

Conclusion

“Past, Present, and Future”

For over 130 years, racial dynamics and discussions have been central to the culture of Whitworth College/University. From early Blackface minstrel shows that portrayed offensive caricatures of African Americans to more recent “Diversity Monologues” that have celebrated diversity, the Whitworth community has confronted issues of race through events both negative and positive. Whitworthians, past and present, have sadly both experienced and expressed racist attitudes and practices. At the same time, Whitworthians, past and present, have made many efforts to understand the roots of racism and address its impact on campus culture and society. Whitworth has grounded these initiatives to pursue justice in an understanding of Christ’s example, an inclusive view of the kingdom of God, and biblical commands to love one’s neighbor.

Whitworth’s history is filled with remarkable stories of individuals of color who succeeded during their years as students and subsequently made significant contributions to their respective communities after graduation. Whitworth’s history also includes faculty and

administrators who made courageous decisions to help break down racial barriers in order to empower students of color and to teach subject matter that challenged students to critique racist social structures. The courageous invitation to enroll Japanese American students during World War II, the “Project Opportunity” initiative that helped recruit African American students from Harlem, and more recent Act Six and Whitworth’s Multicultural Leadership programs all underscore the institution’s desire to create a racially diverse student body.

Not surprisingly, however, Whitworth’s history is also filled with stories of failure regarding race relations. Too many students of color have endured racial slurs and egregious racist acts from other students, and sometimes faculty and staff. Too many students of color have borne the burden of being forced to speak for their race. Too many students of color have had to be “on display” as representatives of their race in a predominantly white community. Too many students of color have been made to feel that if they failed they would confirm negative stereotypes. Over its history, Whitworth has recruited and retained far too few faculty and staff of color who could serve as role models and mentors for students. Too many students of color have felt alone during their time at Whitworth.

Inevitably, the question will be asked whether Whitworth has made “progress” in becoming more diverse and in support for people of color. The university is certainly in a different place in 2024 than it was in 2000. Currently, 32 percent of Whitworth students self-identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous People of Color); in 2000, only 10 percent of students identified as persons of color. A survey of curricular offerings in 2023 reveals more classes that address topics of race than had been true in 2000. These differences are even more dramatic when compared with the 1980s or the 1960s. The college before 1960 is barely recognizable when compared with today’s university when it comes to the composition of the student body,

the number of staff responsible for promoting diversity, and the diverse course content that students can study. Does all of this meet a reasonable definition of progress? I believe it does, and it should be recognized as such.

Nevertheless, “progress” in other areas of race relations is more difficult to measure. To be sure, many students of color interviewed for this project report positive experiences. For the many students who describe satisfactory experiences, common denominators include achieving academic success and finding an academic mentor who encouraged their identity formation. In addition, students of color who report a satisfactory Whitworth experience frequently cite the importance of a supportive friend group.

Many other students of color, also interviewed for this project, report challenges and struggles at Whitworth, in spite of significant human and financial resources dedicated to making the institution a positive experience. Many BIPOC students report difficulty finding an academic major that fits their interests; a few students who report challenges locating an academic mentor who expressed confidence in them and their future. These students often describe a struggle to find peer communities where they feel accepted. In addition, many of these students experienced financial distress during college, rooted in family-related economic challenges. Virtually all students of color interviewed recall microaggressions, both small and large, ranging from students wanting to touch their hair to racist jokes.

One additional challenge for many students of color concerns confidence in their own racial identities, both in relation to the largely white campus culture and in their own communities of color. Since the late 1960s at Whitworth, many African American students, influenced by figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael, have embraced a self-conscious sense of Black dignity and power. This self-consciousness regarding

racial identity quickly extended to other racial groups as well. Experiencing pride in racial identity has become an important priority for many BIPOC students. Not content to assimilate into a larger white community, individuals of color have challenged Whitworth administrators and faculty to provide opportunity to express and celebrate ethnic identities on campus. They have requested and sometimes demanded a Black Studies program, as well as affinity groups such as the Black Student Union, the Hola Club, and Indigenous clubs. They also advocated for an Intercultural Student Center, established in 2010, which became an important symbol and space for individuals to gather.

