BEVERLY DANIEL TATUM

"Why Are All the Black Kids *Still*

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *In 2011, the New American Colleges and Universities established a national award to honor the legacy of Ernest L. Boyer by recognizing an individual whose achievements in higher education exemplify Boyer's quest for connecting theory to practice and thought to action, in and out of the classroom. The 2017 Boyer Award was presented to Beverly Daniel Tatum at the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. T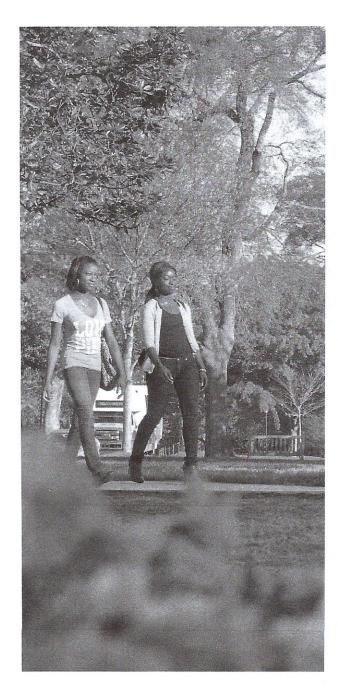he following article was adapted from* the address given by the author on that occasion, and draws from a new chapter in the twentieth-anniversary edition of her book, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" and Other Conversations about Race *(New York: Basic Books, 2017).*

We may be living in a color-*silent* society, where we have learned to avoid *talking about* racial difference

WHEN I TOLD PEOPLE that I was working on a twentieth-anniversary edition of my 1997 book, *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" and Other Conversations about Race* (released in fall 2017), they typically responded with two questions: "Is that still happening? Are things getting better?" A quick glance across the cafeteria in the average racially-mixed US high school or college indicates that the answer to the first question is usually "yes." What, if anything, does that tell us about the answer to the second question, "Are things getting better"? What does "better" look like? That is a more complicated question.
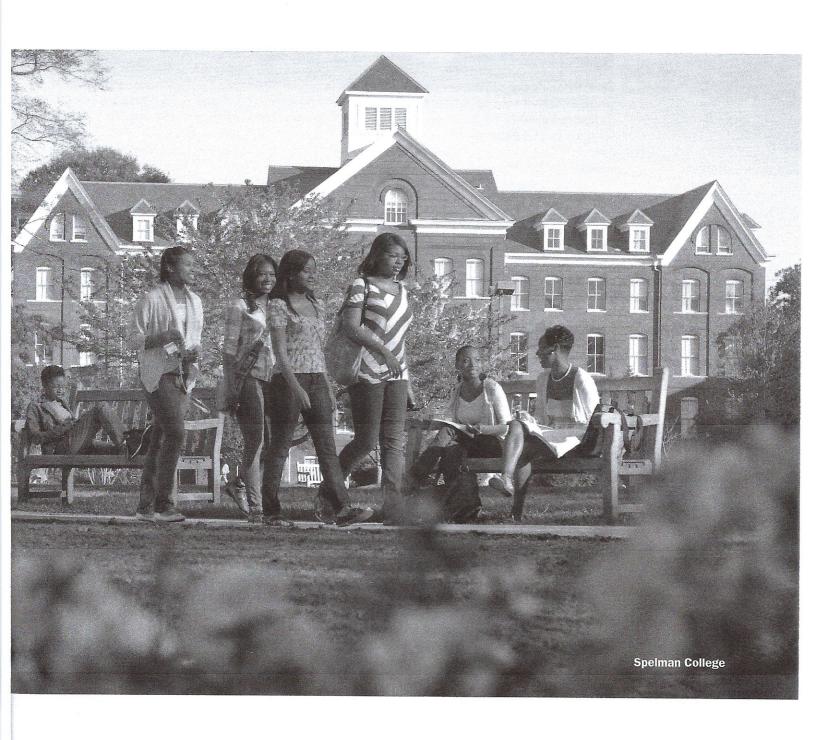
What has changed, for better or worse, in the last twenty years? What is the implication for how we understand ourselves and each

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Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?"

and Other Conversations about Race in the Twenty-First Century

Spelman College

other in reference to our racial identities? And, if we are dissatisfied with the way things are, what can we do to change it?

