes with that. The distinction is that it is anti-blackness. That is that if we look historically that a core component of whiteness formation was buying into an ideology that people of color generally, and Black people in particular, are less than human beings, that they are not fully formed, that they are, you know, a more primitive, more juvenile, more infantile of a species, which then became an ideological justification for any atrocity that happened to them. Because if you're not dealing with a human, you can treat them like cattle, which is what happened in chattel slavery. Or if you don't see folks as human, you can just attempt to genocide against them to steal all their land, which is what happened with the Native American peoples.

But you're right that anti-blackness is a core component because it's huge in terms of colonization. You go back to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: So, you know, in the metaphor of, "Oh, deep, darkest Africa, where I can then look at the deepest, darkest areas of my heart." It's like, "No, man, like, that's ridiculous."

I loved when Trevor Noah was early on his more of a correspondent in *The Daily Show*, when Jon Stewart was still on there, and he would play a game of, Is this South Africa or Detroit? He would have two pictures, because again, it's easy to have those images of, "Oh, look at how backwards things are in Black countries."

And we don't have to dig too deeply to see it manifest. When President Trump referred to countries as s*#@hole countries, and then you look at the list of the countries that he was referring to, they tended to have, at the very least, Black populations and also majority-minority populations. And that's not coincidental because it's easy to have, again, these views of "they're backwards." You saw the same thing play out when he was talking about Mexico doesn't send its best people; it sends its rapists and drug dealers and all these different things. Because it's the whiteness has a core of it as anti-people of color in general.

And it is absolutely a global phenomenon that you see the lightening of skin as being beneficial, as something that folks do. You see it in a lot of Asian countries. You even see it in Mexico, that within families, that lighter-skin

children frequently are treated better. You look at the news and, even though you have extremely dark to extremely light-skinned people, the folks who tend to be in the mass media are the ones who are blonde hair, blue-eyed, have more of their roots rooted in Europe. I think this is a conversation that we need to have a little bit more upfront, because I've been seeing this kind of slip a little bit.

I've seen some folks make the argument, overtly, that basically the racial stratification system in the U.S. is whiteness, anti-blackness, and everything kind of falls in a continuum in between. And I absolutely agree that anti-blackness is a core issue. And as a matter of fact, we need to look at anti-blackness even within communities of color. That is that, you know, oh my God, there's so many examples of, you know, in Latinx communities with telling the daughter, "Don't bring a Black guy home." It's like, I would expect that back at home in McMinnville, but not in these other areas. And that we should not overlook that horizontal violence—communities of color against communities of color.

But the one thing that I don't want to fall into is there's like this little slippage into the oppression Olympics where anti-blackness is kind of the penultimate, and folks will point to, well, look at all of the overt laws that were created to keep Black people in their place, and I completely agree with that. But the point is more that they didn't have to make those laws about Native folk because they just kept pushing them farther and farther west. And we don't want to erase the attempted genocide of our dear Native brothers and sisters to make a point about that anti-blackness is worse than anti-Native American-ness or that it's worse than anti-Mexican-ness.

And then it also creates a weird situation for our Asian American brothers and sisters because before COVID a lot of them were struggling with, well, you know, "I'm not really a minority, people don't really hate me. But then all of a sudden, when you have Trump saying, it's the China flu, it's the China flu. And most White folks can't tell the difference between Chinese, Korean, Japanese, you know. And so, it's sort of like how the Muslim community, Sikh community, all this Post-9/11, all kind of became these targets when people were targeting radical Islamic terrorism—same thing's happening now.

And we forget that, I'm sitting here in Arizona, there was an internment camp for Japanese people, not that far from where I'm living right now. And we don't want to erase that atrocity, either. I'm not saying this is an intention, this is more of an offshoot. When we start ranking these, for me, it's that once these atrocities hit a certain level, let's just say they're all manifestations of whiteness, which is more anti-BIPOC, anti-people of color, but it is a global phenomenon that we're consistently dealing with.

And, like I said, communities of color, we need to have that as an honest conversation and frequently internalize the negative views of each other. We need to have honest reckonings about that. And those are really, really tough conversations. In some respects, it's kind of neat when it's people of color,

White folk in that it's a clear dividing line, but it's a lot harder for us to work on ourselves as well and work on sort of the internalized racist views of other communities that we have.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Yeah. You know, as you say that, too, it was reported, I think back in the summer, where Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, had to literally break down to a customer, Amazon customer emailed to say, "Hey, all lives matter." Like why is Amazon having a banner saying "Black Lives Matter" and doing all of this stuff; all lives matter. And Bezos is going, "Yeah, that would be redundant because BLM is not about other lives not mattering. It's really about racism and Amazon as a company having little tolerance for that."

