The Curious Case of Tolerance among African Americans at U of I and the United States

Tolerance:

1. Capacity to endure pain or hardship.

2. The sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one own; the act of allowing something (toleration)

During this spring semester, my class and I have been presented with passages that impose these previous questions that challenge our way of thinking about race and the university. The one question that really caught my interest was “What is tolerance?” On that day of class, my teacher and fellow classmates shared views that contrasted with my definition of this term. Although class ended that day, my curiosity for this term begin to arise, and I started to think about the significance this term have on society and the affect it have on this campus.

In this paper, I want to explain and compare my definition of “tolerance” and analyze the effects it has on the African American community at U of I and how we have become tolerant in some situations when we should be intolerant. This definition will be used in this paper to understand the relationship between tolerance, race, and the University. The question or research is important because this country is at a critical point in history where the African American community is still experiencing racism or racial tolerance not just on this campus, but throughout this country.
How does a community create or understand the concept of “tolerance”?

**Incident by Countee Cullen**

*Now I was eight and very small,*

*And he was no whit bigger*

*And so I smiled, but he poked out*

*His tongue, and called me, “Nigger”*

This is a passage from Countee Cullen poem “Incident.” In this poem, Mr. Cullen describes an uninspected racial moment that happen to him while living in Baltimore at a young age. I could relate to Mr. Cullen because at a very young age, my mother taught me to treat everyone equal and go about my business the right way, but she didn’t mentioned issues about racism all the time. This was interesting because my mother is an outspoken person that is very protective but honest with her opinions. I remember she told me once about her experience of being called a “Nigger” by a white woman while making a delivery inside the Water Tower building in Chicago. I can tell this experience made her resent white people at that time, because it was her first time experiencing any type of racism in her life and I guess she vowed to turn this unfortunate situation into a positive by explaining it to my brother and me, as we got to an appropriate age.

In the African American community, I believe that the acts of racism are an example of tolerance against black citizens in the United States. What I mean when I used the term tolerance, I mean the act of suffering or experiencing changes within yourself or your ways. In Countee Cullen’s poem “Incident,” it took one racial moment for him to realize that race matters in the US. Over time, the African American community has made huge changes because of racial tolerance.

Throughout the history of the United States, African Americans were exposed to accept certain things that were given or imposed on them with the laws of the Constitution and the federal
government. These laws were focus on the unequal conditions of minorities living in the US. Throughout the decades, the African American culture has constantly made changes because of laws that were against the civil rights of African Americans, in order to cope with many psychological problems inside the culture, creating a sense of inferiority, insecurity, and acceptance that I would argue continues to have an important affect on the African American community today.

I believe that African Americans community has suffered from psychological problems but the significance is different on campus compared to our larger history. Historically, the demographic of the African American community and other ethnic groups are not as larger as the Caucasian demographic on this campus. This raises serious questions about how the University of Illinois conducts their admission process to address this racial imbalance. Do they have certain racial requirements that are needed in order for minorities to get accepted? Or is there complex politics that go into the acceptance of every race.

I would argue that these issues create a psychological disadvantage for African American on this campus, because a diverse community needs equality in order to communicate and survive. When you have a diverse community, communication is a valuable attribute because it allows people to try to understand each other. On this campus, this issue affects African Americans because some white students look at you as if you don’t belong here at U of I. Personally, I can relate to this problem, because earlier this semester I found myself questioning and doubting my learning abilities and knowledge. In a way, the campus and the non-existing communication among students serve as an example of tolerance because students might communicate in class, but outside of class people hang out with their own ethnicity. Currently, there are still issues with the
communication between African Americans and Caucasians in the United States and on this campus.

“The black community and white community have made a very real effort to speak to one another perhaps more than we ever did. I think the white community feels that we have to do that because it was a tragedy happened in the black community. I think the black community feels that healing is to take place if it’s necessary. I think white people do need to sometimes bend over backwards to help heal these wounds because apparently the black community is feeling wound we’re not feeling.” This quote come from Father Ron Foshage, he is a pastor from St. Michael’s Catholic Church, which is located in the small town of Jasper, Texas. In this quote, he was explaining how both the black and white community came together during the trials for the murder case of James Byrd Jr. After being on this campus for whole year, I came to realization on two things. The first one was that U of I is not as diverse as they try to make it seem, and the second one is the student environment on campus is not great because of the lack of communication. Also, these two points are relatable to the American culture because many stereotypes are made about races when people don’t try to adjust and understand other cultures.

