Ensure Students Are Learning:

The Importance of Midlevel Leaders in Advancing Equity

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Introduction

College campuses have always been hostile spaces for racially minoritized groups. Historically, institutions of higher learning were not designed to include these populations but in fact exclude them. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), hate crimes increased 17% between 2016 and 2017, and in that same year most reported that these crimes were either anti-Black or anti-Jewish, with approximately 90 and 50 reported incidents, respectively (Bauman, 2018; U.S. Department of Justice Fedeal Bureau of Investigation, 2018).

Unfortunately, racially minoritized groups are not only placed in a constant state of fear and anxiety over higher-profile incidences of hate on campus, but they also must contend with racism from their daily interactions with peers and even faculty and staff members. This more subtle form of racism, known as **racial microaggressions**, is "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Both explicit and more subtle forms of racism can be equally damaging to the overall campus culture and climate. However, racism in any form is deeply harmful to the psychological health and well-being of racially minoritized college students (Williams, 2017).

Generally, top-level leadership's responses to institutionalized racism on college campuses has been reactionary, as these individuals wait to respond until it is too late or respond when there is a high-profile racial incident on campus (Welton et al., 2018). Also, typical responses from top-level leadership come in the form of blanket email statements that admonish incidents of hate on campus or announce the creation of a chief diversity officer position—all leadership moves that are simply symbolic and do little to nothing to put an end to the policies, structures, and practices that perpetuate racism on community college campuses (Johnson, 2019; Stewart, 2018). Surprisingly little attention has been given to the important role of midlevel leadership (Amey & Eddy, 2018), especially that of department chairs, in facilitating the equity-minded change needed to promote racial equity for minoritized students at community colleges. Therefore, this brief focuses on the critical role of department chairs in eradicating one specific form of racism—**implicit racial bias**.

Department Chairs and Equity-minded Change Leadership

Department chairs and other key roles such as deans, assistant and associate deans, directors, and senior faculty members are all administrative positions typically deemed as **midlevel leadership** (Amey & Eddy, 2018). Midlevel leaders are more focused on students and the community and provide daily operational leadership, and thus are more in tune with ground-level needs (Eddy et al., 2016). Also, midlevel leadership provides added institutional stability when compared to top-level leadership such as college presidents, whose average tenure is only five to seven years (Amey & Eddy, 2018; Eddy et al., 2016). Since midlevel leaders are the first line of support for doing the necessary racial equity work, community colleges should improve the capacity and bandwidth of department chairs so that they are equity-minded change leaders.

