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Why Is That Even A Question?

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Why Is That Even A Question?

Abstract

“Are you the only white Africana Studies Major?” I overheard another student ask a friend.

I reacted. “Why is that even a question?”

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, inequality, race, ethnicity

Disciplines

Educational Sociology | Inequality and Stratification | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Sociology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://www.gettysburg.edu/) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

WHY IS THAT EVEN A QUESTION?

April 23, 2014

“Are you the only white Africana Studies Major?” I overheard another student ask a friend.

I reacted. “Why is that even a question?”

As I waited for his reply I tried to justify his behavior. He must have not known that I could clearly hear all his words. He must not have understood that as my friend was discussing her favorite professors (who both happened to be black), and as she shared her study abroad plans, I was listening to him snickering. He must not have seen me turn around to catch a glimpse of disapproval when she said that she wanted to major in Africana Studies.

“Well, I wasn’t trying to be rude. I just can’t imagine many white people in the AFS department. What would they even do with that major?” he responded.

My jaw dropped and I walked away. The inherent racism in his comment stung.

Though infuriating, his bluntness has been valuable to my understanding of the world around me. It has helped me reflect on how little value is placed on studying the history of people of African descent. Africana Studies is not seen as a necessary or an intrinsically beneficial part of education for all people, specifically those in the dominant society. As a result, it is often undermined.

Throughout history, the dominant group has defined the narrative of minority groups and, as a result, circumscribes what, how, why, where and to whom the story is told. If discussed in textbooks or classrooms, the heritage of those of in the African diaspora is often reduced to a short section on slavery and colonialism. We are not taught about the complex and distinctive experiences and contributions of people of African descent and therefore it is easy for students (particularly white students) to enter college with the conclusion that Africana Studies is something that is only valuable to people of African descent and does have implications in “the real world.”



Yet, it is this lack of education that continues to perpetuate racism and inequality. Because of the blatant omission of the complexities of history, culture, power structures, and modern day ramifications, we continue to see the majority of social and economic issues disproportionately affect people of African descent.

We continue to live in a segregated society. This is because we live in a place where the true histories of people are omitted from our education. We allow our stories to be defined by the dominant group as they decide what history is elective and what is valuable enough to be adopted into core curriculum.

Our education is built on a framework of white supremacy and it influences many people of color to “surrender their identities, beliefs, and values to assimilate into white culture”. Although education is touted as the key to leveling the playing field, our education system is actually creating “fierce cultural protectionism”, not promoting racial harmony.(1)

If the content of Africana Studies were an integral part of everyone’s education, we would all have a better understanding of our collective histories. We would understand that racism is and has been oppressive because it is a system that promotes domination and subjugation and, there would be a far greater value placed on the societal contributions of every person, not just those with white skin.

We’d also be asking different questions.

(1) *Hooks, Bell. 1995. Killing rage : ending racism / Bell Hooks. n.p.: New York : H. Holt and Co., 1995., 266.*

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<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2014/04/23/why-is-that-even-a-question/>