

Antiracist Academic Leadership: Confronting Whiteness

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Abstract

What obligations do academic leaders have to address the ways whiteness impacts departmental and campus climates? And what are some strategies chairpersons can take to mitigate the ways whiteness creates inequitable conditions for students, faculty, and staff success? Participants in this session will have an opportunity to discuss these and other questions and explore the requirements of academic leadership that is avowedly antiracist.

Session Description

The white nationalist rally in the summer of 2017 in Charlottesville highlighted the implications of white nationalism for campus life. While the events that occurred in Charlottesville were especially tragic and were accompanied by stark images, the white supremacy driving those events is anchored in structures of whiteness that pervade our culture. The impact of whiteness--the norming and privileging of the interests of white folks--on the university campus was brought to light in dramatic fashion by the student protests at the University of Missouri in 2015. There, whiteness motivated the students' concerns and highlighted failures of leadership that fail to take the ways whiteness shapes campus culture into account.

More than ever, academic leaders need to understand, acknowledge, and confront the ways whiteness shapes both department and campus cultures. The events at Mizzou illustrate the critical need for academic leaders to examine the role they play in sustaining and reproducing whiteness within their departments, colleges, and institutions. If higher education is to realize the goals of equitably educating all students, and of being an engine of equality and inclusion, then academic leaders need to confront the ways white supremacy is sustained by structures of whiteness present in our institutions. It is essential that we develop leadership training and leadership support mechanisms that will provide chairpersons and other academic leaders with the tools and skills to engage their campuses in antiracism.

The obligation of academic leaders to actively confront whiteness is grounded in the obligation to create and sustain a climate and environment where students, staff, and faculty can feel included and have an equal opportunity to flourish and succeed. To the degree that whiteness pervades academic cultures, academic leaders have the responsibility to take actions to confront and challenge it. There are multiple modes of action leaders can take, including symbolic, educational, and institutional. Making public statements in opposition to white supremacy and white nationalism signals to the campus community that we are committed to the success of everyone. Particular steps that can be taken include organizing trainings and workshops for staff and faculty on topics of whiteness, oppression, and privilege, decolonizing the curriculum, and eliminating policies that subtly privilege one group while disadvantaging another.

This session will begin by clarifying how whiteness shapes campus cultures and identifying some ways for department chairpersons to confront whiteness and disrupt its reproduction. There will be ample time for engaged discussion of what chairpersons can do to confront whiteness.