According to Bragg and McCambly (2018), **equity-minded change leaders** "are advocates for addressing inequities in the experiences and outcomes of students of color and other student groups systematically failed by educational organizations" (p. 2). When top-level leaders make decisions they are in the spotlight; therefore, this level of public attention may give them pause in making the type of revolutionary changes needed to achieve racial equity and level the playing field for racially minoritized groups (Eddy et al., 2016). However, midlevel leaders are more under the radar and perhaps more likely to take the necessary risks to dismantle policies, structures, and even practices such as implicit racial biases, which are unjustifiably harmful to racially minoritized students (Eddy et al., 2016).
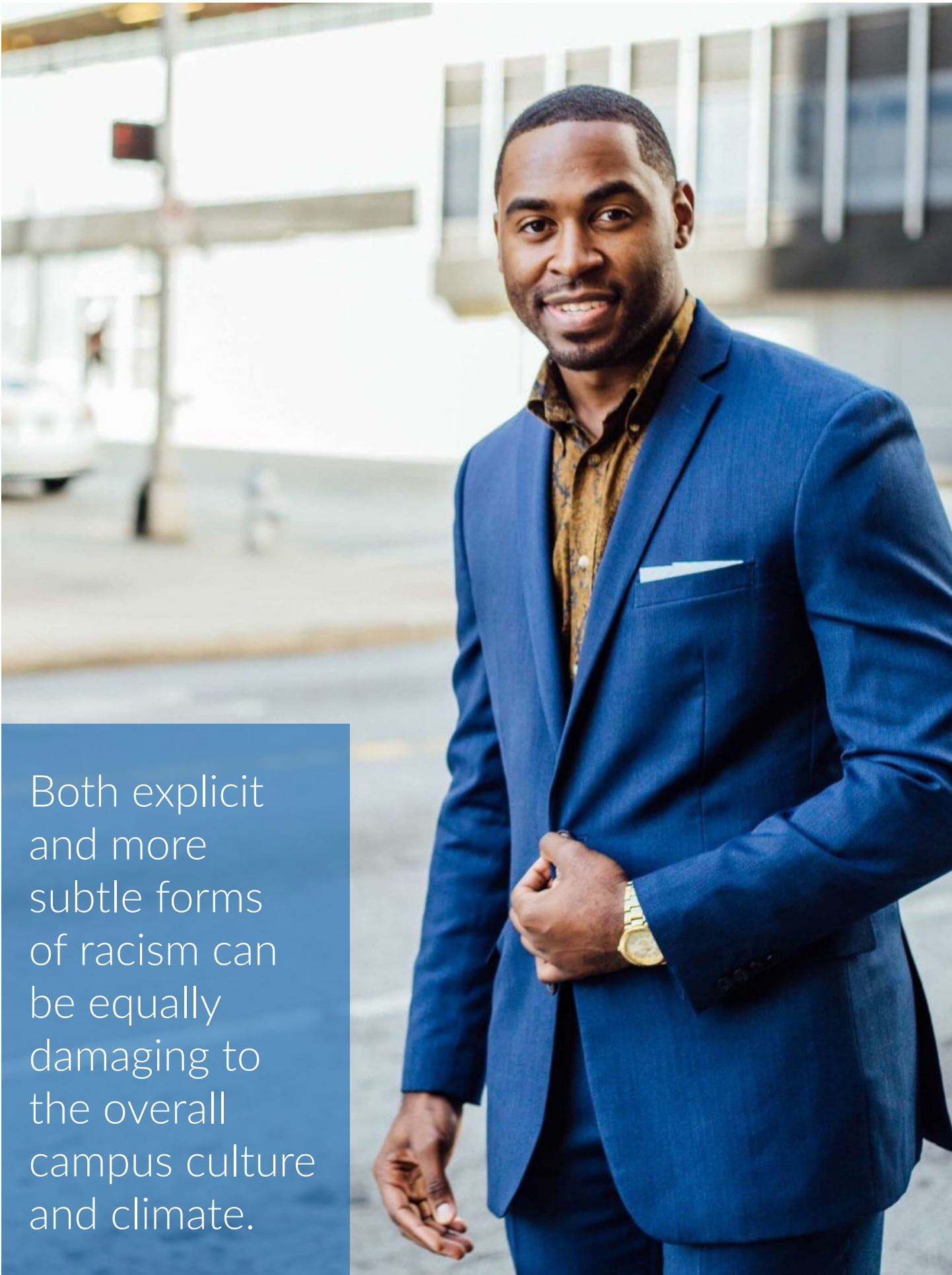
Both explicit and more subtle forms of racism can be equally damaging to the overall campus culture and climate.

Uncovering Implicit Racial Bias

While we might not consciously express our racial biases, we all bear unconscious racial biases that have a negative effects on our decisions and actions. **Implicit racial biases** are racial attitudes and stereotypes that

> affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Activated involuntarily without awareness or intentional control. Can be either positive or negative. Everyone is susceptible. (Staats et al., 2016, p. 14).

Furthermore, we are all socialized to have implicit racial biases as they are formed by the problematic messages we receive about different racialized groups of people (Staats et al., 2016). For example, an academic advisor's implicit racial biases about Latinx students' academic capabilities and performance could result in them lowering their expectations for this population of students, and then referring them to lower-skilled, lower-earning programs of study and career pathways. Because implicit racial biases negatively impact educators' decisions, behaviors, and interactions with racially minoritized students, implicit racial biases can be detrimentally life altering to these students' educational pathways.

Department chairs work closely with faculty and other key instructional staff, and as midlevel leaders hold a critical role in addressing implicit racial biases. The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity suggests the following steps to challenge and change our implicit racial beliefs and biases:

1) **Educate yourself** by taking an Implicit Association Test (IAT) at implicit.harvard.edu. Department chairs can make time in their department meetings for faculty to take an IAT and then share and discuss results. They can also encourage faculty and staff members to be honest with themselves about the implicit racial biases they may hold, and then share strategies on how to change their pedagogical practices based on the results.

2) **Take action** by reaching out and working with other faculty and staff members who are also motivated to actively address their stereotypical views toward racially minoritized students and other faculty and staff. Also, faculty and staff should question whether they have authentic relationships with people outside their own racial demographic group(s), and if not, discuss how their implicit racial biases hinder developing authentic cross-racial relationships.

