

Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

Volume 19 | Number 19

Article 8

2020

Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom: Notes from a White Professor

Jeffrey Tabone
Indiana Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tabone, Jeffrey (2020) "Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom: Notes from a White Professor," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*. Vol. 19 : No. 19 , Article 8.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol19/iss19/8

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Association of Christians in Student Development at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.



Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom: Notes from a White Professor

Kernahan, C., 2019
West Virginia University Press
Reviewed by Jeffrey Tabone, PhD

Talking about race and racism is difficult. In the context of Christian higher education, it may be easier for us to focus on the redemptive power of Christ's work in the world, while ignoring the prophetic laments of the oppressed who face both individualized and systematic injustice on a daily basis. Within student affairs you may have found yourself ill equipped to mediate racialized conflicts. Be it a microaggressive comment rooted in ignorance or a blatant racist perspective, students look to their campus leaders for de-escalation, answers, and (possibly) justice. Wisdom reminds us there are no easy answers to these situations and empty platitudes fall drastically short in offering condolences to a hurt minoritized individual.

In her book, *Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom*, Dr. Cyndi Kernahan, professor of psychology at University of Wisconsin–River Falls, offers an exemplary account for engaging students in the topics of race and racism. As a trained social psychologist whose scholarly work focuses on teaching and learning within higher education, and as one who has had years of classroom instructional experience, the author successfully integrates two academic fields and offers a comprehensive and pragmatic account for teaching about race. Kernahan's

clearly states the foundation of her book saying, "This book is about teaching race and racism in a way that is not blaming or shaming, a way that is compassionate but also relentlessly honest about the realities of racism and White supremacy in the United States" (p. 5). Broken into six chapters, Kernahan's book covers many of the dynamics transpiring within the college classroom—from faculty and student differences, student resistance, developing an identity as a teacher, cultivating a sense of belonging, embracing a growth mindset, and ends with suggestions of how instructors might develop their course content. Utilizing both anecdotal stories and relying on scientific literature, this text remains clear, accessible, and insightful for those wanting to gain a strong foundation to teaching and discussing a challenging subject matter. *Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom*, synthesizes content from a variety of academic disciplines and offers educators avenues to increase their knowledge base and instructional strategies (both in and outside of the classroom). In essence, Kernahan discusses "how to teach rather than on what to teach" (p. 10), in which these lessons remain directly applicable to student affairs professionals.

Though *Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom* remains an exemplary text, it does present some limitations. First, at times Kernahan relied too heavily on anecdotal evidence in order to articulate key points. Use of narratives and stories were engaging and productive to the text, yet it may leave the reader desiring more references to scholarship surrounding the topic of teaching on race and racism. Second, the text would have been strengthened through a clearer articulation of implementing her suggestions in (and outside of) the classroom. For a book about *teaching*, Kernahan's section on content delivery (pp. 181-188) could have offered more substantive directives on how to incorporate the content of the book into learning environments. The author would have strengthened this text with a simple list of tangible learning activities readers could utilize within their own educational practices. Yet, perhaps Kernahan is wise enough to understand the complicated nuances of curricular settings and refrains from offering prescriptive one-size-fits-all teaching practices? Regardless, some may be left with wanting a clearer account of the *how* to teach such a critical topic.

Amidst some minor limitations, there remain significant takeaways for student affairs professionals. A distinguishing feature of this text was in Kernahan's comprehensive vision of what it means to be human in a racialized society. Being trained in the discipline of social psychology, she

accounts for how teaching race is complicated largely because humans are complicated. Her articulation of these challenges was to be expected in a text such as this, yet her attentiveness to these details lent itself to the book's strength. Kernahan demonstrated a posture of genuine compassion for her students and continually reiterated the importance of not shaming or embarrassing students for their positions, but educating them. The reader's attention is drawn towards the *humanness* of those whom we strive to educate, which serves as a reminder for student affairs professionals whose relationships with students can easily be contextualized by alternative categories which diminishes student humanity. Kernahan challenges readers with a call of being firm, yet compassionate and reiterates the significance of listening to those whom we are privileged to instruct.

A second observation of this text comes from Kernahan turning the book's attention from student to instructor. Throughout the text, Kernahan expresses a firm understanding of her positionality as a White female instructor teaching race and racism, and acknowledges her own limitations from this vantage point. An essential take away for those in student affairs is how the author highlights ways in which educators can personally develop their own self-efficacy in regards to teaching in the areas of race and racism along with managing the power they hold as an educator. Kerneham highlights how critical it is for instructors to "know themselves" (p. 82), as a means of conceptualizing how we may experience advantages or disadvantages solely based upon our race or social identities. The advice Kernahan provides offers readers an opportunity for pause and personal reflection to take account of their own positionality and what they bring to an educational setting—perhaps a step often overlooked by the nature of our busy and noisy lives.

An additional consideration gleaned from *Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom* is the articulation of the need to cultivate student belonging within our educational contexts. Though the author's content is largely focused on a classroom setting, student affairs professionals can easily correlate Kernahan's insight into how one might facilitate avenues of connection via student activities programming, within residence halls, or in any additional cocurricular environment. Readers are reminded the nature of race and racism can be isolating to students on a variety of levels regardless of their racial identity. Kernahan offers pragmatic suggestions of ways educators can facilitate connection between instructor and student or from student to student (pp. 99-130)

through practices such as creating a positive learning environment (i.e., creatively incorporating humor within course content), utilizing reoccurring getting to know you practices, and identifying ways in which to acknowledge and move beyond negative feelings. We are reminded through the author's account that learning environments become less volatile and angst ridden the more successful we are at eliminating feelings of fear and isolation.

Kernahan's work, *Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom*, offers a proactive response for student affairs professionals willing to put in the time and effort to grow as educators of race and racism. In light of today's current events and increasingly diverse student populations, the question is not "if" the topic of race and racism arise, but "when." According to Kernahan, a proper response isn't to have all the answers, but to be familiar enough with scholarly literature surrounding racism so we can direct students towards facts verses opinions, to know oneself and how we may be implicated within a racialized society, and to cultivate a compassionate attitude towards our students in order to draw them from fear and isolation into a community of belonging. Whether you are a new professional or seasoned administrator, *Teaching about Race and Racism in the College Classroom* remains an transformational resource to learn from and grow as the text offers practical steps wherein readers are challenged to foster rich learning environments dedicated to a critical topic.

Jeffrey Tabone serves as both the Assistant Director of Programs and Student Formation and Assistant Professor of Honors Humanities in the John Wesley Honors College at Indiana Wesleyan University.