And so again, you're right. There's a way in which it becomes comparative suffering in some regards, because I remember sharing, again, that there are nuances and it's not about a pecking order per se. But one thing that isn't necessarily disagreeable is that, apparently, anti-blackness is not just a U.S. phenomenon—it's global. And that is not something that just happens within White communities, but also within communities of color and even within Black communities as there's internalized racism.

Nolan L. Cabrera: Oh, absolutely. But in that, oh my God, talk about a prophetic text that goes all the way back to Fanon's analysis of *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* and the way that the colonized will internalize and start believing the views of the colonizer about themselves and their communities. And that's a natural psychological phenomenon that stems from a very unnatural system of colonization. You see that all the time and it's not just specific to Black communities. It can happen to any systemically marginalized community.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: So, speaking of community, one thing that I wanted to make sure we got a chance to talk about are community colleges. I'm very much an advocate for, cheerleader of, community colleges and much of the scholarship around issues of racial tensions, racism, campus climate is very four-year college- and university-centric, when we know nearly half of all undergraduates that are enrolled in college are actually not at these four-year institutions but at community colleges. And that the way in which many students, particularly students of color, move in through and out of postsecondary is that the doorsills of a community college.

So can you, for our audience, talk about what are some of the things within a community college sector, thinking about the nuances of context and how community colleges actually have even more cultural pluralism, if you will, among its attendees than many of our four-year sister institutions. So can you share with our audience for community college faculty, staff, leaders that are concerned about improving campus climate, what are some things that they can do to stand in solidarity with communities of color and to provide inclusive environments for diverse learners?

Nolan L. Cabrera:

That's a whole semester-long seminar, and you're asking me to do it in 10 minutes. I think one of the biggest issues is, yes, community colleges are incredible bastions of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism. But oftentimes people misinterpret that to mean that because you have this cosmopolitan cohort that racism is not as big of an issue. Race is really an issue where you have segregated areas. We don't really have racial problems here, but it's more philosophically that we have to understand that, no, race and racism and systemic racism impacts all of us at every level. And so a few simple examples that pop into my head.

Number one, community colleges have so many multiple roles. So you have, I'm trying to get my general education requirements out of the way so I can transfer them to a four-year institution, and there's a whole vocational track as well. And so a core question, not a critique, but something you really, really need to ask yourself deeply is are students of color being disproportionately tracked into the vocational track?

I want to be really careful about this because there is nothing wrong with people trying to improve themselves going through a vocation. But the problem is that we haven't learned the lessons from the 1960s when we say that because we have racist views of the intellectual capabilities of communities of color that it becomes an easy way to just push students who have incredible talents, incredible intellectual talents, who could be at a four-year institution towards the vocational track. And also seeing if we do view the vocational track as intellectually less than. And so there's a lot of self-reflection that needs to go on.

And there needs to be a lot of training around that with the recruiters, advisors, all the different people who are associated with that. Because in K-12 education we see the *exact* same thing happening, that, you know, the AP classes are for the smart kids, and then auto body shop is for the kids who are going to work as mechanics. And again, I don't want to demean that because in Aouth Tucson you see some actually incredible work that's being done around vocational ed and students really gravitate towards it, but we can't have it be seen as less than or intellectually inferior because all we're going to do is recreate race in the process.

If we start from the presumption that everybody has internalized racial biases, then we can start working in the other direction. Then we can start saying, "Okay, this is how we can do it." Because there's some folks who will say, "Oh no, I don't have any problem with Black people. I don't have any problem with Mexican people. I'm just doing what's best for them."

And already there's a patronizing view towards communities of color. "I know what's best for you. This is really where your talents align best." There's huge, huge issues, and this is a really, really, really tricky one. And I really hope that some of the pressure gets let off with the new administration.

But with undocumented students, that's a huge, huge issue because they have so little access to resources and they have to keep almost this kind of closeted view of themselves. If you disclose your undocumented status, it can really harm you in the process. And so what kind of messaging comes out from the central administration to everybody throughout the campus?

