



12 Ways to Foster Care *for People of Color*

BY SHAUN R. HARPER

HURRICANE KATRINA DEVASTATED MORE THAN 15 MILLION PEOPLE along the American Gulf Coast in 2005. Several predominantly black communities in New Orleans were destroyed. Response from the federal government was slow, which compelled rapper and music producer Kanye West to famously declare in a live television broadcast that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” West was responding to the extraordinary human suffering that numerous media outlets visually captured and reported. Despite horrifying images of black people stranded on rooftops of homes surrounded by nearly 20 feet of filthy flood water, the nation’s chief executive waited several days before taking action. For nearly 50 years, researchers have consistently documented various forms of human suffering on college and university campuses, much of which higher education leaders continually ignore.

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Since 2001, research I have conducted at several dozen predominantly white institutions (PWIs) has revealed time and time again that many higher education leaders recurrently demonstrate astonishing carelessness for people of color. Kanye West's conclusion was based on observation. Mine is a qualitative, evidence-based restatement of one heartbreaking, yet honest thing that students, faculty, and staff members of color repeatedly say in interviews with me on their campuses: "This institution does not care about us."

In the tragic case of Hurricane Katrina, photos and video footage captured dead bodies (most of them black) on streets, children and elderly people weeping, homes destroyed, and the Louisiana Superdome overwhelmed by more than 25,000 distressed evacuees. Hence, West's critique of presidential unresponsiveness seemed warranted, perhaps irrefutable.

Higher education leaders would likely argue that no crisis of this magnitude has occurred at U.S. colleges and universities. So why, then, would black people make such harsh claims about institutional carelessness? My data show that it is not one-time catastrophic events, but instead frequent (sometimes daily) encounters with racism that signal to people of color that their lives, educational success, and workplace experiences do not matter to persons who lead their institutions. It seems important to note that the overwhelming majority of higher education leaders, including vice presidents for student affairs, are white.

Creating Conditions for Care

The following 12 actions are based on my experiences as a professional of color working at PWIs over the past two decades, as well as my work as a consultant to hundreds of campus leaders. Other actions on the list come from thousands of responses to one question I pose in campus racial climate study interviews: What can leaders do to improve your experiences as people of color at this institution? Surely, these dozen actions are not the only things that VPSAs, other senior student affairs officers, provosts, and presidents can and should do. However, these actions would demonstrate higher degrees of personal and institutional care for people of color on campuses.

Take Seriously Reports of Racism on Campus

Three things usually occur when people of color tell leaders that something racist has happened on campus. First, nothing. Second, leaders minimize the experiences and attempt to attribute them to factors other than racism. And third, they get defensive. These responses invalidate people's experiences and make them lose confidence in their leaders. Listening to people's reports, genuinely expressing empathy, calling for investigations, and ensuring restorative justice are better responses. Leaders must also demonstrate care by holding accountable people who inflict racial insult and harm onto others. Making excuses for a fraternity that holds a blackface party, for example, is a demonstration of carelessness for black students. Also, employees of color often attempt to give white leaders feedback about the racial climate in an office, department, or division. Many leaders take these critiques personally

and somehow hear the person of color saying, "you are racist," even when those exact words are never said. It is important to listen to feedback and recognize there is something to be learned that may help improve the workplace climate for that person and other employees of color. Retaliating, which too many leaders do, would be wrong.

Host Listening Forums, Take Notes, and Communicate Actions

Several institutions invite me to facilitate large campuswide forums about race. These are spaces where people of color and their white counterparts talk openly and honestly about racial tensions, their encounters with racism, observable patterns of racial segregation on campus, their feelings of racial stress and disappointment in administrative responses, and other topics. I advise leaders to say something at the beginning to frame the event; actively listen to what is being said; take copious notes; and offer some sort of meaningful reaction at the conclusion. I also suggest that they send an email to everyone who attended (or perhaps the entire campus) within three days after the forum recapping what they heard. Within a month or two, I suggest they send another email with a list of strategic actions they are taking in response to issues discussed in the forum. Providing a progress report to the campus community the next semester and again one year after the forum is also something I highly recommend to leaders. Simply attending the forum, feeling arrested by what people are saying, and then ultimately doing nothing or failing to communicate what is being done to fix the issues is a common demonstration of carelessness.

