Racial Identity

Campus community members will fall along a wide range of racial identity development. This might include:

- A full embrace and celebration of racial identity (or identities)
- An identification with more than one group (bi- or multi-racial)
- A failure to recognize that one has a racial identity

Racial identity can be a positive force. For example, African American students who have a positive racial identity and feel connected to other groups report higher levels of psychological well-being.

But, we can’t discuss racial identity without discussing racial strife. Racism is a persistent and devastating problem in the United States. In 2017, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) reported:

- An increase of 17% in reported hate crimes
- Over half of the 7,175 reported hate crimes were motivated by bias against a victim’s race or ethnicity
- 280 of these hate crimes were reported by campus police forces; 2017 was the third consecutive year of higher reported hate crimes on campus

Campus community members need tools to better understand racial identity and the interplay of racial privilege, power and difference. As Beverly Daniel Tatum explained in 1992, “The introduction of… issues of oppression often generates powerful emotional responses in students that range from guilt and shame to anger and despair. If not addressed, these responses can result in student resistance to oppression-related content areas… When students are given the opportunity to explore race related material in a classroom where both their affective and intellectual responses are acknowledged and addressed, their level of understanding is greatly enhanced.”

The goal of this section is to provide tools that community members can use to better understand their own racial identity and how it might impact privilege and oppression.


“Racial identity is a multifaceted construct that refers to:

- The qualitative meaning one ascribes to one's own racial group,
- Meaning attributed to other racial groups,
- Sense of group identification with one’s own racial group,
- Salience of race in defining one’s self-concept, and
- Perspectives regarding race over time”

Source: https://bit.ly/34PyeMi

“We have a responsibility to try to identify and interrupt the cycle of oppression. When we recognize that we have been misinformed, we have a responsibility to seek out more accurate information and to adjust our behavior accordingly.”

– Beverly Daniel Tatum

Source: https://bit.ly/2X84bNli
Understanding the Mutable Nature of Race

Because race influences so much in our society, the idea that race is a social construction can be a challenging concept to grasp. After all, racial categories are in part visual and have very real effects on people’s lives; these categories might feel permanent. Understanding the way that racial identities and categories have changed over time can give campus community members a sense of agency and understanding.

Historian Nell Irving Painter wrote, “If you investigate…history, you’ll see that white identity has been no more stable than black identity…We recognize the evolution of ‘negro’ to ‘colored’ to ‘Negro’ to ‘Afro-American’ to ‘African-American…Whiteness [also] has a history of multiplicity.”

Painter continued, “Before the mid-19th century…many people in the United States were seen as white…but were nonetheless classified as inferior (or superior) white races…By the 1940s anthropologists announced that they had a new classification: white, Asian and black were the only real races. Each was unitary — no sub-races existed within each group.”

Key Definitions

**Ethnicity:** “Social characteristics that groups of people may have in common—language, religion, regional background, culture, foods, etc.”

**Oppression:** “When an agent group, whether knowingly or unknowingly, abuses a target group. This pervasive system is rooted historically and maintained through individual and institutional/systematic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice, resulting in a condition of privilege for the agent group at the expense of the target group.”

**Prejudice:** “Preconceived judgment or opinion, often based on limited information.”

**Privilege:** “Unearned advantages that are highly valued but restricted to certain groups; these advantages oppress another group.”

**Race:** “A social construct…best understood in social and political terms: it is a yardstick for allocating power, and for distributing material benefits and burdens”

**Racism:** “A system of advantage based on race.”


“No coherent, fixed definition of race actually exists.”

– Ta-Neihesi Coates

Source: https://bit.ly/2X2uOmS

“Race is a social construction, where societies generate informal or formal rules about what we see (i.e., perception) and how to act and treat others (i.e., discrimination)... Race is socially real, not biologically real. Socially important categories can be very real and meaningful, but arguably nonetheless arbitrary in nature.”

– Gordon Hodson

Source: https://bit.ly/2K8gGn2
Start with Self-Awareness

To understand how racial identity works in our society, it’s important to start with yourself. Fill out this worksheet to reflect on how racial identity affects your life.

My racial identity is: ________________________________

My ethnicity is: ________________________________

Others assume that my race is: ________________________________

Others assume that my ethnicity is: ________________________________

What is an assumption people make about your racial identity group and ethnicity?

________________________________________________________________________

What is an assumption that you make about your racial identity group and ethnicity?

________________________________________________________________________

Race & Ethnicity

**Ethnicity:** “A social–political construct and includes shared origin, shared language, and shared cultural traditions” like religion.

