The Race for Honors

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The Race for Honors

Abstract
Over graduation weekend, it was pretty common to see people weighed down by massive numbers of honor cords hanging around their necks. This is a mark of respect at Gettysburg College, so students wear them proudly. I had the privilege to attend Spring Honors Day and watch many of my friends receive achievement awards. As we started winding down to the end of the ceremony, something hit me:

The recipients were overwhelmingly white. [excerpt]

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Disciplines
African American Studies | Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Disability and Equity in Education | Educational Sociology | Race and Ethnicity | School Psychology | Sociology

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Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College 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.

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THE RACE FOR HONORS

May 27, 2013

Over graduation weekend, it was pretty common to see people weighed down by massive numbers of honor cords hanging around their necks. This is a mark of respect at Gettysburg College, so students wear them proudly. I had the privilege to attend Spring Honors Day and watch many of my friends receive achievement awards. As we started winding down to the end of the ceremony, something hit me:

The recipients were overwhelmingly white.

I wondered to myself if I'd perhaps missed a few people, or maybe they were unable to attend. And yet, I couldn't get the idea that this was an incredibly white event out of my head. But why? I know many students of color who are exceptionally bright, engaged with co-curricular activities, and most certainly worthy to receive an honor for their academic achievement, service to community, or leadership on campus.

I brought this up later to my mother. She suggested that the ratio of students of color receiving awards perhaps reflected the ratio of white students to students of color at Gettysburg. So I did the math. There were seven students of color who were listed as award recipients or acknowledged for their membership in an honor society. [It should be noted that I did make assumptions about how people identify racially to come to this conclusion. Regardless, the number was very small.] Considering that there were 143 awards, this means that more than 95 percent of these awards were given to white students. The Gettysburg College website states that students of color and international students are twelve percent of campus, so, explaining away this phenomenon with matching ratios isn't going to work.

So how do we explain it?

Do white students simply do better at Gettysburg College? That's what this data would seem to suggest. But I would argue that it's not quite that simple. We can't just explain away the imbalance with a slavery-era mentality that there are intelligence disparities between races. As anti-racist activist Tim Wise explains, "...substantially unequal outcomes are the result of substantially unequal opportunities."

This is institutionalized racism, folks.
We live in an individualistic society where we are taught that we can “pull ourselves up from our bootstraps.” We are taught that hard work and determination make anything within our grasp. We are taught that our achievements were earned and deserved because of our own actions. For those of us who have worked hard and are smart, it’s easy to believe that we did everything right to get to the top.

But, this is a myth; it’s the myth of meritocracy.

The idea that anyone can make it on their own devalues the weight that privilege has on success. There is inherent privilege in being white, and as a result white people are met with different opportunities than persons of color. My race has informed my socioeconomic status (and has for generations), and, as a result, I’ve had access to well funded schools. Wise also discusses statistics (1) that show that the average white kid like me attends school with half as many poor kids as the average black or Latino student. Income influences school resources and thus academic success.

My parents are also both college educated and white, and they both work in academia. From a young age, I knew that college was more than a possibility— it was part of my life plan. And so, I went to a college preparatory school— a predominantly white, upper class one at that— which had small classes and qualified teachers. I was placed in multiple advanced placement courses, which is an occurrence that is twice as likely for me than for a black peer with similar test scores, according to Barbara Diggs-Brown and Leonard Steinhorn (2). My excellent education led me to Gettysburg College where I came fully prepared for academic success. My situation is one of privilege, and sure, hours of studying went into it too, but that is only part of the story.

With all these advantages, it’s no wonder that white students are able to “reach the top” and get most of the awards in college. But what’s just as scary to me is how we internalize these disparities. They impact our sense of self and how we see the world. When knowledge and academic success are synonymous with being “white” it’s easy for us to believe we are better than people of color. Think about how it plays out right here at Gettysburg College.

- Does reading predominantly white authors influence how we understand literature and history?
- Do our subconscious racial biases affect who we choose to become friends with and who we don’t?
- Do white students inadvertently promote racial bias through party themes, jokes, and regular conversation?
- Does interacting with a predominantly white faculty and staff allow us to internalize our racial biases about intelligence further?
- Do racial biases affect the way some professors grade our papers?
- Do we assume white people are more worthy of awards and therefore have an unconscious bias in our nomination process?

In addition to these questions, we also need to think about how our academic awards are established in the first place. Many are established by alumni, a majority of whom are white. White privilege is inherent in the awards themselves.

In an education system and a society where racial prejudice and preference thrives, I’d imagine it’s difficult for students of color to avoid absorbing negative messages and internalize these beliefs about themselves as well. As a woman living in a paternalistic society, I know this is true of myself. This undoubtedly affects one’s performance in school. We can look all the way back to Jane Elliot’s experiment in the 1970s. She taught her class what discrimination was by differentiating her students by the color of their eyes. Countless studies afterwards have proven the very same idea: one’s racial identity affects how one expects to be received.
and informs one’s behavior. So like Elliot’s brown-eyed students, when students of color are repeatedly told, whether overtly or subconsciously that they are “not good enough,” it’s easy for self-doubt to take over.

Couple that with daily micro-aggressions and overt racism, “doing great work” becomes harder to do. White students, myself included, don’t deal with stress of racism in daily interactions. My peers don’t jokingly remark that I sound like all the other white people around me. I’ve never been walking home from the library and had someone shout a racial slur at me. I’ve never had the music change to Toby Keith when I walked into a fraternity party. I’ve never been told that I was acting like someone else when I expressed myself articulately. I’ve never been asked to speak on behalf of Germany because I have a German-sounding name. A professor has never confused me with the only other person of my race in the classroom. I’ve never been randomly photographed while reading on Stine Lake because I model what “diversity” looks like at our school. My peers of color are not as lucky. As a result, I have the luxury of walking through campus with ease and security which translates into less stress, the comfort of feeling welcome in the classroom and an increased ability to focus on school work.

So what is it that’s being recognized with these awards, anyway? Are we really honoring students for their hard work and achievement? Absolutely, I’m sure that’s a lot of it. I’m certainly proud of myself and my friends who received awards. But it seems to me that by not acknowledging some of the challenges, we’re perpetuating something that just doesn’t feel completely truthful. We get to continue to pat ourselves on the back for our individual efforts to rise to the top. We get to put the prestigious awards on our résumés and sustain the illusion that our responsibility, intelligence and competence are paramount. We get to reinforce the notion that the achievement of white students is the standard.

I believe we can do better. Let’s start by acknowledging and challenging our daily biases. Let’s recognize not just the awards, but the system within which we operate.

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