Talk Openly about Racial Issues

Few leaders in industry, including higher education, know how to talk comfortably about race. In most cases, it is because they never learned how to do so anywhere in their educational or professional upbringings. White leaders are particularly afraid of appearing clueless and naïve about racial topics. Furthermore, they especially fear being misperceived as racist if they make a mistake when talking about race. For these and other reasons, they avoid such conversations. Avoidance also becomes a cultural norm on campus—meaning that race talk is skilfully and deliberately evaded. It is unlikely that racial equity can be achieved for students or for employees if race is not talked about honestly and openly. Leaders must make space for and sometimes guide these conversations. Racism on campus and in the broader society affects most people of color. Care for their well-being requires VPSAs and their colleagues to foster conditions that allow for public acknowledgement, grappling, processing, support, strategizing, and healing.

Remediate Racial Illiteracy

Few leaders enter their roles intuitively knowing how to manage multimillion dollar budgets, negotiate contracts with vendors and service providers, design risk reduction policies and practices, and other high-level leadership responsibilities. Instead, they learn these things over time. In many instances, they read what experts have written on these topics. Leading

on racial equity requires reading about race issues and the experiences of people of color on campuses and in society. Leaders must read and discuss race-focused texts with members of their leadership teams, with other employees in their units, and with students. Books like *Race on Campus* by Julie J. Park (Harvard Education Press, 2018) and *Engaging the Race Question* by Alicia C. Dowd and Estela Mara Bensimon (Teachers College Press, 2015) can stimulate productive conversations about racial issues on one's campus and beyond. Additionally, articles about racial incidents on campuses across the country are published weekly in *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Leaders should send these articles to their colleagues and devote time in meetings to discussing them. VPSAs and other leaders must engage students in conversations about race on campus and in society.

Take Strategic Actions to Address Racial Inequities

People of color know their leaders are serious when racial issues are not just talked about, but bold actions are taken to redress them. Responses to racial disparities between groups, hate and racial bias incidents, and troubling realities discovered in campus racial climate assessments cannot be one time or superficial. They require deep strategic planning and action. They also demand the participation of stakeholders from a range of racial and ethnic groups. Corrective efforts are not the sole responsibility of staff members in ethnic culture centers or other people of color on campus. White people must be meaningfully involved, and leaders must be at the table as invested collaborators. The University of Southern California Race and Equity Center offers eight-week professional learning experiences in which higher education leaders are taught to strategically approach racial equity work. They are also coached on four sustainable racial equity projects that they collaboratively develop during the eight-week experience. Teams are provided feedback on design, implementation, resourcing, communication, accountability, assessment, and sustainability for their four campus projects. This level of investment and its strategic approach are strong demonstrations of care.

Show Up Where People of Color Are

My career in student affairs began at Indiana University. At the time, Richard McKaig, a longtime NASPA member, was VPSA there. McKaig frequently attended evening and weekend events that historically black fraternities and sororities and other ethnic student organizations hosted. It was clear to students that he was there for support, not surveillance. His presence meant a great deal to members of these groups. It signaled that he cared about them. It also afforded McKaig a window into these students' cultural lives on campus. Moreover, being there poised him to refute any inaccurate claims about what may or may not have been happening at these events that few other white people attended. Put differently, were McKaig in meetings with white colleagues or anyone else who was making assumptions about what black students were doing, he could weigh in with firsthand



Students must know that institutional leaders are willing to apologize for racist experiences on campuses.

knowledge of the facts. When white leaders do not attend events hosted by people of color, they may end up erroneously relying on hearsay. Attending dinners, events, and meetings where faculty and staff members of color convene—as a listener, learner, and supporter—also signals care to them. Acting on troubling experiences they describe and important needs they articulate in these spaces also is important to employees of color.

Make It Less Difficult for Black Students to Host Events

I entered the student affairs profession through sorority and fraternity affairs as an advisor to the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) and groups that were members of the Multicultural Greek Council at Indiana University. It surprised me to hear colleagues at other institutions say that students of color routinely encountered resistance in reserving spaces for on-campus parties. Often, these groups were required to pay for extra security officers because campus leaders feared violence would erupt at their events. Since that time, I have conducted racial climate studies on several dozen campuses across the United States. Black students have repeatedly told me that they continue to face a different, tougher set of security standards when attempting to host nighttime campus events. A committed leader would help make it easier for these students to host events. This is especially important at institutions where predominantly white sororities and fraternities have houses at which they host social events, but historically black Greek-letter organizations do not.

