The high cost of the myth of colorblindness.

By Samuel D. Museus, April L. Yee, and Susan A. Lambe

Multiracial in a Monoracial World

Student Stories of Racial Dissolution on the Colorblind Campus

IN 2006, HINES WARD, wide receiver for the Pittsburgh Steelers, was honored as the Super Bowl's Most Valuable Player (MVP). Shortly thereafter, Ward received increased attention from media outlets for his success on the football field, as well as for the fact that he was the first multiracial black/Korean American to win a Super Bowl MVP award. Interestingly, however, much of the media attention around Ward chronicled his experiences with prejudice and discrimination as a multiracial child and his humanitarian efforts to advocate for multiracial Korean children who might be enduring struggles similar to those he encountered in his youth.

Newspaper articles, Internet blogs, and television shows highlighted the fact that Ward's Korean mother chose to emigrate from South Korea to the United States because of her fear of the discrimination her son would face as a multiracial person in South Korea, a country that the media suggested has

a history of racial intolerance. However, their move to the United States did not prevent Ward from experiencing mistreatment as a mixed-race person. Ward experienced racial prejudice and discrimination in the schools in Georgia, as well as difficulties trying to fit in with various racial and ethnic groups. In an interview with ESPN, Ward describes his formative years:

> Going to school, black kids teased me because I was Korean, so it was hard trying to fit in with black kids because they always made fun of my Korean side. Trying to hang out with the Korean kids, they'd always tease me because I was black, you know. Trying to hang out with the white kids, they'd tease me because I was black *and* Korean.

Ward's story is important, in part, because it conveys how deeply he was affected by prejudice

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and discrimination. Despite his superstar status, Ward's experiences have remained with him into adulthood and, to some extent, continue to drive his values, identity, and behavior. If experiences with racial prejudice and discrimination are such salient aspects of multiracial individuals' experiences, we believe it is important for postsecondary educators to acknowledge and help students manage them. This article is based on the premise that educators must work to first understand what happens when multiracial students encounter campus environments that perpetuate *colorblind ideologies*—that is, worldviews that suggest that race and racism do not significantly influence people's experiences. We argue that educators have a responsibility to foster environments that acknowledge the important role of race in college life and beyond.

The bulk of the story that follows is told by four self-identified mixed-race college students, representing four different racial backgrounds. Our conversation with these students illustrates the problem of the colorblind campus and the potential for what we call racial dissolution. We use this latter term to describe instances in which a student's passion for addressing

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racial problems is diminished or eradicated by environments that send messages discouraging such activities. We follow this discussion with recommendations to college educators for addressing these issues and for improving the experiences of mixed-race college students and of all students.

COLORBLIND CAMPUSES AND THE AVOIDANCE OF RACIAL DIALOGUES

AT THE TIME OF OUR INTERVIEW, Mase was a second-year, Asian/white, male student; Jax was a fourth-year, Asian/black, male undergraduate; Chase was a fourth-year, black/white, male student; and Sky was a fourth-year, Native American/white, female undergraduate. Through our conversation, the students offer their perspectives on their multiracial identities and campus experiences and discuss the challenges they faced related to colorblindness on their campuses, including feelings of frustration, isolation, apathy, despair, and depression.

The four students were enrolled in three different highly selective, predominantly white, private universities located in an urban area in the Northeast region of the United States. The students describe the geographic area as "liberal," "diverse," and "pretty accepting." From their perspective, racial, particularly multiracial, issues are ignored. Other members of their campus communities, intentionally or not, use colorblindness as their approach to topics related to race. Chase, Mase, and Jax describe their campuses.

Chase: "People don't like talking about race. Honestly . . . no one wants to talk about it. No one wants to talk about the real differences or similarities [among racial groups] or any racial issues. They just want things to be sort of stuck under the rug and kept quiet as long as it can be."

Mase: "Yeah, I feel like my friends don't really ask me about it, because they don't want to bring race up."

The participants suggest that the avoidance of racial issues on their campuses is, at least in part, a function of people's desires to be seen as highly knowledgeable, culturally sophisticated, and racially enlightened.

Jax: "It's either just apathy, or 'it's a waste of my time,' or they just don't want to think about it at all."

Sky: "Yeah, there are one or two people who care about racial issues, but overall the campus feels like it's pretty colorblind."

Scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and others have discussed the adverse consequences of such colorblind ideologies. Bonilla-Silva argues that a majority of whites and some people of color deny that race and racism continue to play a fundamental role in American life, while "racial considerations shade almost everything in America" (p. 1). Shaun Harper and Sylvia Hurtado underscore the problematic avoidance of racial discourse specifically on college campuses. In their analysis of focus-group discussions involving 278 racial minority students, the authors identify the avoidance of racial discourse as a major theme and quote a participant who believes that it is unrealistic and unfair for institutions to expect students to initiate conversations around sensitive topics such as race without institutional help.

The four multiracial participants of our focus group attribute the colorblind ideologies that predominated on their institutions, in part, to their campuses' liberal orientations and elite status. Chase and Mase offer the following explanation.