Almost two decades into the twenty-first century, we are still struggling with what W.E.B. DuBois identified in 1906 as the "problem of the color line,"[1] even though the demographic composition of that color line has changed. The numbers are remarkable: in 1950, the total US population was nearly 90 percent White; in 2014, for the first time in US history, the majority of elementary and secondary school children were children of color—Black, Latino, Asian, or American Indian.[2]

New faces, same places

Today Latinos are the largest population of color in the nation, at 17.6 percent of the total population. The Black population is at 13 percent. The Asian population is at 6 percent but growing faster than any other group, largely due to immigration. The percentage of multiracial babies has risen from 1 percent in 1970 to 10 percent in 2013.[3] But despite the rapid shift in our national diversity, old patterns of segregation persist. Nationwide, nearly 75 percent of Black students and 80 percent of Latino students attend so-called "majority-minority" schools. Both Black and Latino students are much more likely than White students to attend a school where 60 percent or more of their classmates are living in poverty. Separate remains unequal as schools with concentrated poverty and racial segregation are still likely to have less-experienced teachers, high levels of teacher turnover, inadequate facilities, and fewer classroom resources.[4]

Neighborhoods once again determine school assignment, and to the extent that neighborhoods are segregated, the schools remain so. Certainly income matters when you are looking for housing. But we can't overlook the way housing patterns have been shaped historically by policies and practices such as racially restrictive real estate covenants, racial steering by real estate agents, redlining of neighborhoods, and other discriminatory practices by mortgage lenders. That history includes the use by many White homeowners' associations of physical threats and violence to keep people of color out of their neighborhoods. The legacy of these policies and practices lives on as past housing

> **The anti-affirmative-action backlash has had significant effects on Black, Latino, and American Indian access to the best-resourced public universities**

options enhance or impede the accumulation of home equity and eventually the intergenerational transmission of wealth. And though such policies are now illegal at the federal, state, and local levels, evidence suggests they haven't been eliminated in practice.
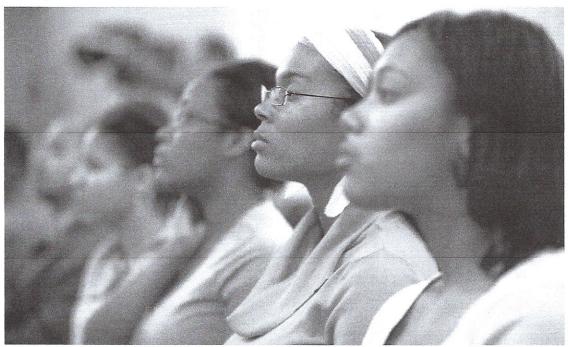
What difference does it make? For people of color, living in a hypersegregated community increases one's exposure to the disadvantages associated with concentrated poverty and reduces access to the benefits associated with affluent communities. Racial segregation limits access to the social networks needed for successful employment and access to other important resources. Keeping groups separated means that community helpfulness is not shared across racial lines. Because of residential segregation, economic disadvantage and racial disadvantage are inextricably linked.[5]

The now-centuries-long persistence of residential and school segregation goes a long way toward explaining why "the Black kids are *still* sitting together." In those few places where students of color and White students enter academic environments together, their lived experiences are likely to have been quite different, and racial stereotyping is likely to be an inhibiting factor in their cross-group interactions.

Change you can believe in?

That said, isn't *anything* better? In his 2016 commencement address at Howard University, President Barack Obama highlighted how opportunities for Black people have expanded since his own college graduation in 1983. "We're no longer only entertainers, we're producers, studio executives. No longer small business owners—we're CEOs, we're mayors, representatives, Presidents of the United States."[6] While President Obama was correct that positive, meaningful social change has happened in our lifetimes, in the twenty-year period from 1997 to 2017, at least three setbacks have occurred: the anti-affirmative-action backlash of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the economic collapse of 2008 known as the Great Recession, and the phenomenon known as mass incarceration. In this article, I will focus on the first two.

