REVEALING THE WHITE ELEPHANT:
ADDRESSING WHITENESS AND DIVERSITY IN A HIGHER ED COURSE AT ILLINOIS

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OVERVIEW

In order to be effective student affairs practitioners, White graduate students in higher education must be conscious of race and understand its’ importance on students of color’s success in college, both academically and emotionally (Mueller & Pope, 2003). Thus, I conducted an ethnographic research project to examine discussions on Whiteness and Diversity from a small portion of Illinois’ graduate students.

METHOD

I interviewed 3 students (1 White female, 1 White male, 1 African-American female) for approximately 1 hour each in a semi-structured interview format. I also conducted an ethnographic observation of a class session in which Whiteness and Diversity articles were discussed.

SELECTED RESEARCH QUESTIONS

• What value do you place on diversity courses?
• Did you know that race and ethnicity would be included in course content?
• In particular, how did you respond when you realized that Whiteness would be a topic of discussion?

KEY FINDINGS

1. Required Diversity Coursework
   • All students interviewed agreed that a diversity course should be required in the program.
   "I feel like our white students don’t think they will need stuff like this because they could very well run into the old boys network and not really have to deal with race issues per se, so it’s going to be less and less as time goes on and they graduate and are looking for jobs. They are going to need to learn how to work with other individuals who don’t look like them and become comfortable with these issues and I feel like these [diversity] classes are a stepping stone to kind of breakout that discomfort and be with students just like them and talk about this issues." – from a student interview

2. Importance of Instructor Characteristics and Cultural Competence

3. Need for Out-of-Class Experiences
   • Valued as very important by all interviewees
   • Needed in addition to courses

RECOMMENDATIONS

• Focus would be on helping the student to develop their own racial identity and how it could affect the interactions with their students
• Train instructors in "managing difficult dialogues" in the classroom
• Follow up with students who are enrolled in the Diversity in Higher Education master's program at Illinois to require at least one diversity course in its curriculum
• Provide training for instructors so that they have the "tools" to succeed
• Examine if attitudes of Whiteness and Diversity are different among student affairs professionals working at community colleges versus those at a 4-year college/university