Chase: "I think a lot of people like to think they're above the fray. They want to be so progressive and liberal that, you know, they don't see color. . . . They don't see race. . . . You're just a student."

Mase: "I feel like my white friends or Asian friends don't really want to bring racial or multiracial issues up because, you know, they don't want to offend me in any way."

In his comments, Chase suggests that many people on campus espouse liberal political views and a desire to be seen as people who can transcend the effects of race and racism. In Mase's view, people do not want to damage their image as progressively liberal by mak-

ing statements that could be perceived as racially insensitive. The participants suggest that the avoidance of racial issues on their campuses is, at least in part, a function of people's desires to be seen as highly knowledgeable, culturally sophisticated, and racially enlightened. In this way, others at the participants' institutions steer away from open dialogue about race and racism, creating a colorblind environment.

The notion of avoiding racial dialogues to protect one's reputation is not new. Teun van Dijk discusses the ways in which individuals protect their self-image by avoiding situations in which they might be labeled racist or intolerant. In "Discourse and the Denial of Racism," van Dijk suggests that racial intolerance is no longer socially acceptable in most circles and individuals are likely to avoid negative evaluations of their personalities in an attempt to save "face" or preserve their reputations. Indeed, members of institutions attended by our focus-group participants protect their reputations by avoiding situations where they might be perceived as racially insensitive. On the infrequent occasions that racial dialogues occur on their campuses, participants explain that monoracial issues tend to dominate that discourse and multiracial issues remain largely ignored. Sky and Jax, who were from the same Ivy League institution, describe their campus environment.

Sky: "The people who do care about racial issues are usually involved in monoracial groups. . . . It's really hard to get organizations to want to talk about mixed-race things. If I propose having a discussion about our multiraciality as a group, it isn't something people would want to talk about. They would be like, 'Oh, does it matter?' or 'Why are we going to talk about this in front of other people, like this is an issue in our community?' So, I think there's sort of resistance in terms of wanting to discuss the issue of multiraciality itself, let alone collaborate or be a part of a group who has that as its central focus."

Jax: "I think a lot of people in the black community who are mixed-race identify just as black, and [mixed-race dialogues] could be seen as kind of a

challenge to authenticity even, and it's like calling people out. You don't want to do that."

Sky's comments, seconded by other participants in the conversation, suggest that monoracial peers are unaware that important issues exist in the multiracial community or are unwilling to acknowledge and discuss them. Jax's comments, however, underscore a more political motivation for suppressing discourse around mixed-race issues. His observations indicate that black peers, in particular, might intentionally stifle multiracial campus dialogue because they may not want their legitimacy as members of the black community to be challenged.

This is not entirely surprising given the contentious history of multiraciality within monoracial communities in the United States. In the 1990s, for example, during debates about whether there should be a separate "multiracial" box included on the 2000 Census forms, many black and Asian American political leaders spoke out in opposition to such an option. Their disagreement with the inclusion of a multiracial box emerged from the concern that this option would encourage mixed-race individuals to defect from the monoracial community and weaken those groups' political power. Today, some monoracial community leaders continue to discourage identification with multiracial groups for that same reason. As a result, some multiracial students feel pressured to choose to be "with or against" their communities, and may believe that identification with mixed-race groups can be interpreted as a lack of legitimacy in or loyalty to monoracial communities. As Jax noted earlier, these concerns may cause mixed-race blacks on his campus to avoid multiracial discourse.

Colorblind Campuses and Racial Dissolution

ONE CONSEQUENCE OF THE COLORBLIND CAMPUS that was felt by these students is racial dissolution, which is char-

acterized by a student's passion for positively addressing racial problems being diminished or eradicated in environments where continuous messages are sent that these efforts cannot or should not succeed. As the following discussion demonstrates, the psychological consequences of racial dissolution include students "giving up" and disengaging from these efforts, as well as increased levels of confusion, frustration, discouragement, apathy, hopelessness, and depression.

Jax and Sky explain how they became pessimistic about the prospects for meaningful and consistent attention to multiracial issues at their college.

> *Jax*: "I came to campus thinking I was going to, you know, shake things up, bridge gaps, whatever, and . . . things are very entrenched here. But I'm glad to see that my efforts with [the multiracial organization on campus] paid off, somewhat. . . . I just don't see it as something that, I mean realistically speaking, as something that will be that long lasting. Seems like efforts to talk about multiraciality are pretty fleeting, at best."

> *Sky*: "Yeah, they cycle. Every couple of years it comes up again, and people do something, and then it sort of dies off. . . ."

This loss of momentum eventually led these and the other students to become discouraged and disengaged. They also describe the negative impact of colorblind campuses on their psychological states. Sky and Mase, for example, use "frustrated" and "jaded" to describe the consequences of the racial dissolution that they experienced.