The anti-affirmative-action backlash has had significant effects on Black, Latino, and American Indian access to the best-resourced public universities. California offers a telling example. In 1996, California voters approved

University of Michigan

California Proposition 209, effectively ending all state-run affirmative action programs, with devastating impact on the enrollment of Black, Latino, and Native American students at the University of California–Los Angeles and the University of California–Berkeley. A similar result followed the passage of Michigan's version of Proposition 209 in 2006. The California and Michigan flagship institutions have found that without taking race into consideration, it is very difficult to achieve representative levels of diversity, despite recent demographic change.[7]

Recognition of that difficulty seemed to play a role in *Abigail Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, which challenged the university's use of race as one factor among many in a holistic review of applicants. To the surprise of many observers, the Supreme Court ruled on the side of the university. Writing the majority opinion for the court, Justice Anthony Kennedy praised the university for having offered a reasoned, principled explanation of its policy, but also warned that the court's decision "does not necessarily mean the university may rely on that same policy without refinement" in the future, reminding us all that affirmative action programs stand on unsteady ground.[8]

The second setback—the economic collapse of 2008—shook the ground of many, but had a disproportionately disastrous effect for many Black and Latino families, with many families of color losing their homes and their jobs. Disparate unemployment rates continue, despite the national economic recovery, and "the racial wealth gap between Whites and people of color is the highest it has been in 25 years."[9]

Economic disparities translate into educational disparities. College access is much more difficult when families have little opportunity to accumulate savings and no real estate assets against which to borrow. According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, the percentage of Black students whose families had nothing to contribute to their college educations (in financial aid terms, an "expected family contribution of zero") went from 41.6 percent in 2008 to 60 percent in 2012.[10] For many Black and Hispanic families, the last twenty years have been a downward slide. It is worth noting that some White families have been sliding, too. Since 2000, the poverty rate among working-class Whites has grown from 3 percent to 11 percent,[11] fueling both economic anxiety and anger.

These statistics are depressing, and perhaps you are thinking, "surely *something* has changed for the better in the last twenty years!" Indeed, if there is one thing that *might* suggest a positive change in race relations in the twenty-first century, it would be the election of Barack Obama in 2008.

The election of President Obama
I spent Election Night 2008 with hundreds of students gathered at Spelman College. When the announcement of Senator Barack Obama's victory came, the cheers and tears in the swell of the largely African American crowd at Spelman were mirrored in the multiracial, multiethnic, and multigenerational gatherings broadcast from Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC. It was a night to remember. According to a *USA Today* poll taken immediately after the election, 67 percent of Americans expressed pride in the racial progress the election represented, even if they did not vote for Barack

Obama. Yet 27 percent said the results of the election "frightened" them.[12]

Some of that fear could have been related to disagreement with Obama's policies or related concerns. But for some small segment, the fear might have been related to an unvoiced and maybe even unconscious recognition that the racial calculus of our society was changing. To the extent that the election of Barack Obama disrupted the usual narrative of White victory, it represented unpredictability. Lack of predictability creates anxiety, even psychological threat. And during the last twenty years, we have seen the level of anxiety rise in our nation. Why? It's not just the election of a Black president. It's the 2008 collapse of the American economy. It's the occurrence of terrorist attacks on our own soil. It's the slow recognition that other countries are gaining on US global prominence. Maybe especially, for White people, it's the growing sense of being outnumbered in what was once a ninety-percent-White nation.

Each of these societal changes represents a challenge to a set of assumptions, deeply held by many in our nation—and anxiety, even fear, is the result. How do we deal with fear? We typically either withdraw or attack. In the aftermath of the 2008 election, there was evidence of both patterns, with withdrawal taking the form of "hunkering down"—pulling in and away from, and even a lashing out at, those we feel threatened by. Such behavior can help explain why there has been a sharp rise in hate groups, and in racially and ethnically motivated hate crimes, since 2008. Indeed, according to a *New York Times* report, Stormfront.org—America's most popular online White supremacist site, founded in 1995 by a former Klan leader—saw the biggest single increase in membership in its history on November 5, 2008, the day after President Obama was elected. Perhaps more surprising, sixty-four percent of registered Stormfront users are under thirty.[13]

The myth of the color-blind millennial
One of the young users of such internet hate sites was twenty-one-year-old Dylann Roof, charged with the 2015 murder of nine Black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina. Following the horrific shooting, Gene Demby of National Public Radio issued a report entitled "Dylann Roof and the Stubborn Myth of the Colorblind Millennial."[14] The story opens with these lines:

The young age of Dylann Roof, who's charged with sitting alongside nine Black churchgoers for an hour before standing up and shooting them dead, is sure to inspire some head-scratching in the wake of his attack. He's 21, which means he's a millennial, which means he's not supposed to be racist—so the thinking stubbornly (if disingenuously) persists, despite ample research showing that it's just not true.