3) **Be accountable** by actively confronting your own racial biases, beliefs, and actions. Racial biases are biases because they are not based in fact and therefore cannot be explicitly justifiable to other people (Staats et al., 2016, p. 15).

Finally, we suggest department chairs create opportunities in which faculty members can evaluate and critically examine their own pedagogical practices for evidence of implicit racial biases. For example, Reinholz et al. (2019) studied how college-level math instructors reflected on classroom-level data that was collected using the free teaching evaluation tool **EQUIP** to help reduce implicit biases in their instruction. **E**quity **QU**antified **I**n **P**articipation or EQUIP is a web-based equity-centered classroom observational tool (https://www.equip.ninja/) that tracks patterns in student class participation using disaggregated social-identity markers. The tool was developed by Dr. Daniel Reinholz and Dr. Niral Shah.

A Case Study

To link research to practice, we present a case study scenario that department chairs can use as a teaching exercise within departmental meetings to operationalize how to lead and advocate for racial equity as a midlevel leader.

Setting

Ocean Community College (OCC) is in a large metropolitan area in the southeast that has an annual enrollment of 30,000 students within four satellite campuses. Since its opening in 1960, OCC has played a substantial role in educational access and affordability for its campus communities. The

college prides itself on its diversity with a student population that is 45% African American, 22% Hispanic/Latinx, 20% white, 10% Asian/Asian American, and a 3% population of other students. A vast majority of students enroll at OCC with the goal of transferring to four-year state institutions or attaining vocational certifications. The faculty of the college is 63% male and 37% female. Of the male faculty, 65% are white, 20% are Asian/Asian American, 8% are African American, and 7% are Hispanic/Latinx. Of the female faculty, 45% are white, 30% are African American, 15% are Hispanic/Latinx, and 10% are Asian/Asian American.

Characters

- You, Department Chair, Teaching and Learning
- Jonathan Winters, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Education, tenure-track, White
- William Best, Ph.D., Assistant Vice Provost of Equity and Instruction, African American
- Cheryl Johnson, Ph.D., Dean of Education, Asian American
- Lauren Diaz, 19-year old student, Latinx

Case

As an assistant professor of education, Dr. Jonathan Winters is in his third year of teaching at Ocean Community College. His research interest includes the factors that influence the reading comprehension and fluency of underachieving minoritized students in urban school systems. As a previous teacher, he believes that his classroom experiences have provided him with the necessary knowledge to teach a course tailored to reading interventions for minoritized students in K-12 settings. Additionally, he has included his research interests into his curriculum for his Processes and Acquisition of Reading course.

You are the department chair of teaching and learning, and you just received an urgent email from Dr. William Best, the assistant vice provost of equity and instruction, who has copied the dean of education, Dr. Cheryl Johnson, on a troubling complaint from Lauren Diaz, a student in Dr. Winters's Processes and Acquisition of Reading course.

According to Dr. Best, Lauren sent an email to his office to file a grievance against Dr. Winters, citing multiple instances of racial bias incidents within class discussions. Lauren reports in her claim that

Winters used derogatory statements in several lectures to describe Latinx and African American students in public education as "lacking work ethic, and unable to comprehend basic English." He often made statements to Lauren and other students of color in the course: "How long have you been in America?"; "You are very articulate despite being a minority"; and "What was it like growing up in the hood?"

In addition to the comments made by Dr. Winters, Lauren states that several white classmates made subtle remarks and behaviors that disparage her and others while Dr. Winters does nothing to address their behavior. Dr. Best is concerned because OCC is currently holding campus-wide implicit bias trainings that all faculty are required to attend. Dr. Winters has expressed in writing that he will not be attending any trainings held around equity and race because he finds them to be nonessential to his courses.

Dean Johnson also expresses concerns over the remarks made because, after further review of previous course evaluations, she noted that some former students expressed discontent with their experience in his courses due to similar sentiments. Additionally, two other department faculty members have been identified as conducting their courses in the same way as Dr. Winters.

As the department chair, you have been asked to create a proposal by the end of the week for departmental professional development that focuses on embedding equity-minded pedagogical practices into all courses. You must also meet with Dr. Winters to address the complaint from the student and create a faculty development plan to address his teaching and behavior.

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