Because if you're cowering down to the federal government, which a lot of institutional leaders have done, basically what you're saying is, "Stay in the shadows. Don't say anything, don't rock the boat." But then the problem is how in the world are these students going to get connected to resources? Because there's committed people on the ground level who want to do that.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: You know, as you mentioned, undocumented students as well, again, community colleges and many states are often serving the largest number of undocumented students. And because, again, part of the mission and vision is around serving *all* students. Now, while we serve all students, that doesn't mean we serve them all in the same way. And just because it's an open-door institution doesn't mean that there's open access to various programs of study.

But with that said, I also just wanted to make sure that relative to the conversation around tracking, as you mentioned, differential expectancy at play sometimes when we think about who the students are, and yes, there are still ways in which Burton Clark's traditional "cooling out," if you will, where students might be cooled out.

But one of the dilemmas of what has been referenced as vocational education, which we now refer to as career tech ed, CTE, is that we do see some evidence of returns for students. But part of the issue too is, depending on what on-ramp, trying to make sure that, as you mentioned, there isn't a way in which, unwittingly or not, that students, and particularly racially minoritized students, are not put on programs of study and so-called pathways that don't have the same type of mobility.

So what we do see is in CTE, more often, you can have high-skill, high-demand, high-wage occupational areas to go into, but if you are seeing that students are segmented within these opportunities of CTE, a prime example is seeing lots of Brown and Black women in CNA programs but not RN programs. And that that middle area, there's been very little happening for LPN programs, so where's the step? How do you have the articulation of moving them to a higher credential with more mobility, socially, economically education.

But we do have evidence that shows that, again, like you said, we've got to be careful about it, that there's a lot of good on-ramps, multiple on-ramps. But if we aren't attentive to disentangling the tracks and really interrogating and disaggregating where the opportunity gaps are that we will still have the effects of inequitable programs of study and pathways that, again, are impacted and it's not remediated by race but exacerbated by socioeconomic status and race and gender.

Nolan L. Cabrera:

Absolutely, absolutely. And then you want to add another layer of complexity to it that we're talking about community colleges as this kind of monolith. But there's certain ones, like I remember very vividly when I was living in the Bay Area, there were a couple of community colleges that were basically direct feeders into UC Berkeley. Like, parents who wanted a cheaper way for their kids to get everything done, like, the transfer rate was incredible from there.

You know, then I'm down in LA and I'm talking to students at East LA Community College, and that culture just isn't there. And it was weird because there just wasn't any presence of the four-year institutions at that spot. Ridiculously talented, really creative, really innovative folks there who could have done extremely well, but they were just given up on, again, because East LA Community College, what are we going to do there? It's that same nonsense that college recruiters do all the time is you take the reputation of an area as sort of a destiny of that area: "Why even bother with resources in there?" And it's like, because, well, first of all, you keep saying, "I want to diversify my campus." You can't keep doing the same thing. But the second thing is that there are people who could really do well there, but you're just giving up on them all the way around. That was my call for the four-years, not the two-years.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Okay. Your call to the four-year, not the two-year, but hey, let's roll with that as we wrap up, talking about calls, talking about calls to action, right? And we need them for both the four- and the two-year. You know, Dimpal Jain frequently talked about transfer-recessive cultures and the fact that the onus can't just be on the community colleges as the sending institutions, but as you just said, a call at a four-year, but the receiving institutions also, you know, that the onus is on them.

So, what would be your call to action for educators, P-20, as we think about many of these issues we've talked about aren't siloed within a particular educational sector, but are presented as grand challenges as a student matriculates throughout their educational careers? Can you just leave us with a few pearls of wisdom or call to action for how we can work to advance more inclusive, just, equitable educational spaces for diverse youth and adults?

Nolan L. Cabrera:

You're asking me some tough questions. I love it, I love it. So, I think one of the biggest things is that institutional leaders, I'm going to start from probably the ones that are the most overly resourced and probably have the greatest "reputations." So if we start from the four-years, normally what happens in higher education debates is we say, "Well, you know, unless K-12 does its job, we really can't do our job. And if the community colleges don't do their job, we can't really do our job. We're doing the best with what we can." And I just got to call BS on that. Let's flip that on its head.