**Racial Identity:** “Racial identity is a multifaceted construct that refers to:

- The qualitative meaning one ascribes to one’s own racial group,
- Meaning attributed to other racial groups,
- Sense of group identification with one’s own racial group,
- Salience of race in defining one’s self-concept, and
- Perspectives regarding race over time”

Race and ethnicity are two different categories, though sometimes they overlap. According to the National Institute of Health, “Each of the racial groups of Asian American, African or black American, American Indian or Native American, and white American includes a series of ethnic groups. For example, persons of Hispanic ethnicity include white, black, and Asian races, while persons of sub-Saharan African ethnicities are almost exclusively of black race and persons of Pacific Island ethnicity are almost exclusively of Asian race. This raises a critical point: boundaries of ethnicity are not precise, and may be fluid across geopolitical boundaries.”

Start with Self-Awareness  

When was the last time you thought about your racial identity and/or ethnicity? Why did you think about it?

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

How often do you watch TV shows and movies that feature people who do not share your racial identity? On social media, how racially diverse are your friends, followers and people you follow?

_________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________

Are you friends with a lot of people outside your own racial group and/or ethnicity? Why or why not?

_________________________________________________________________________

How do you feel when you are in a neighborhood where people outside of your racial identity and/or ethnicity are the majority of residents?

_________________________________________________________________________

Systematic Racism

In American history, we can point to various times when entire racial identity groups were targeted for discrimination. Randomly distribute these cards, then ask each person to come up with a two-minute verbal presentation about how the government systematically worked against people of a certain race or ethnicity. (If necessary, have people work in pairs or groups.) The presentations should include the following:

- Explain what happened.
- When did this take place?
- What circumstances led to these laws or programs to be implemented?
- Who was primarily impacted?
- How and when did the program or law end?

**Cards**

- Redlining in Housing
- Japanese Internment Camps in World War II
- Poll Taxes
- GI Bill Funds Not Offered to All World War II Veterans
- Tuskegee Experiment
- Chinese Exclusion Act

**Discussion Questions:**

- We do not have control over our racial identity, but our racial identity often effects our lives. How do you feel about that?
- Most of these policies are no longer in effect. How do policies and programs enacted decades ago have lasting consequences that reach into the present?
- Think about our campus. Can you think of any examples of systematic racism that occur here? Please explain.
- How can we prevent systematic racism from occurring on campus?
- Sometimes people say that they are “colorblind” when it comes to race. How might this minimize the impact of systematic and structural racism?
**Identify Versus Identity**

Rachel became actively involved in the Black Student Association (BSA) in her first year, had been the driving force behind many of the group’s biggest events in her sophomore year and was elected as Vice President at the start of her third year.

When Dr. Green, the advisor for the BSA, arrived at her office on a Monday morning, she found several upset BSA members. They explained that they had seen Rachel around campus with her parents that weekend. Even though Rachel had always presented herself as black, her parents looked white.

The students asked Rachel if she had been adopted and she said no. Rachel explained that she had a black boyfriend in high school and had identified as black since then. Rachel told them that she changed her physical appearance by styling and growing her hair into locks and tanning to maintain a darker skin tone, because she felt like she was black. One student said, “We thought she was celebrating our culture but she’s been appropriating it the whole time! She’s fake! We do not want her in the BSA anymore.”

**For Discussion:**

- What should Dr. Green’s next steps be?
- What is the difference between sharing a racial identity and identifying as a racial identity?
- Why was Rachel’s “identification” so hurtful to her fellow BSA members?
- How can cultural appropriation be harmful and/or painful?
Push and Pull

Before he was born, Danny Hernández’s dad immigrated to the Midwest from Mexico. Danny’s dad met and married his mother, an Italian American. Danny’s father refused to let Danny speak Spanish at home because he was worried that Danny wouldn’t learn English. Though Danny understands a lot of Spanish, he’s not a fluent speaker. A few years ago, Danny’s mom passed away and his dad moved to the southwest.

Danny followed his dad a few years later. He got a job at the local community college as an admissions advisor. He loves his job, but finds that often people assume he can speak Spanish because of his last name and skin tone. Danny feels silly telling people that he is not bilingual. Meanwhile, Danny finds that white people make racially biased assumptions about everything from what he might like to eat for lunch to what sports he watches. More often than not, Danny feels like he doesn’t fit in any racial category.

For Discussion:

• How can being bi- or multi-racial impact a person’s racial identity?
• If you were Danny’s colleague, how could you make him feel welcome?
• How can you prevent yourself from perpetuating racially-based stereotypes on campus?
• How can our understanding of racial identity change over time?
Racial Identity Development Handout

Racial identity development is not always a linear process and can change over time. Below is a quick primer on three theories of racial identity development.

