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Building the Racial Equity Ecosystem for Sustainable Change

By

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Abstract

The goals of truth, racial healing, and transformation cannot be accomplished working in silos and sectors. It requires a shared responsibility for identifying and dismantling the systems, structures, and policies that fuel racism and division both within and outside of higher education institutions. Community partnerships and community voices are vital to preparing students, faculty, and staff in becoming leaders in racial equity work. If we seek to eliminate racial inequities and to fulfill the unpaid debt felt and lived by people of color, we must continue to build the racial equity ecosystem for sustainable change and a brighter future.

Building the Racial Equity Ecosystem for Sustainable Change

By

Tia Brown McNair, Eric N. Ford, and J. Goosby Smith

“We are all products of our environments” is a common phrase. Our experiences shape not only who we are, but how we interact with others and make decisions. Similarly, higher education institutions and their policies and practices represent of the lessons we have learned from our environments. The case for racial equity in higher education cannot be made in isolation from the communities in which on our institutions reside.

To address racial equity within higher education, we must first understand and acknowledge that higher education institutions are part of a larger community ecosystem that must dismantle the deeply embedded belief in the hierarchy of human value that fuels systemic and structural racism. Sustainable change will only come from shared and collective action—starting with changing individual mindsets through truth and racial healing that can lead to transformation.

In 2017, the Association of American Colleges and Universities partnered with ten higher education institutions to host Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) Campus Centers. As part of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s national TRHT effort, the centers seek to prepare the next generation of strategic leaders and thinkers to break down racial hierarchies and dismantle the belief in the hierarchy of human value. In 2020, with the support of Papa John’s Foundation, AAC&U will announce an additional thirteen institutions that will host TRHT

Campus Centers (For more information on AAC&U's TRHT efforts, please see <https://www.aacu.org/trht-campus-centers>).

AAC&U became part of the national TRHT effort because we believe that the framework of narrative change, racial healing and relationship building, separation (which includes segregation, colonization, and concentrated poverty), law and the economy with an emphasis on truth-telling reflects the principles of what it means to be liberally educated. With this goal in mind, a fundamental component of truth-telling within the TRHT Framework is the use of Rx Racial Healing Circles, designed by the visionary and architect of the TRHT framework, Dr. Gail Christopher.

As the centerpiece of the TRHT Framework, Rx Racial Healing Circles, provide a compassionate and expansive forum for sharing personal truth to help begin the process of transforming hearts and minds. The Rx Racial Healing Circle methodology stresses active listening, being open to the perspectives, and the experiences of others (<https://www.aacu.org/trht-institute-rx-racial-healing-circles>). It is from this foundational and shared experience of speaking, hearing, and accepting our individual truths that the work of building trust and relationships across differences in both the institution and community must begin. The examples below represent the practice of racial equity within our institutions and with our community partners.

TRHT Campus Centers Building the Racial Equity Ecosystem

The University of Maryland - Baltimore County (UMBC)

Three years ago, The University of Maryland - Baltimore County (UMBC), committed to transforming its [Shriver Center](#)--a center for service learning and civic engagement--into a Truth,

Racial Healing, and Transformation Campus Center. We envisioned a community where youth and their families, both on campus and in Baltimore, played an active role in transforming the very systems that have upheld racial hierarchies in the region for too long. And we recognized that this commitment would require an equitable distribution of resources and an equal voice and for people and community partners traditionally underrepresented in key decisions in higher education.

The first step was acknowledging that while UMBC is nationally recognized for its commitment to diversity education and inclusive excellence, the work it takes to break down campus/community hierarchies and barriers, particularly those involving race, is a continuous process. UMBC is only a few miles outside of Baltimore City, yet the visible and invisible barriers separating the campus and Baltimore's communities are undeniable. Additionally, some Baltimore communities and neighborhoods have a long and negative history with universities, where competing interests and conflicts of values often leave communities and colleges at odds. For example, this past year saw months of protests and concerns from both students and community members surrounding Johns Hopkins decision to hire a [private police force](#). Instances like this over decades have created an enormous divide between campuses and communities in the region.

Despite these challenges, UMBC is well poised to do this kind of work. We are a young university with a dynamic president, Dr. Freeman Hrabowski, a man of color with a personal history in civil rights organizing and leadership. Therefore, we are excited to work towards a community where Baltimore City youth, families, community leaders, advocates and activists value UMBC as *their* university. The past three years have become an opportunity for us to try,

test, and adapt the TRHT model for service learners and those interested in community engaged projects between UMBC and the Baltimore community.

Our model includes three key aspects. The first is truth telling-- taking the time to learn about the history of oppression and racial inequity specifically as it relates to Baltimore's communities where service takes place. It also requires being truthful with oneself and grappling with one's role within that history. Truth telling is meant to be an ongoing process of learning and self-reflection.

The second aspect includes racial healing. Rx Racial Healing Circles are an intentional space where stakeholders can come together and give equal voice to the experiences that have shaped their identities. Rx Racial Healing Circles may include different stakeholders, whether it is a mix of service learners and community members, or all community members, or all service learners.

The third aspect includes transformation. In our model we are not just seeking individual transformation, but the transformation of systems and structures that have created barriers to racial equity. Therefore, it is critical that as stakeholders engage in truth telling and racial healing, barriers are identified, and project leaders make a commitment to removing them.

This has led to many challenges and triumphs, and many lessons learned. Most importantly, it has garnered our TRHT team an understanding of just how important community partnerships and community voices are in preparing students, faculty, and staff in becoming leaders in racial equity work, and just how deep you need to go to really do justice for everyone involved.

