

THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

FACULTY

How Higher Ed Can Fight Racism: 'Speak Up When It's Hard'

By *Francie Diep* | JUNE 01, 2020

Over the past week, protests against police officers' use of force against black men and women have rocked American cities. American institutions are facing a reckoning, and higher education is not excluded.

That's because colleges have their own problems with racial inequity, says Sirry Alang, an associate professor of sociology and health, medicine, and society at Lehigh University.

She spoke with *The Chronicle* on Monday about how academe can meet the most pressing problems of the moment: the disproportionate toll that Covid-19 is taking on black and Latina/o Americans, as well as harsh policing in black and brown communities. She offered

— recommendations for college leaders on how to respond to racial bias on and off campus. —

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Lehigh U.

Sirry Alang

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How have you seen colleges respond to the recent antiracism protests?

They've made it mostly an issue with law enforcement, and that is problematic because the reason law enforcement is what it is, is the same reason higher ed is the way it is: They are disproportionately white, and the experiences of scholars and students of color are just really different.

The big thing that I've found really troubling is that our institutions of higher education are focusing on trying to walk away from the problem. They're saying, "We are good. We have values. We are in solidarity with this community. But it's not our problem." And these are the "good" institutions that would actually recognize racism, and recognize white supremacy.

What would it look like if colleges took greater responsibility for reducing deadly racism in society?

The responses we would see from college presidents would be: These are the exact actions that we are taking. We are making sure that our students of color are protected. We are making sure that our campus police operates under these principles. If this were to happen on campus, these are the actions that we would take.

Fund critical race and ethnic studies. Emory just voted to approve a general- education requirement across the college for critical race and ethnic studies. I think every university should do that. This country was built on racial capitalism. Every student should know that, because if you know, then the expectation is that you need to do better.

Increasingly, people have acknowledged that they have white privilege. That's an important step, but simply acknowledging that privilege doesn't solve anything. We have been hesitant in honestly relinquishing that privilege.

We need to stop hiring people just because we know them. We can't say that our institutions are really white, things must change, and then make exceptions for people simply because you know them. Most white people know white people, and there are

people of color who are also really good, but they don't have the white people who are in positions of power who will advocate for them.

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That doesn't just matter for us. It matters for students who look like us, for their everyday sense of safety and support.

Besides the killings of unarmed black men and women, another driving force for recent protests seems to be the fact that black and Latino Americans are suffering disproportionately from Covid-19. How can universities help reduce those disparities?

Universities need to make sure that the people who do custodial and food-service work on campus are paid a living wage, not the minimum wage. We can make sure that people can take time off of their work for medical leave, and not worry about their jobs. And why is it our custodians are disproportionately people of color? We need to fix that.

There is a lot of confusion around what is science and what is fake, around the response to the pandemic. Schools of population health, public health, and education really need to step up and be a trustworthy resource for people.

Most of our institutions have woefully failed in that. What they've cared about is producing research for researchers — we got a paper published in X, Y, and Z, and we have this grant to study the impact of Covid. There are people dying in the community. We need to start doing research that is relevant to the experiences of our neighbors, communities around the vicinity of the university that are disproportionately affected.

How are we working with our local health officials? How are we working with the community leaders that are distributing food and medication? How are we working for the health-care providers?

We need to step away from our intellectual contribution, to focus on our human contribution.

Many of our readers are white, and not directly affected by health or policing inequities. Are there actions they can take to support academe's role in reducing inequality?

They should call their representatives. They should contribute money. They just need to go online and see where they can contribute financially.

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Put up a sign in your house, in your office, that says, “Black Lives Matter.” You shouldn’t assume that your colleagues think that you support them. You should tell people that you support them.

But this is really important: If you say this in your write-up, that I say that you should tell black people, “I see you. I support you,” I want you to add that then it’s OK when they don’t reply. We get the emails. We get the text messages. The fact that we don’t reply, it’s not because we didn’t want you to say something. There’s just a lot going on right now. People are tired and stressed.

Speak up when it’s hard. In a faculty meeting, when somebody says to me something that’s rude, speak up. Or when we’re on a search committee and somebody says, about a candidate of color, “I just don’t see that they would succeed here” without any reason for why, I need my colleagues to say, “Well, what does that mean? How can we get them to succeed here?”

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