**William Cross: Black American Racial Identity**

1. **Pre-encounter:** Has absorbed beliefs and values of white culture; largely unaware of racial implications
2. **Encounter:** Events cause an acknowledgment of racism; now focused on membership in a group targeted by racism
3. **Immersion/Emersion:** Seeks out history and culture with members of one’s own racial group; avoids symbols of whiteness
4. **Internalization:** Is secure in racial identity and prepared to engage with white people who acknowledge that identity
5. **Internalization/Commitment:** Translates personal sense of blackness into commitment to blacks as a group; comfortable with own race and others

**Janet Helms: White Racial Identity Development**

1. **Contact:** Racial difference is not seen as a salient factor; racism is caused by acknowledging racism exists
2. **Disintegration:** Experiences lead to acknowledgment of racism, which then causes shifting world view and often feelings of shame and guilt
3. **Reintegration:** “Blame the victim” mentality that acknowledges whites have deserved privileges
4. **Pseudo-independence:** Whites do not deserve the privileges they receive, but people of color are responsible for confronting racism
5. **Immersion/Emersion:** Feels connection to white identity and attempts to be anti-racist through relationships with other whites who deal with issues of race
6. **Autonomy:** Positive and clear connection to white identity and pursuit of social justice

**Promoting Positive Racial Identity Development on Campus**

- Offer activities and programs catered to a wide range of identities
- Infuse diverse perspectives into course curriculum
- Create opportunities for intergroup learning

Source: https://bit.ly/2XaATOh
W.S. Carlos Poston: Bi-Racial Identity Development

1. **Personal Identity**: Sense of self unrelated to ethnic grouping
2. **Choice of Group**: Feel pressured to choose one ethnic group over another
3. **Categorization**: Choices influenced by status of the group, parents, cultural knowledge, appearance
4. **Enmeshment/Denial**: Guilt and confusion about choosing an identity that isn’t fully expressive of all cultural influences; denial of differences between racial groupings; exploring identity that wasn’t chosen in stage 2 and 3
5. **Appreciation**: Admiration of multiple identities
6. **Integration**: Sense of wholeness that integrates multiple identities

Normalizing Campus Conversations on Race Worksheet

Shaun Harper, the executive director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania and author of the book *Race Matters in College*, warns that higher education institutions are not putting enough effort into training staff and faculty to tackle racial tensions and create equitable campuses.

Below, you can find Harper’s tips for avoiding a campus full of “mis-educated inequity sustainers.” For each number, examine:

- Have you personally taken action steps?
- Has your campus taken action?
- How you can make changes to engage in these activities and create a more equitable campus?

1. **Discover and communicate personal racial biases**
   a. Personal action: ____________________________________________
   b. Campus action: ____________________________________________
   c. How to make change: _______________________________________

2. **Make conversations about race the norm, instead of restricting them to certain courses or activities**
   a. Personal action: ____________________________________________
   b. Campus action: ____________________________________________
   c. How to make change: _______________________________________

3. **Assign or utilize works from racially diverse scholars who write about race**
   a. Personal action: ____________________________________________
   b. Campus action: ____________________________________________
   c. How to make change: _______________________________________

4. **Find current or “live cases” of protests or racist activity on campus and analyze them, potentially offering solutions to colleagues at that institution**
   a. Personal action: ____________________________________________
   b. Campus action: ____________________________________________
   c. How to make change: _______________________________________
Normalizing Campus Conversations on Race Worksheet continued

5. Hold focus groups with alumni
   a. Personal action: __________________________
   b. Campus action: __________________________
   c. How to make change: ______________________

6. In group settings, work through simulations of racial conflict
   a. Personal action: __________________________
   b. Campus action: __________________________
   c. How to make change: ______________________

7. Include all employees, including adjunct faculty, in any initiative about race
   a. Personal action: __________________________
   b. Campus action: __________________________
   c. How to make change: ______________________

Source: https://bit.ly/2ObFKKS

Setting the Table for Difficult Conversations

- Self-reflect
- Be prepared to take a break if you need it
- Before starting, explain why you want to have the conversation and what you recognize and appreciate about the other people in the conversation
- Set expectations and/or ground rules
- Listen first, then respond
- Do not place blame, shame or call names
- Challenge conclusions, not emotions

Source: https://www.erasethehate.org/learn-more/difficult-conversations
Racial Identity and Dynamics

Racism & Stress Handout

The American Psychological Association (APA) states that people can be affected in significant ways by the experience of racism, including:

- **Physical Effects**: Increased hypertension, illness, resorting to risky behaviors like substance abuse
- **Emotional Effects**: Anxiety, anger, depression, irritability
- **Spiritual Effects**: Decreased sense of purpose, isolation, reduced involvement in enjoyable communal activities

For example, studies have shown that prolonged exposure to the stress of dealing with discrimination negatively affects the health of black women, including significant maternal health disparities. These physical, emotional and spiritual effects can translate into behaviors including hypervigilance, difficulty regulating emotions, avoiding any situations related to experienced racism, mistrust of others and over-monitoring loved ones out of fear.