There are five lessons that we have learned as we prepare a new generation of young people through campus and community partnerships. First, not all experts hold degrees and that all communities of color have a history of social justice and racial equity work. They are filled with experts, organizers, artists, activists, and engaged citizens... Therefore, a key lesson is to look to your community leaders for guidance first, not to campus leaders necessarily. For example, in our work, which includes Rx Racial Healing Circles, our community experts came from [Womb Work Productions Inc.](#) who had been offering a culturally responsive , and creative approaches to racial healing in Baltimore for years.

The second lesson includes using a grassroots and community organizing approach, including on campus. Looking for specific places of power to sponsor our work often does not do justice to community partnerships and community voice. It has to come from community members, from the outside-in and from the bottom to the top. For our work, this meant a willingness to take countless face-to-face meetings. We learned that to build a coalition we would need to meet with individuals repeatedly to keep us on the same path.

Third, we learned what transformation work actually looks like. On campus, we often look to service learning and community engagement as a way of improving cognitive skills. Racial healing work is most acutely work of the heart. Therefore, we needed to begin understanding how change and transformation happens when students gain not just cognitive skills, but affective skills as well. We continue to work with students to better understand and assess their readiness to serve communities of color to ensure that our TRHT strategies are creating this transformation.

Fourth, although we are a young university, we quickly learned that there are layered structures and hierarchies, even within the Shriver Center,. Community members and

organizations may have little experience navigating within these structures. And community people doing racial equity work often intentionally operate in ways that are non-hierarchical and nontraditional. .

To navigate this, we have learned to listen to the individual experiences and stories of our partners. An example is the university requirement of a bachelor's degree for community members to participate in Shriver Center fellowships. We worked with the university to remove that requirement, essentially being more inclusive about who has access to our service opportunities. Our first non-bachelor's fellow recently started his service year.

Finally, we learned that even in communities with strong diversity track records and communities of color, it is possible to find yourself in a group of largely white de facto leaders or “experts” in community engagement. It meant that we needed to be intentional about our leadership group early on. We continue to acknowledge this reality, and make sure we are removing barriers for people of color interested in taking on roles within the center as we can. The lessons we are learning from our community partnerships are essential to achieving our TRHT goals at UMBC.

NEED A HEADER HERE? **TRHT Campus Centers should embrace their local milieu**

The Citadel

As many students of Southern history know, The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina¹, was founded in 1842 to repurpose a militia armory and add a military academy, because in July 1822 a slave revolt to kill Whites in Charleston. The Armory was founded to

¹ <http://www.citadel.edu/root/>

prevent any future slave uprisings². Notably, Mother Emanuel AME Church was burned to the ground because it was connected to Vesey³. Thus, is the origin story of The Citadel, which began as an all-male military academy and did not admit Blacks or women into its South Carolina Corps of Cadets (SCCC) until 1966 and 1996, respectively.

Because of the links of our college to slavery, the Civil War, the perpetuation of Jim Crow, and the massacre in Charleston at Mother Emanuel AME Church, the Citadel jumped at the chance to host a Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Campus Center. The Citadel's location in the "Bible Belt" inspired our interfaith strategy for community collaboration to achieve our Center's vision of "brokering mutually transformative, generative, and edifying relationships between The Citadel and Charleston community." At an institution like ours, progress is necessarily deliberate, and we are learning lessons for advancing racial equity and preparing the next generation of leaders to dismantle the belief in a hierarchy of human value.

The most important ingredient for the TRHT Center's external impact is trust. Charleston is a self-contained and tightly networked community. In order to build trust, we need to participate in our local community in ways that matter to them, including timing and sensitivity to local events. We completed our TRHT Center application in the wake of the massacre at Mother Emanuel massacre at a time when our city really needed to heal. We are cultivating relationships with an AME Church, a Synagogue, and the Muslim community in hopes of them hosting interfaith circles.

In building our program, we are also seeking to create new traditions on campus that will help achieve our TRHT vision. After fully understanding the benefits of Rx Racial Healing

² <http://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/the-citadel/>

³ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/18/415452594/mother-emanuel-church-suffers-a-new-loss-in-charleston>

Circles, we developed our vision for integrating circles into the work of our TRHT Campus Center. We labeled our Rx Racial Healing Circles “CitListen Sessions” following campus naming conventions. The Circles are foundational in that they allow a diverse group of attendees to “come as they are” and start to get to know others as individuals, not as representatives of “groups.” This has supported our efforts to integrate TRHT into our institutional culture and encourage participation.

Our Center co-sponsored and participated in the (ongoing) 50th Anniversary Celebration of our first African American Cadet, the late Charles Foster’s graduation. We also co-sponsored the first annual “The World is Here: A Celebration of Inclusive Excellence,” a graduation celebration of faculty, staff, and students who contributed to our diversity and inclusion. Our impactful speakers and book discussions also encourage interracial unity. In these ways we have positioned ourselves to brand a “CitListen” experience that is supported by our institutional norms.

Last year we collaborated to write these efforts into the draft of “Our Mighty Citadel,” the current strategic plan for the College. As a part of that plan, and as a part of the Master Planning process, we requested physical space for the Center in the plans for a new campus building that should open in 2022. Our work provided the justification for our requests. Next, we plan to explore with The Citadel Foundation the possibility of our Center being a line item to which donors can direct support.

Each of us is part of the intervention.

The efforts at both UMBC and The Citadel suggest the truth of the cliché, “Be the change you seek.” Each member of the TRHT team at both institutions has used his or her community

connections to ease the work into the community. We have found that when we connect our personal and professional lives in service of this work, it flows and creates even more genuine connections.

The goals of truth, racial healing, and transformation cannot be accomplished working in silos and sectors. If we seek to eliminate racial inequities and to fulfill the unpaid debt felt and lived by people of color, we must continue to build the racial equity ecosystem for sustainable change and a brighter future.