The classroom has been a more complicated arena, where students of color have sought to influence curriculum to provide students of color opportunity to learn more about their own histories and cultures. At the same time, many students of color have been reluctant to speak up in class, often because the typical classroom has included few other BIPOC students. Speaking up and challenging the professor or saying something that might risk their standing with peers has generally been avoided.

All of this underscores the central challenge for most students of color: how does one nurture a sense of pride in one's racial identity while still learning how to succeed on a largely white campus? This has proven to be one of the more difficult issues over the past fifty years. Students of color have navigated this tension in different ways. One of the most common strategies has been what Esther Louie, one of Whitworth's most influential diversity officers, described as "code-switching." In other words, many BIPOC students have developed the skill of understanding and reading different cultural signals that are normative in predominantly white communities, while also practicing separate cultural norms in their respective ethnic

communities. The complexity of this challenge for students of color simply does not exist in the same way for white students on the Whitworth campus.

There are at least two other dimensions to these challenges for students of color. Interviews reveal that, at times, students are criticized by racial peers for not being “Black” or “Hispanic” enough. Sometimes, what makes a person not “enough” of an ethnic identity is related to a manner of speaking, to holding particular political beliefs, to dressing in a particular way, or to being savvy regarding cultural issues. All of this internal pressure can add to an individual student’s sense that they might not belong at Whitworth. In addition, as Whitworth’s student body has become more racially diverse, there are growing numbers of students of color who have grown up in largely white neighborhoods and families. Some students have acknowledged that coming to Whitworth has provided them with the first critical mass of students of color that they have ever been around. Some have reported, in fact, that they are learning for the first time what it means to embrace the ethnic identity of their particular race.

The variety of BIPOC student experiences, and struggles are set against the backdrop of complex racial attitudes and practices among white individuals at Whitworth. As this history of race relations at Whitworth has revealed, there have been significant numbers of white students, staff, and faculty who have attempted to make Whitworth more diverse, and to reach out on a personal level to make friends and create a more hospitable community. On the other hand, there are significant numbers of white students, staff, and faculty who have knowingly or unknowingly participated in racist behaviors. For many white students, lack of contact with students of color prior to Whitworth contributes to a fear of making mistakes in class around racial issues. More work needs to be done to gather data from white students, faculty, and staff regarding racial attitudes and experiences. In general, according to the most recent campus surveys, there

continues to be a large gap between white students and students of color regarding perceptions that there are racial problems on the Whitworth campus. Not unexpectedly, far fewer white students on campus feel that there are racial problems than do students of color. This difference in understanding makes interracial and intercultural understanding difficult.

Consequently, any estimation of “progress” must be tempered by the backdrop of above-mentioned challenges for students of color and the often-complex interaction with white students. Progress is difficult to measure because expectations and perceptions have been a moving target.

Historians, as a rule, are hesitant to prescribe future actions. Nevertheless, on the basis of this attempt to document and interpret Whitworth’s history of race relations, I offer the following suggestions (far from inclusive of all that might be done) to current decision-makers:

1) Expand efforts to recruit and retain faculty and staff of color. This has been an ongoing issue for nearly seventy years, yet the institution has made little progress.

Based on efforts that have been effective at other institutions, strategies might include:

- Create an “opportunity fund” that allows for hiring when candidates of color emerge, even though position openings might not coincide with the candidate’s availability. This money, held in reserve, funds positions until the anticipated opening materializes.
- Engage in “cluster hiring.” To help mitigate the isolation that faculty and staff members of color can experience at Whitworth, it is advisable to create cohorts of faculty and staff of color, particularly through simultaneous hiring.

- Diversity specialists on hiring committees, once trained, can bring expertise to the task of creating diverse applicant pools. Current employees can also be important contacts in every stage of recruitment and hiring.
- Community agencies and partners that champion diversity (e.g., NAACP) may offer consultation on hiring practices that increase diversity.

2) Increase resources to help white faculty teach race-related subject matter. Especially given the small number of faculty of color at Whitworth, much of the teaching on diversity topics is done by white faculty. This raises several key questions: what can Whitworth do to train and/or support white faculty who hope to engage students in potentially controversial material around race, racism, systemic oppression and the like. Is it possible for white faculty to teach effectively on diversity topics? Can the university establish norms regarding the use of language, particularly in historical texts that might be considered racist or offensive today?