On this campus, communication among students is only tolerated inside classes. For certain classes, participation is required because the teacher objective for each student is to communicate and share their thoughts and ideas. Through this communicate, students sometimes make friends or develop interest in certain new things. This is important for any race or ethnicity because the classroom is open environment that someone can really try to connect and understand about other ethnicities. I know from this semester I have learn a lot about my fellow classmates in my Rhetoric 102 class. I was exposed to different ideologies and perspectives that have changed my views on certain issues. This is very important for African Americans, because my learning is example of
our culture destroying this tolerant image or stereotype of being uneducated people that relies on the government to support us. But majority of these results don’t always occur in all classrooms at U of I because either the students resist communicating in class or the environment is large and separated to communicate. From my research, I observed Robert Morris University campus to compare and contrast the diversity among the student community.

“Race doesn’t play a factor on the campus, because Robert Morris is a small school and the students are mainly focused on trying to get out of school.” These are the honest words from one of my best friends, Damane Grier. He has been a Robert Morris for over a year now, so he has great insight on the campus and the student environment. He explains the reason for the student’s closeness was the city college campus. He said the students don’t have time to think about racial issues or any problems because of the work load and the schedule, student collectively work together so they can achieve their goal of graduating early and apply for jobs. After observing the student body and the campus, I find it impossible not to find a racial issue or any sign of tolerance on this campus, but I was wrong because reacting proactively towards any opposition or problem results into possible solutions.

So what is your definition of tolerance? And how can you solve this problem?

I believe in the complete opposite definition of tolerance; I believe in being proactively intolerant. I totally disagree with the concept of “enduring pain” or being “exceptional to things,” because of the psychological hardships a person will have to go through to experience during this process. I think being a “tolerable” person is going against your personal rights and allowing anyone to clearly take advantage of you. With proactive intolerance, you can have control on issues that deal with race or racism, because you are volunteering to allow yourself to be open to
anyone thoughts or opinions. This act of intolerance provides a person with an option to become outspoken and challenge social issues. For African Americans, the sixties was a renaissance for blacks Americans because the entirely culture began to enlighten themselves with education and questioned the tolerable treatment from the United States government and society.

“Racism by all counts is technically tied to the law” This quote was made by my graduate counselor, Marvin Armstrong Jr.; in an interview I conducted with him earlier this semester. In the 1960’s, African Americans began to question the social order in the United States with the Civil Rights movement and Black Power movement. These movements provided liberation and inspiration in the African American community that encourage families to strive issues dealing with education, better living conditions and support and funding from the government. Role models like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were dedicated and understood that these movements were going to triumph over the legal and social oppressive ways of the United States.

I understand we are in a different era and that socially things has change, but once again, I believe that the African American culture have became tolerable to American society. I make this statement because I am proud African American male and I have experience in this culture. Also, I understand we have a black president in office, but what a black president mean if a black person in small town is getting harass because of his skin color? From my experience on being here at U of I, I notice there are more Caucasian students than any other race or ethnicity. When I bring this issue up around my fellow black classmates, they give me this tolerable expression and shrug their shoulders and say, “So. That’s U of I for you!” This is important for African Americans because we need more black students at good colleges like U of I. In order for this to happen at U of I, we need to fellow our predecessors and use our proactive intolerance to take a stance against the admission process or any racial incident that occur on this campus. Another issue that I have a
problem with on this campus and in the United States is the perception of African Americans and the carelessness we have for this issue.

“So much as of what people can believe you can do with your expectations is if they ever seen someone do it before.” Ever since I was younger, I was taught to respect myself, my reputation, and others. Being a young black man on this campus and living in the US, I understand that there are many stereotypes that I must overcome in order to prove myself. Everyday, I feel that is my personal goal to prevail over the pressures and factors that are presented. I believe that African American males and females should cherish, honor, and respect their image because young black children (or any child) look for role models and our culture need these positive characters, so we can continue to progress as a whole. I disagree with the careless notion that image does not matter, because if you don’t care about how you are treating people, then you are acting selfish and tolerable against yourself by becoming separate from your culture and society.

In this paper, I critically analysis the term “tolerance” and the affect it has on the African American culture at the University of Illinois and in the United States. I think when you talk about the term “tolerance” in the African American community it is a requirement to explore the past and compare and contrast it to the relevant because there differences from the way American government has change over the years, especially with the election of President Barack Obama. But the social structure continues to remain the same and have a significant affect on the African American culture. I believe the only solution is to become proactively tolerant and more involve with the actions of the American government and society.
Works Cited


The Two Towns of Jasper and America's Racial Divide. Dir. Whitney Dow and Marco Williams.