Demby cites the results of an MTV survey of young viewers regarding their racial attitudes. That 2014 survey of a nationally representative group of one thousand fourteen- to twenty-four-year-olds was an in-depth look at how millennials think about issues related to bias.[15] Among the key findings was a widespread belief (91 percent) that everyone should be treated equally, with 48 percent believing it is wrong to draw attention to someone's race, even in a positive way. Seventy-two percent reported believing that their generation is more egalitarian than previous generations, and 58 percent agreed that racism will become less and less of an issue as they take on leadership roles in our society. For 62 percent, electing a Black president was evidence that race is no longer a barrier to opportunity for people of color.

White respondents and respondents of color, however, reported significantly different life experiences. White respondents, for example, reported rarely feeling excluded at school or work because of race or ethnicity (10 percent), while 23 percent of respondents of color said they often felt excluded in those settings. Thirteen percent of White respondents said they had been treated differently by a teacher because of their race, compared to 33 percent of respondents of color. Despite the fact that White respondents reported fewer negative experiences with bias, and 41 percent agreed that "I have more advantages than people of other races," almost half (48 percent) also agreed that "today, discrimination against White people has become as big a problem as discrimination against racial minority groups." Only 27 percent of respondents of color shared that perception. Almost twice as high a percentage of White millennial respondents (41 percent) as respondents of color (21 percent) agreed that "the government pays too much attention to the problems of racial minority groups."

Despite these highlighted differences in experiences and attitudes, almost all millennials

Beverly Daniel Tatum, AAC&U Annual Meeting

surveyed (94 percent) reported having seen examples of bias (defined by the survey as "treating someone differently—and often unfairly—because they are a member of a particular group"). Yet just 20 percent indicated that they were comfortable having a conversation about bias. Most (73 percent) think we should talk openly about bias, and that doing so would lead to prejudice reduction, but like many adults, they are hesitant to speak up. For 79 percent, their biggest concern about addressing bias is the risk of creating a conflict or making the situation worse.[16]

For me, one of the main conclusions from this survey is that neither my Baby Boomer generation nor their millennial generation is living in a post-racial color-blind society. Instead, we may be living in a color-*silent* society, where we have learned to avoid *talking about* racial difference. But even if we refrain from mentioning race, the evidence is clear: we still notice racial categories, and our behaviors are guided by what we notice. Those biases manifest themselves in ways that matter—who we offer help to in an emergency, who we decide to hire, who we give a warning instead of a ticket, or who we shoot at instead of deescalating during a police encounter.

Indeed, police shootings and their aftermath have offered the most glaring evidence that we are not living in a post-racial world. The police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in the summer of 2014 was a tipping point. The activism that followed, not just in Ferguson but around the nation and on college campuses, linked through social media by #BlackLivesMatter, awakened a new generation to the power of protest. Whether it came from professional athletes wearing "I can't breathe" T-shirts, medical students in "White Coats for Black Lives" staging die-ins, Bay Area public defenders organizing demonstrations, Stanford students blocking the San Mateo bridge, or college students mobilizing protests on their own campuses, the rallying cry of "Black Lives Matter" had the nation's attention.[17]

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The movement goes to college

If Ferguson was the epicenter of Black Lives Matter, the University of Missouri in Columbia (known as Mizzou) became the most visible symbol of campus-based student activism in the fall of 2015. Just as the young activists of

Ferguson felt betrayed by President Obama's inability to stop police violence, Black students were angry that senior leaders were unable to prevent bias incidents on campus—or that the responses to those incidents often lacked a sense of urgency.

The speed with which events unfolded at Mizzou, culminating in the resignation of the two top campus leaders, was breathtaking. So was the wave of activism that swept across other campuses. Again, social media played a critical role. A new website, TheDemands.org, was created to compile links to student demands on a growing number of campuses, providing templates for student leaders as they drafted their own versions. By December 2015, student demands at eighty colleges and universities (including three in Canada) had been posted.

An analysis of the various campus demand statements led researchers to conclude that "these students are petitioning institutions to consider expansive shifts to institutional culture rather than merely stand-alone programs or add-on policies."[18] Presidents are responding. In a January 2016 anonymous online survey conducted by the American Council on Education's Center for Policy Research and Strategy, of the 567 college presidents who responded, nearly half said that students on their campuses had organized around concerns about racial diversity, the vast majority (86 percent of those leading four-year campuses) had met with student organizers more than once, and the majority (55 percent) indicated that addressing racial climate on campus had become a higher priority for them than it was three years ago.[19]

But not everyone has been sympathetic to the cause of the student protesters. Pushback has come from all corners—from fellow students, from faculty, from administrators, from alumni, from trustees, from state legislators. People say the students are overreacting and need to get over it. Often, though not always, the critics are White. Failure to empathize with the outrage of Ferguson protesters or the sense of isolation or threat that students of color report may be due in large part to the racially insulated lives many White people lead, the result of persistent school and residential segregation.