Coping Strategies

To deal with racism-related stress, the APA recommends:

- **Building a support network**
  - What activities or organizations are available on campus that would allow someone impacted by racism to speak with others who are also impacted?

- **Incorporating traditions on campus**
  - How can a diverse variety of racial and ethnic traditions and expressions be celebrated and supported on campus?

- **Consistent physical activity**
  - Is there a culture of wellness on campus?

- **Self-care and reflection**
  - When was the last time you utilized activities like deep breathing, meditation, journaling and limiting media exposure?

- **Counseling and therapy**
  - Are counselors on campus equipped to help students with race-related stress? What are community resources that would benefit all campus community members?


“"The body’s response to the experience of racism can make accessing resources to cope with the situation difficult. Race-related stress is unique in that it threatens psychological resources that are needed to cope and fulfill basic needs such as financial support, housing, access to jobs, etc…When your body is in stress mode, it is geared up to help you…survive, which sometimes leads to impulsive decisions. If you live in a chronic state of stress related to racism, you can start to engage in survival coping. Survival coping can help you to deal with very hard or potentially life-threatening situations. However, if you continue to exist in this mode long-term, it can make it difficult to enjoy being in the moment…and can reduce your ability to feel safe and in control.”

– American Psychological Association
Resources

Here are some resources you can use to supplement this training information on Racial Identity and Dynamics...

- 1619 Project from *The New York Times*: https://nyti.ms/36mMLAC
- ACPA College Student Education International’s Coalition for Multicultural Affairs Resource Page: https://www.myacpa.org/coalitions/multicultural-affairs/resources
- American Psychological Association’s Racial Stress and Self-Care tool, including how racism can impact a person and strategies to deal with stress caused by racism: https://www.apa.org/res/parent-resources/racial-stress
- Anna Ortiz and Silvia Santos’s article on “Campus Diversity and Ethnic Identity Development”: https://bit.ly/36lXtaf
- Erase the Hate Movement: https://www.erasethehate.org
- “I Spy Something White” TEDx talk by Stephanie Afful: https://youtu.be/ggHYzV3QWp4
- National Public Radio’s Code Switch Podcast on “‘Racial Imposter Syndrome’: Here Are Your Stories”: https://n.pr/37teTC4
- Teaching Tolerance’s resources on race and ethnicity. These resources were developed for K-12, but there are many applicable themes and ideas that can be adopted for higher education audiences: https://www.tolerance.org/topics/race-ethnicity

Must-Reads on Race & Identity

- Alexander, Michelle. (2010.) *The New Jim Crow*
- Baldwin, James. (1955.) *Notes of a Native Son*
- Johnson, Allan. (2001.) *Privilege, Power, and Difference*
- Painter, Nell. (2010.) *A History of Whiteness*
- Tatum, Beverly. (1997.) *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*
Racial Identity and Dynamics

Discussion Questions

Use these questions as starting points for further conversations about the topic of Racial Identity and Dynamics...

- How do racial dynamics affect your campus community?
- Do you think racial tensions have increased on campus in recent years? Why or why not?
- How does your racial identity impact your life?
- What is the difference between ethnicity and race?
- How can racial and ethnic identities overlap?
- What is the process on campus for someone to report racial harassment or hate crimes on campus?
- The parameters for racial identity groups have changed over time. How do you think they should change in the future, if at all?
- What does racial privilege look like on our campus? Which groups have privileges and which are excluded?
- What ideas do you have for making campus more equitable and inclusive for all racial identities?
- What are some lessons that you learned from your parents about racial identity?
- Please share an experience where you were very aware of racial difference. How did that make you feel?
- What are some stereotypes about racial and/or ethnic identities that are transmitted through the media? How can we go about combating those stereotypes?
- Has your understanding of your racial identity changed over time? Why or why not?
- What are some ways that your campus community does well regarding working toward inclusion? What are some areas that could be improved?

“Because each of us likely has an element of privilege within our make-up (ethnicity, gender, ability level, religion, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity), individuals need not feel guilty for their privilege. Rather, the focus should be to use our privileged positions to challenge the systems in which we live. Specifically, challenge yourself and others to refuse to live in a system of unchecked privilege. Determine and offer ways to challenge systems of privilege and oppression in your own life.”

- National Association of School Psychologists