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Opening Doors Building Bridges (Sankofa Journey)

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Research and Integration Paper

The United States has been one of the most diverse nations in the world, yet racial disparities continue to deny certain individuals' access to equal opportunities. One such disproportion lies within the scheme of higher education where systemic racism contributes tremendously to decision-making. Although attaining a college degree has become one of the greatest breakthroughs for people to climb the social ladder, systemic racism still negatively affects minorities to achieve their goals. Systemic racism in higher education entails the biased ways institutions develop and execute policies in favor of one particular group but not the other ("Systemic Racism in Higher Education" 49). It is ingrained, projected, and perpetuated in a structure that is filled with implicit biases. While prejudice and stereotyping are simply negative attitudes toward the target outgroup, they can manifest into discrimination in institutional settings. With this unfortunate reality, it is vital for colleges and churches to advocate for diversity inclusion. At the same time, getting on the spiritual journey of reconciliation can gradually restore justice.

This research paper will first cover the importance of the acknowledging the existence of systemic racism. Various issues concerning the problem and division stemming from racial prejudice in higher education will be addressed. In order to review the background on this subject, the paper will include discussions of inequality in standardized testing, affirmative action debates, racial hostility in the classroom, racial marginalization, and the role of socially

constructed views on race. Moreover, an examination of the progression of social change will focus on the methods and interventions of reconciliation that have occurred in specific college campuses. With respect to fighting against systemic racism, the Reconciliation Roadmap will offer valuable insights. Finally, the paper will conclude with some suggestions on the next steps in integrating reconciliation at Nyack College.

Compared to decades ago, higher education is much more accessible to many people today. Nevertheless, the system used to determine who gets a chance to pursue a college degree often times still works against people of color. Given that those in leadership positions have control over the process of decision-making, this “elite” class, which is predominantly White, tends to offer admissions to individuals alike in order to preserve power and status (“Systemic Racism in Higher Education” 52). What is at stake here is the critical discrepancies in racial representations in both public and private universities. When more minorities are unable to attend college, their career choices will become limited and their employment-seeking experience will yield more hardship, in turn confirming the stereotype that they often do not hold high-paying jobs. Ultimately, systemic racism puts its victims into a vicious cycle as well as multiple forms of injustice.

One of the major factors that contributes to systemic racism is inequality in standardized testing. Tests like the SAT and the ACT are no easy tasks for adolescents’ premature brains. Yet minority students are typically those without sufficient resources to prepare them for difficult entrance exams, resulting in inequitable admissions (“Systemic Racism in Higher Education” 53). Another component in the problem of systemic racism concerns racial hostility in the classroom that prevents precollege students from performing with their full potential. With the widespread of racial prejudice in daily life, White students tend to deliberately or micro-

aggressively mistreat people of color based on their race-related stereotypes like African Americans are drug dealers and Mexicans are rapists (“Systemic Racism in Higher Education” 68). Such disconcerting experiences often reduce minority students’ ability to do well academically, at the same time, seeking higher education can give the impression of putting themselves in an even more inferior position. Racial marginalization also exacerbates the division by isolating people of color from the mainstream culture (“Systemic Racism in Higher Education” 71). Consequently, those feeling disconnected with the rest of the student body that fail to celebrate multiculturalism would suffer from this institutionally endorsed segregation.

Different socially constructed views on race have affected the development of systemic racism. First, the very basis of disunity originates from the social concept of ingroup versus outgroup, or the classic “us” versus “them” (Cleveland 67). People are drawn to finding a sense of belonging with individuals who share common characteristics. Interestingly but also sadly, people are inclined to move toward one extreme to distinguish their identity from that of the outgroup despite the insignificance of the distinction (Cleveland 68). Applying to race, the majority would view minorities as the outgroup who ought to stay out of the majority’s circle and activities, including attending their private schools.

The idea of stereotype threat also plays a role in racial disparities in higher education. Facing the threat that African Americans and Hispanics are labeled as intellectually less competent, these students would experience more anxiety and distress that hinder their performance (“Systemic Racism in Higher Education” 54). Further, one of the social foundations relates to another system of prejudice, the segregated church. While Sunday mornings remain to be America’s one of the most segregated time, the unspoken existence of Eurocentric bias has been an element that is socialized into the American Christian culture (Felder 13). If believers

cannot see the biblical implication of multicultural values, the church as well as Christian colleges would fail to lead the mission of racial reconciliation.

Although systemic racism lingers as a detrimental part of reality, the future of justice is not without hope. One of the many crucial interventions on this social matter is affirmative action. In particular, the advantage of affirmative action lies within its focus to raise diversity through race-conscious admissions. Regardless of the possible effect of post-racialism, it still serves as a means to combat systemic racism in higher education (“Systemic Racism in Higher Education” 56). An example would be the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) in the state of New York that offers college admissions to students with educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Some colleges and universities with diversity awareness have implemented classes required for certain majors like psychology, social work, education, and pastoral ministry. This method provides students with the opportunity to experience “the power of crosscultural contact” (Cleveland 153). When individuals come together to understand one another’s upbringings and perspectives, they can learn to renounce any past prejudice against the outgroup members. Christena Cleveland puts it as “an exercise in error reduction,” denoting that positive interracial interaction can bring forth diversity inclusion. Moreover, groups like the Racial Reconciliation Initiative and the Multicultural Peer Mentoring Program in college campuses allow individuals to have honest, community-building conversations that project to impact a larger part of society.

System racism in higher education is rooted in a spectrum of America’s original sins. In order to make lasting change, schools and churches must participate in tackling the fundamental problem of racism. The Reconciliation Roadmap is a beneficial tool to begin the spiritual journey of reconciliation. Brenda Salter McNeil indicates that a catalytic event must happen before

individuals can become conscious about the ongoing issues (McNeil 41). For an institution, a powerful event about race can be decision-makers' personal encounter with capable minority students who could not be admitted to their desired schools due to racial bias. The students' individual testimonies can shake up the unequal system to act toward structural transformation. Institutions should also openly recognize their previous shortcomings and lack of intercession as they prepare to execute new influential policies. At their activation phase, communicating and advocating equal opportunities while relating to and educating others are essential (McNeil 95-96). Christian colleges playing a role in both higher education and church ministry ought to delve into the process of reconciliation more actively.

In conclusion, systemic racism has affected generations of students of color unjustly. However, many conscientious forerunners of reconciliation have followed Jesus the Reconciler's example. Some recommendations for next steps in integrating reconciliation at Nyack College include requiring all students to take the Racial Reconciliation class before they graduate and hosting more multicultural celebration events to raise awareness of diversity inclusion. In addition, professors can create more safe space for students to express and discuss racism in the academic environment. Eventually, reconciliation is most effective through "thoughtful and intentional contact between well-equipped individuals" (Cleveland 155). Such well-equipment must incorporate biblical teachings and the response to God's call to social justice guided by repentance, forgiveness, and perseverance.

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