According to a 2013 American Values Survey conducted by the Public Religion Research

Often involving the projection of stereotypes, microaggressions can occur at any moment of the day and are a constant potential source of stress

Institute (PRRI), 75 percent of Whites have entirely White social networks without any minority presence. This degree of social network racial homogeneity is significantly higher than among Black Americans (65 percent) or Hispanic Americans (46 percent). Robert P. Jones, the CEO of PRRI, writes that "the chief obstacle to having an intelligent, or even intelligible, conversation across the racial divide is that on average White Americans ... talk mostly to other White people." The result is that most Whites are not "socially positioned" to understand the experiences of people of color.[20]

Not just a Black matter
Perhaps because so much national media attention has focused on lethal encounters between Black people and police, the national conversation about race, to the extent that it has occurred, has focused on anti-Black racism. However, it is important to recognize that lethal police violence is not just a problem for Black communities. In fact, Native Americans "were more likely to be killed by police than any other group, including African Americans."[21]

In the same way that the problem of police violence extends beyond African Americans to other marginalized populations of color, so too does the problem of isolation and marginalization on historically White campuses. Indeed, while 13 percent of student statements on TheDemands.org focus specifically on the concerns of Black students, over half have a more general focus on campus diversity, broadly defined.[22]

What cuts across the experiences of all marginalized groups on college campuses is the phenomenon known as microaggressions. Psychologist Derald Wing Sue defines the term as "the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group."[23] Often involving the projection of stereotypes, microaggressions can occur at any moment of the day and are a constant potential source of stress.

After experiencing one of those moments walking with his family after church on a Sunday morning in October, Michael Luo, a Chinese-American journalist, posted about his experience on Twitter and wrote "An Open Letter to the Woman Who Told My Family to Go Back to China." To his surprise, the *New York Times*

published it on the front page. "Dear Madam," it began, "Maybe I should have let it go…. But I was, honestly, stunned when you yelled at us from down the block, 'Go back to China!'…. Maybe you don't know this, but the insults you hurled at my family get to the heart of the Asian-American experience. It's this persistent sense of otherness that a lot of us struggle with every day. That no matter what we do, how success-ful we are, what friends we make, we don't belong. We're foreign. We're not American."[24]

Luo's open letter captured the psychological and physiological toll that microaggressions take on those who experience them. Social science research has demonstrated that micro-aggressions cumulatively "assail the self-esteem of recipients, produce anger and frustration, deplete psychic energy, lower feelings of sub-jective well-being and worthiness, produce physical health problems, shorten life expec-tancy, and deny minority populations equal access and opportunity in education, employ-ment and health care."[25] Unfortunately, these experiences became more frequent for some during the 2016 presidential campaign season.

The election of 2016

Donald Trump's campaign gave new visibility to a movement that for many years had been in the shadows of American life. The "alt-right" is defined by the Southern Poverty Law Center as "a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that 'White identity' is under attack by multicultural forces using 'political correctness' and 'social justice' to undermine White people and 'their' civiliza-tion."[26] Much alt-right rhetoric is "explicitly racist, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic and anti-feminist."[27] Jonathan Greenblatt, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League, speaks for many when he says he is troubled by the "mainstreaming of these really offensive ideas."[28]

While not everyone who voted for Donald Trump had bigoted views, Donald Trump's elec-tion victory nonetheless emboldened White nationalists. The Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate-motivated incidents, released a post-election report documenting almost nine hundred reports of harassment and intimidation from across the nation, not including online harassment. In these documented accounts, many harassers invoked Trump's name during assaults, making it clear that the outbreak of hate stemmed in large part from his electoral success. According to the report, most occur-rences involved hateful graffiti and verbal harassment, although a small number included violent physical interactions. K–12 school and college settings were the most common venues for hate incidents. Only 23 of the 867 incidents reported were directed at the Trump campaign or his supporters.[29]

At a time like this, we know that leadership matters, on college campuses and in our nation. When I listened to the polarizing rhetoric of radio and TV commentators during the long campaign season, I was reminded of *Left to Tell*, a book by Immaculée Ilibagiza, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. She wrote about the hostile rhetoric that was on the radio airways before and during the genocide, demonizing the ethnic minority to which she belonged. That rhetoric was made especially powerful because it came from the country's leaders.[30] I do not mean to suggest that what we are seeing in the United States today is on par with what happened in Rwanda. But *what we say* matters, and *lead-ership* matters. The expectations and values of leaders can change the nature of our conversation.

