Project Title: Book Club and Mini-Conference on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

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Need: When the highly contentious word “racism” enters a dialogue, people often conjure up images of highly publicized behaviors, like specific examples of celebrities using racial slurs or job candidates telling off-colored jokes. Race-based acts like these are appalling, divisive, and alienating. However, society often focuses solely on overt hostility and explicitly negative attitudes about racial groups when talking about discrimination, so much so that many individuals assume that an absence of explicit and overt discrimination indicates an absence of racism. J. M. Jones (1997) challenged this perspective by highlighting the individual, structural, and cultural nature of racism, arguing that it works discreetly at multiple levels and is deeply ingrained in the fabric of our everyday lives. Consistent with this framework, critical race theorists agree that the shift from the Jim Crow era of overt racism, active exclusion, and hostile/aggressive behavior toward people of color has been replaced by color-blind racism that continues to support the ideology of White racial superiority (Bonilla-Silva, 2013).

Over four decades of research has shown that microaggressions, or seemingly small, ostensibly singular acts of oppression, have consistently permeated the lives of people of color and other under-represented groups (Pierce, 1970). From being followed around a store by a security guard, to being repeatedly asked “Where are you from?”, to being assumed to be a service employee, to being skipped over in line to attend to a white customer, micro-aggressions are often dismissed as accidental, unintentional, color-blind individual acts (Sue et al., 2007). However, ample testimony and empirical research make evident that microaggressions (1) compile for people of color with a (daily) regularity that white people do not encounter and (2) compound to create hostile climates for members of affected groups (Sue et al., 2007). This “death by a thousand paper cuts” has deleterious physical and mental health effects. Sadly, dismissing these subtle forms of racism as insignificant (Solórzano et al., 2000) makes it difficult for individuals from under-represented groups to find allies and support networks.

The focus of this proposal is to advance discourse on these more subtle forms of racism by establishing an affinity group for racialized faculty and EDI allies at UTSC. The logic of this group borrows from research on undergraduate learning communities (Thompson & Phillips, 2013), which typically unite students who have a common interest and/or identity status in classes, extracurricular activities, and, in some cases, residence. The support that is provided among these learning communities generally offsets some of the isolation that is experienced among students of color, showing gains in engagement, personal and social development, and overall learning (McNair, Finley, & Krivian, 2013). The proposed affinity group seeks to fulfill a similar role for faculty of color and EDI allies. With a focus on EDI issues, the group will (a) provide a forum for learning and open dialogue, (b) create faculty engagement and collaboration, and (c)
cultivate resilience among under-represented communities.

The proposed book club or reading group would provide an opportunity and forum for UTSC faculty to consider and actively discuss readings from books, chapters, empirical papers, op-ed pieces and other relevant work in the domain of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). The reading group meetings would be once a month for the 2019 winter term and the 2019-2020 school year (12 meetings in total). The meetings would then culminate in an EDI mini-conference open to all UTSC faculty, staff, and students at the end of the 2019-2020 academic year. The mini-conference would be comprised of one keynote speaker, 2-3 concurrent round-table and/or panel discussions, and several poster presentations. There is potential for this mini-conference to be hosted in conjunction with the Center for Teaching and Learning, as a joint effort to facilitate their Annual Celebration conference.

To launch the EDI reading group, the organizers will host an EDI speaker and/or workshop in Spring 2019. This portion of the proposal will be supported by the Vice Dean Faculty Affairs & Equity as part of the ongoing Equity Matters seminar & discussion series.

**Impact:** The affinity group will pursue three major goals, all based in recommended practices:

*Education.* It is likely that many well-meaning colleagues in higher education are steeped in a generational discourse where colorblindness is a valued ideal, believed to promote equality. According to this framework, someone could theoretically view antiracist behavior as positive in an abstract way but then might also view the practice of antiracist behavior (e.g., conversations about race or racism) as undermining their efforts to promote equality (Juarez & Hayes, 2012). This logic of colorblindness and/or dismissing discussions of race and racism so that it can ‘die a natural death’ is deeply flawed and an impossibility (Watts, 2004). In fact, D. W. Sue (2004, p. 762) claims that the greatest challenge that society faces with combatting racism is “making the ‘invisible’ visible.” In order to shift a culture to be more aware and critically conscious, the dialogue needs to become more purposeful. In this way, the proposed reading group and mini-conference seeks to provide a forum for education and open discussion, laying the groundwork for broader EDI based discussions and campus initiatives.

*Facilitating connection and collaboration among faculty.* Under-represented faculty often find themselves in organizations, departments, meetings, and situations in which they feel isolated, excluded, misunderstood, and even silenced by the more dominant majority (Pololi et al., 2013). Yet, publications from leading positive organizational scholars (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Wooten, 2006) suggest that universities can maximize their effectiveness by galvanizing the experiences and talents of their under-represented faculty and enabling the development of meaningful interactions among all faculty. In fact, opportunities to engage with people who have different perspectives and hold different narratives can be especially energizing, particularly in moments when diversity discouragement and fatigue sets in (Wasserman, 2016). The proposed reading group and mini-conference seeks to empower our faculty to understand and engage differences, building bridges for positive change (Roberts, Wooten, & Davidson, 2016).

*Cultivating resilience.* Resilience, or the reduced vulnerability to environmental risk (Rutter, 2012), can develop over time with practiced and effective coping strategies (Masten et al., 2009; Luthans & Youssef, 2009). Among the strategies for people coping with and combatting various forms of biased treatment are assertively addressing offensive or inappropriate behavior (Hyers, 2007; Krieger & Sydney, 1996), maintaining a positive ethnic or racial identity (Evans et al., 2012),
seeking social support (Liang, Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2007), and getting involved in political activism (Watts, 2004). However, without proper socialization and training, people from under-represented groups are often ill equipped with effective strategies to cope with the reality that they encounter (Henderson & Bell, 2016; Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010), typically learning to navigate the terrain through trial and error. DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby (2016) propose that, in addition to academic and discipline-specific training and development, higher education should develop training to include candid conversations about race, gender, sexuality, disability, and religious freedom, teaching how to cope with -isms while actively working for change, and helping people to deal with micro-aggressions. In particular, given the diverse student body at UTSC, it is paramount to provide outlets for pedagogical development to support our students effectively. This proposal seeks to cultivate resilience among all of UTSC – students, faculty, and staff – through its impact in the reading group and mini-conference.

**Conclusion:** Despite efforts to emphasize diverse and multi-cultural visions, the domain of equity, diversity, and inclusion has often been overlooked, undervalued, trivialized, and even feared among lay people and lay faculty. Given this, it is paramount to open the doors to discussion – to provide safe opportunities for faculty to broaden their perspectives about the impact of structural racism, to facilitate a culture of critical consciousness, to develop strategies for coping, supporting and empowering one another, and effectively working for change.

**References Cited:**


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