What can the most overly resourced institutions do? And so, the first thing is we need to *stop* having patronizing views of communities of color. And I know that sounds really basic, but there is this general attitude where it's almost like they're doing a favor to transfer students, like, you know, "Oh yeah, we're giving

you another opportunity to come over here to our institution. You're going to do great here, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no." You're constantly seeking out talent. You wouldn't sit there if you were the coach of the football team and be like, "Oh look, there's, you know, of course these kids are going to come into our program."

You go out there and you actively recruit. You have folks on the ground out there beating the bushes, saying, "You should come to our institution." Where I'm at, it's the U of A needs to be out more and have a stronger presence at the community college, saying, "Hey, you can come here. You can do this," as opposed to just saying, "Well, you know, if you transfer and et cetera."

And like we said, you then need to make sure that you have an infrastructure in place to support that transfer. Because, look, you have an infrastructure in place for the transition of first-year students when they come in as freshmen, as 18-year-old freshmen. You have all your orientations, all the structure in place there. And people do that for transfer students, but it's not *nearly* to the same degree. And again, already you're saying with your institutional resources that you value these students *less* than the students who came in when they were 18, 19 years old. And then you have all these different academic mentors and coaches and all these different things, but you won't make the same kind of investment for students who are transfers. There's just kind of this view that the students are going to do it on their own.

And I guess the biggest thing that I keep saying is because I hear institutional leaders, in particular presidents and chancellors, say this all the time because there's always, like, wherever an institution is an urban center, there's always a marginalized, underserved community like right in its backdoor. You know, so when I was at Stanford, it was East Palo Alto. When I was at UCLA, it was South LA. Now that I'm in U of A, it's South Tucson. There's always like a south or an east associated with it. And the question was always why are there not more students from East Palo Alto, South LA, South Tucson at our institution? And I reject that as a premise. I say why is Stanford not more in East Palo Alto? Why is UCLA not more in South LA? Why is U of A not more in South Tucson? Like why is that?

Because especially at the U of A, like, we've done some *in-depth* analyses of students on native reservations in the south side of town, all these different things. It doesn't take much. It doesn't take much to go out there and get them engaged because these are areas that people are basically giving up on. They're not competing for these students. And so I'm saying that if you really, really, really committed to the broad goal of diversity but racial equity in particular, that that's a really core commitment. If that's your institutional value, you need to compete for these students in the same way that your football coach is competing for players on the team. You need to compete in the same way that the basketball coach is competing for players on that team, because that's what you're doing.

And if you're just like these students are going to come here already, you know what? DeVry's going to pop right in there and take them and snatch them right out from under you, ITT Tech's going to do it, the military is going to do it. Because you know what? Those folks are fricking competing for our students of color. They are down there. You go down to Sunnyside on the south side of town, those recruiters are there. They're in the ears of those students. They're giving them schwag. They're having little competitions. They are competing for those students.

And you're just like, "Well, we're the University of Arizona. We're so great. Everybody knows us." No, they don't. These folks are competing for them. You want to diversify, you've got to compete on that level. You got to invert your institutional ethos and do it in an opposite direction.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: I love that: Invert your institutional ethos. Yes, yes. Real talk. Well, again, I want to just publicly acknowledge what wonderful work you have been doing. It's been a joy to watch your career. And again, the 2019 Book of the Year Award from ASHE. Yes. And then this year, *the most* downloaded article for the *Review of Higher Education*, our tier-one top journal, is yours.

Nolan L. Cabrera: Thank you.

Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: And so, again, I'm saying that as just a case in point also, other than, like, give him his props, but a case in point of the fact that we are very much at a juncture as a society and within our institutions as spaces that, again, mirror larger society of needing to have these conversations—though difficult, needed and necessary conversations. And ones that, even if they provoke discomfort, are such that we need to go there. And so with that said, again, we want to thank Dr. Nolan Cabrera, associate professor of Educational Policy Studies and Practice at the University of Arizona, for being with us. And I just really, again, want to thank you, sir, and appreciate you being with us for OCCRL's Democracy's College podcast.

Nolan L. Cabrera: Thank you so much for having me. A beautiful space you're creating and thank you so much for inviting me into it.

Announcer Sal Nudo: Tune in next month for our Democracy's College podcast, when OCCRL affiliate member, Jose Del Real Viramontes talks with Dimpal Jain, Alfred Herrera, and Santiago Bernal about how community colleges and four-year colleges and universities can work together to develop and enhance transfer receptivity.

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