Human beings have an innate tendency to think in "us" and "them" categories, but we look to the leader to help us know who is "us" and who is "them." The leader can draw the circle narrowly or widely. When the leader draws the circle in an exclusionary way, using hostile rhetoric, the sense of threat among followers is heightened. When the rhetoric is expansive and inclusionary, the threat is reduced. The leader has to ask, *How is the circle being drawn? Who is inside? Who is outside? What can I do to make the circle bigger?* As Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, we are caught in a "network of mutuality"[31]: our collective fate is intertwined. We will thrive or fail together.

And here's what we must also consider: If a person is twenty years old in 2017, born in 1997, all the critical issues I have identified thus far are coming-of-age hallmarks of their generation. If you were born in 1997, you were eleven when the economy collapsed, perhaps bringing new economic anxiety into your family life. You were still eleven when Barack Obama was elected. You heard that his election was proof of a post-racial society; yet your neighborhoods and schools were likely still segregated. In 2012, when you were fifteen, a young Black teenager named

> **What we say matters, and leadership matters. The expectations and values of leaders can change the nature of our conversation**

Trayvon Martin, walking home in his father's mostly White neighborhood with his bag of iced tea and Skittles, was murdered, and his killer went free. When you were seventeen, Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri, and his body was left uncovered in the street for hours, like a piece of road kill. In the same year, unarmed Eric Garner was strangled to death by police, repeatedly gasping "I can't breathe" on viral cellphone video. When you were nineteen, Donald J. Trump was elected and White supremacists celebrated. So, are things getting better? How a twenty-year-old would answer that question will probably depend a great deal on the social identities of that twenty-year-old.

In 2017, twenty years after I first wrote my book, how we see ourselves and each other is still being shaped by racial categories and the stereotypes attached to them. Our social context still reinforces racial

Our social context still reinforces racial hierarchies and still limits our opportunities for genuinely mutual, equitable, and affirming relationships in neighborhoods, in classrooms, or in the workplace

hierarchies and still limits our opportunities for genuinely mutual, equitable, and affirming relationships in neighborhoods, in classrooms, or in the workplace. So, what do we need to do on our campuses?

Dialogue as action

Creating campus dialogue groups is an action that could be taken on any campus. I found a hopeful example of this strategy at the University of Michigan. In October 2016, I visited with David Schoem and some students from the Michigan Community Scholars Program, a living and learning residential community that has cross-group dialogue at its center. As part of the residential program, intentionally multiracial in its composition, students take a seminar and participate in various structured dialogues. The students, both White and of color, who chose the Community Scholars program spoke eloquently about what they had gained, and also about how different their experience was from that of their classmates who are not part of the program. They are deeply engaged in learning how to talk about difficult topics *with* rather than *past* one another.

In the 2016 fall semester, White supremacist posters with explicitly anti-Black content appeared around the university's campus, creating a hostile environment for Black students who felt under attack. Among the students I met

was a young African American woman in her first year who said, "It's hard to focus [on your schoolwork] when there's so much hateful stuff.... It's hard to know who to trust…it takes energy to reach out to Whites without knowing if they are 'safe.' MCSP [Michigan Community Scholars Program] helps with that." A White woman in her cohort was quick to second that observation, even though as a White student she was not the target of hateful rhetoric. She said, "MCSP is the only place where I've constantly felt supported, listened to, and understood."

When we get it right, it makes a difference. Research shows that when schools (and communities) are truly integrated, with real opportunities for students of different racial backgrounds to take the same classes, participate in clubs and sports together, and collaborate on projects, they make more friends across racial lines and express more positive views than other students do. As adults, they are more likely to live and work in diverse settings, more likely to be civically engaged, and more likely to vote.[32] In my view, that is what "better" looks like. Is it better? Not yet. It could be. It's up to us to make sure it is. □

To respond to this article, email liberaled@aacu.org, with the author's name on the subject line.

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