Pull Culture Centers Out of Basements and Better Staff Them

Raggedy houses on the outskirts of campus, small suites with one or two offices and a tiny convening space, and windowless rooms in building basements strongly convey to students of color that their culture centers do not matter to the institution. Because these centers tend to be the most affirming sites at PWIs for these students, their poor locations are often disappointing demonstrations of carelessness. If leaders want

to confirm that black lives matter on campus, they must use their authority to relocate or renovate the spaces that most reliably engender feelings of mattering among black students. A bright, well-resourced environment signals to culture center employees that campus leaders highly value them as professionals. Moreover, students and staff members of color relate that employing only one or two full-time staff members in a multicultural center, compared to a dozen or more employees in offices that serve other student populations, is a frustrating indicator of the groups institutional leaders value most.

Include Native American, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Multiracial People

Most conversations about race focus disproportionately or entirely on comparing black staff, faculty, and students to their white counterparts. Occasionally, Latinx/a/o or “brown” people are referenced. By comparison, Asian American, Native American, Pacific Islander, and multiracial individuals are considered less often, if at all, in conversations, programming, racial equity planning, and other efforts aimed at achieving racial justice on campuses. To demonstrate care, leaders must be intentional about spending time with populations that are routinely forgotten. VPSAs and other student affairs and campus leaders must solicit deeper insights into how members of these groups uniquely experience the environment; their population-specific needs, issues, and expectations; and their appraisal of institutional commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Leaders can also reassess the investment of funds into culture centers and programs that serve diverse groups.

Assess the Campus Climate and Act on Results

Leaders who care about people of color regularly assess campus climates and use data to make substantial improvements. An embarrassing number of leaders assess their climate, then do nothing with findings and recommendations. People of color we interviewed on campuses generously recalled, unpacked, and relived their racial trauma. Many of them indicated skepticism about the institution taking subsequent action on the examples and suggestions they offered in interviews. I often see people months or sometimes years after they participated in a focus group, and too many admit they and others never saw my report, findings, or recommendations. They say they know of no efforts to acknowledge or correct the problems faced by students, faculty, and staff members of color. Because of this inaction, they confidently conclude that campus leaders do not care about people of color. The USC Race and Equity Center recently launched the National

Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates, a quantitative survey informed by a decade of qualitative climate assessments conducted on several dozen campuses across the United States. The goal is to engage thousands of campuses in the survey, but only if their leaders act on the results and recommendations.

Apologize Sincerely for Racism—Past and Present

A climate assessment was recently conducted on a campus with a long history of disrespecting and discriminating against black employees. These issues had been previously documented for many lawsuits against the institution, as well as in the campus and city newspapers. A president had been fired, in part, for mishandling these and other racial problems on campus. The new president hired the USC Race and Equity Center to help move the institution forward. Some black employees had been repeatedly called the N-word by their colleagues. While this and other issues were fairly well known, no one had apologized. While these troubles did not occur during the current president’s tenure, I advised this new leader to apologize. Apologies for using funds from the American slave trade or actual labor from enslaved African people to build the college or university at which African American people now learn and work demonstrate care. Apologizing for racist experiences on campus is another important demonstration of care. It is also essential that VPSAs and other leaders apologize for racial mistakes they and others make, especially when people of color are harmed. Getting defensive, attempting to minimize or explain away the wrongdoing, and taking corrective actions without first apologizing is careless.

Denounce Racism and White Supremacy

White nationalists marched at the University of Virginia in August 2017. They chanted racist and anti-Semitic hate. President Teresa Sullivan released a statement on the university’s website in which she regarded the march “intolerable” and “entirely inconsistent with the university’s values.” Sullivan also added that she was “deeply saddened and disturbed by the hateful behavior displayed by torch-bearing protesters that marched on our grounds this evening.” The four-sentence statement said nothing about white supremacy or race. For this reason, my faculty colleague Charles H.F. Davis III and I wrote an article for the *Los Angeles Times* critiquing Sullivan’s response. In it we maintained that responding to racism in a raceless way is the worst way to demonstrate care for the people most harmed. Leaders must courageously speak up in clear, strong ways when hate comes to campus. Also, it is more meaningful to people of color when leaders use their voices and platforms to take a stance on racist incidents that occur in our larger society. **LE**

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**SHAUN HARPER
TO SPEAK AT NASPA
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