



Changing the Tide: Increasing Student Retention by Acknowledging Race and Bias

Over the past 400 years, race has impacted every facet of life for marginalized groups in the United States, including housing, education, and job opportunities. Although institutions of higher education have shifted focus recently to increase equity and inclusion on college campuses, many initiatives have been reactive in nature. This article explores the effects of discrimination and provides ways educators can increase student multiculturalism and combat implicit bias in the classroom. By providing opportunities for students to engage in interactive and reflective activities, instructors can provide students with opportunities to challenge their beliefs in a safe and collaborative classroom environment.

Overview of Student Development

To fully understand the effects of racism, privilege, and bias on college student performance, it is important that we broadly discuss several theories of college student development. Most theories agree that students face two major obstacles in college: Trying to figure out who they are, including what they want to do in life and where they fit in, and building an individualized support system. When students' safety, security, and support needs have been met, they are able to focus on the tasks at hand, attend classes, and experience feelings of self-worth and autonomy.

Cognitive Distortions (Errors)

Humans are exposed to thousands of stimuli at any given moment. To quickly navigate and make sense of the world around us, we often place people into groups (categorization) and assign characteristics or qualities (classification). One major factor that may lead to prejudice and bias is emphasizing the differences between groups and inflating the similarities within the same group. The categorizations and classifications we place onto others are the direct results of our own experiences, which dictate our ways of thinking and the behaviors we exhibit.

Privilege

Privilege occurs when we fail to realize that inequities exist. This can be due to limited interaction with marginalized groups or limited discussion regarding racial issues. Privileged individuals may feel strongly against historical racial events or may fail to acknowledge that acts of racism still occur.

Implicit and Explicit Bias

Implicit bias (unconscious acts of discrimination) and explicit bias (conscious acts of discrimination) occur when individuals are exposed to frequent, often negative interactions or discussions of a marginalized group, heavily defended by prejudice and stereotypes. Bias has the potential to turn into future acts of violence and is often used as a catalyst for discrimination.

Effects of Oppression

Although institutions may focus on activities that counteract bias, prejudice, and privilege, we often fail to acknowledge the negative psychological effects hate crimes and acts of racism have on students. Recently, studies have begun to explore the psychological effects of racism. They have found that experiencing discrimination leads to trauma, low feelings of self-worth, and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. When provided with necessary supports, students may use oppression as motivation to prove others wrong or advocate for others.

Changing the Tide

As educators, we have the privilege of interacting with and molding students who will later branch out into various industries. Although the thought of tackling systemic racism may seem overwhelming, it is important to note that the first step in making lasting change is combatting incidents of institutional racism. This begins with the implementation of a "trickle-down effect."

Lasting change requires a comprehensive model of transformation, which incorporates not only reactive, but preemptive programs, policies, and procedures. For students to develop a strong sense of belonging, change needs to begin at the administrative level. When faculty and staff are treated fairly, provided opportunities to apply for alternative forms of funding, encouraged to create innovative programming, and feel as though they are respected and belong, they develop an increased desire to build a sense of camaraderie in the classroom. This alleviates the likelihood of job burn-out and has been found to positively impact feelings of compassion and empathy towards others.

Types of Classroom Activities

When developing instructional activities, do not be afraid to shake things up. It is important to include a variety of reflective and collaborative individual and group projects and assignments that require students to reflect upon and question individual beliefs, values,

and perceptions. The more interactive activities are, the more buy-in you will get from students. Please note that activities may need to be adapted based upon class size, individual student needs, campus climate, and course modality.

Icebreakers

One of the easiest ways to build a sense of camaraderie in the classroom is by implementing weekly five-to-ten-minute icebreakers. Icebreakers are a great way for students to learn more about one another in an open and judgment-free environment and can assist students with challenging their own pre-conceived stereotypes. The flexibility of icebreakers also allows educators to easily incorporate icebreaker themes or concepts directly into the curriculum. Although many students do not like icebreakers, when they are presented in a fun and interactive manner, students often begin to view these activities as games and like the predictability of learning about others. Examples of icebreaker questions include: "What is your favorite hobby?"; "If you could have any superpower, what would you choose and why?"; and "If you could un-invent anything in the world, what would you choose?"

Team Builders

Team builders are another effective and efficient way to enhance students' communication and multicultural skills. Team builders provide instructors with the opportunity to promote group work in a controlled environment. Games such as Jeopardy and Family Feud provide the opportunity to create situations where students see the value of individual contributions and perspectives. These activities can be easily adapted from quizzes or tests and are often more effective since students are able to learn from one another.

Reflective Narratives

Although interactive activities are extremely important, engagement without reflection is fruitless. Reflective exercises require that students actively think, analyze, and digest complex information to form direct connections. A simple way to incorporate reflections into the curriculum is by creating partnerships with Student Affairs offices. Many institutions hold heritage month celebrations, festivals, museums of oppression, and multicultural panels that are wonderful opportunities for student reflection. An incentive for attendance can include extra credit. Proof of attendance can include obtaining a staff signature or asking students to write a narrative describing their experience and what they learned. At institutions where funding is limited, a variety of online videos such as the "Brown-Eyed, Blue-Eyed Experiment" or memoirs such as *There Are No Children Here* can be assigned and explored.

Considerations

When implementing programs and activities, it is important to keep the institutional mission at the heart of your work. Efforts should focus on pushing the mission forward and ensuring that the institution practices what it preaches. Programming should abide

by the bylaws, policies, and procedures of the institution and be approved prior to implementation.

Assessments and Evaluations

One problem with the current evaluative structure is that educators often do not receive student feedback regarding their overall performance until mid-terms or finals. Unfortunately, delayed feedback can result in student disinterest, disengagement, and truancy. Students display more buy-in when they are provided with evaluations after each class session. These can be implemented by creating a Google Form and sending the link to students after each class meeting.

Try to keep evaluations to five to ten questions to prevent student burnout. Evaluations do not have to be complex. It is sufficient to ask, "What was the best thing about today's class session?"; "What was the worst thing about today's class session?"; "Name three things you learned in class."; "What questions do you still have regarding concepts discussed during this class session?"; and "What improvements do you have for future class sessions?" This allows you to make instructional adjustments as needed, gather quantitative and qualitative data regarding the student experience, and improve class performance and participation.

Final Thoughts

Remember: It's okay to not know what it's like to walk in the shoes of another person. However, you can acknowledge the difficulty of their journey, provide encouragement, and ease their burden. Small acts of kindness can make a huge impact. When we center our moral compass around the "Golden Rule," we meet students where they are, easily build rapport, and create lasting relationships. When we fail to acknowledge the beauty of diversity, we do a disservice to our students. When institutions fail to provide a holistic model of development, future generations continue to struggle with issues of oppression, bigotry, and violence.

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