> *Sky*: "I think it is definitely frustrating, and I don't know if this is just because I'm a senior now and I've sort of just accepted that this is the way things go here. My freshman and sophomore year, I was all about, 'Oh, we have to get more ethnic groups to collaborate with one another, work together,

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discuss these things together.' That was like my mission in life. And then, by junior year, it's just like, 'F&$@ it.' But, yeah, now, I'm so jaded. My freshman and sophomore years, I was just sort of like, 'Alright, how can you be so racially conscious, so socially aware, and still not want to confront these issues? Or, still think that I'm weird or whatever for wanting to always bring this stuff up that's never talked about?' So yeah, I think it was mostly frustration, and a little bit of confusion."

Mase: "I was frustrated for a while, but I just find that people are going to think what they think. You're not going to be able to get it out of them. There are few people who actually want to talk about it. . . . So it's kind of tough to, you know, find someone, find an outlet for it. So, I guess, I just kind of brushed it under the rug in my head."

Sky came to college with a mission to have a positive impact on race relations. By her senior year, she abandoned that mission, replacing it with apathy, frustration, and confusion. Mase also felt frustration and increased apathy. He coped with his racial dissolution, however, by repressing his thoughts about multiracial issues. When we asked the students how they felt about the general avoidance of multiracial issues on their campuses, Sky summed it up for the group with one word: "Depressed." The rest of the group concurred.

Mase, Jax, Chase, and Sky began their college careers optimistic about their ability to positively impact the environment for multiracial students. The racial dissolution they experienced over the course of time is shared by other students of color and speaks to a flaw in even the most open and sophisticated of learning environments.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGE EDUCATORS

COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES THAT CULTIVATE and perpetuate environments that eliminate students' passion to resolve racial issues and have a positive impact on society, do a disservice to individual undergraduates, the campus community, and the public at large.

In this section, we offer a set of recommendations for combating colorblind ideologies and preventing racial dissolution among students of color, including those from mono- and multiracial backgrounds. While participants in our conversation were from highly selective private institutions, research suggests that colorblind ideologies, avoidance of racial dialogues, and racial dissolution can exist on college campuses of various selectivity levels, missions, locations, and sizes. Our recommendations for all educational communities include: (1) cultivating campus cultures that embrace racial dialogues as a norm, (2) ensuring that multiracial issues are included in campus discourses about race, and (3) actively supporting multiracial students and groups.

College educators must first promote discourse around issues of race and racism to foster campus cultures in which racial dialogues are considered the norm. Mitchell Chang, June Chang, and María Ledesma suggest that too many colleges and universities enroll racially diverse student populations but fail to realize the benefits of such diversity because of "magical thinking." This thinking fuels false notions that benefits of diversity will be realized without intentional efforts to promote them. We echo this assertion. College educators must assume responsibility for creating structured, multifaceted, and regular opportunities for all members of the campus community to interact around issues of race. All students should be socialized to the notion that racial discourse is an institutional norm. The campus should be seen as a place that encourages racial dialogues throughout the students' college experience, and as a place where racial discourse is valued and appropriate in academic and social settings.

The establishment of racial discourse as a norm begins with orientation through which students can be introduced into an environment that values discourse around issues of race. From there, monthly lecture series, annual race-focused conferences, or other formal

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opportunities can be sponsored. The key to their effectiveness is that these dialogues become part of the fabric of the institution, as opposed to events that occur only during ethnic history months or in response to racist events on campus. With regard to spanning academic and social boundaries on campus, college administrators and faculty members should work together to make connections between courses that address racial issues and cocurricular racial dialogues on campus. For example, faculty could require or encourage student participation by incorporating these events into their course syllabi. Institutionally sponsored professional development should be offered to help prepare classroom faculty and other educators for integrating issues of race into both the curriculum and the cocurriculum.

Our second recommendation, that campus discourse on race must include multiracial issues, is founded on the belief that dialogue around monoracial and interracial issues is strengthened by the inclusion of voices from the multiracial population. For greatest effectiveness, facilitators and guest speakers must be capable of challenging the often-taken-for-granted socially constructed racial categories. They must confront current understandings of race and demonstrate its complexity, nuance, and shades of gray. Among students who would benefit from such discussions are the growing number of participants in interracial relationships, as well as majority students and students across the racial spectrum.

Finally, in addition to sponsoring additional conversations about race in general and multiracial issues specifically, more campuses should work to support and engage multiracial students and organizations. We offer a few questions to ponder in this regard: Do multiracial student organizations have representation and support equivalent to those enjoyed by other ethnic organizations? Do they have dedicated campus space, equal funding, and faculty and administrative advisors? Are they invited to participate in diversity panels for prospective students and hold positions on student governing boards? Overall, how might current structures and practices inadvertently marginalize multiracial students and groups?

In 2010, more than 9 million people identified with more than one racial category. That number is likely to grow, as will the number of self-identified mixed-race students matriculating into institutions of higher education. College and university leaders must be aware of this student population and work to ensure their inclusion in the racial discourse and organizational structures on their campuses. By doing so, they will not only promote the engagement and success of multiracial students, but they will also challenge colorblind ideologies, decrease instances of racial dissolution, and create richer learning environments for all students.

NOTES

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