- Faculty development programs that focus on development of diverse resources and issues related to teaching material outside of one's own racial experience are essential.
- Faculty should be encouraged to develop a university philosophy statement regarding use of historical language and images, once common but now deemed offensive. Inevitably, this issue will surface, particularly in dealing with historical content. Students need to know what to expect from the university regarding this subject matter, and why; faculty need to know how to proceed, and what approaches the university will support.

(Similar issues pertain to other diversity topics—e.g., gender, sexual orientation, are are important to address.)

3) Nurture conversation about ways Christianity intersects with issues of race. It is important for the community to be familiar with the history of Christianity and race; specifically, more attention should be given to both the efforts of Christians who played major roles in the abolition movement and civil rights movement as well as Christians and denominations that were complicit in the slave trade, KKK, and segregation. In addition, both Black theologians and Womanist theologians should receive more explicit attention in Whitworth's curriculum in order to better understand contributions made by theologians of color.

- Faculty should be supported in development of courses that incorporate Black and Womanist theology.
- Grant funding that supports development of Black and Womanist theological training for faculty (e.g., CCCU funding for inter-institutional projects) can offer significant support for faculty development in this area.
- Whitworth has developed a strong statement of Christ-Centered Rationale for Diversity. Finding ways to advertise that statement to both internal and external constituents, and to engage community members in conversation around that statement, can help reinforce the connection between theological and diversity commitments.

4) Encourage faculty and staff to incorporate one or more of the five approaches that have surfaced over the last decade regarding the treatment of race. These include

Critical Race Theory, Inclusive Excellence, Intercultural communication, Empathy, and Anti-racism.

- The faith-learning framework, approved by Whitworth faculty and trustees, has given language for institutional commitments to faith and learning. A similar framework for approaches to diversity can offer similar assistance and common language around diversity commitments.

5) Help white faculty, staff, and students understand the racial problems that exist and the challenges that students of color experience. In student surveys, consistently white students and students of color disagree over whether a racial problem exists at Whitworth. Much of the difference seems to come down to alternate definitions of what actually is racist. Large numbers of white students tend to define racism in terms of belonging (or not) to white supremacist organizations such as the KKK or the Aryan Nations, or whether using racist slurs in public settings. Students of color, on the other hand, generally experience far more subtle and unconscious expressions of racism. They generally acknowledge that most of their white counterparts are not consciously hateful, but perceive many white peers as racist in that they lack understanding of “ways that people of color across the world are harmed by racial prejudice.”

- It is difficult to find ways to communicate the challenges experienced by many students of color without constantly putting them on the spot to share difficult moments. The Diversity Monologues have gone a long way toward encouraging the campus to learn from students of color in an environment that conveys support and interest. If there are ways of

capturing these stories, without requiring students to repeat them multiple times, that may be an important resource for the community.

- When campus data are distributed, data regarding students' perceptions and experiences of racial attitudes may be helpful to include.

6) Address directly both explicit and subtle racial incidents on campus. Clearly, the campus has worked hard to provide education and grievance processes for reporting harm. Still, it is a concern that so many of the students of color, past and present, have experienced microaggressions. Students of color need not only to have confidence that there are consequences for racist actions, but that the university stands with them in moments of injury. While we know less about the experiences of staff members of color, we must assume that many of them also need more explicit institutional support.

- Cultural Diversity Advocates are a valuable addition to Whiworth's student leadership programs. CDAs are in a unique position to explain grievance processes to peers, and to support students in filing concerns or complaints.

7) Explore additional ways to come alongside students of color who are trying to further a strong sense of their own racial identity; at the same time, help develop skills that allow them to succeed if they choose to live and work in areas predominantly shaped by white cultural norms. Since the 1970s, the vast majority of students of color have had to learn how to navigate these respective worlds largely by instinct or intuition. More direct attention needs to be paid to teaching and mentoring practices as well as leadership training that is culturally specific.

- Conduct annual surveys/interviews with students of color regarding their experiences at Whitworth. Once students leave, it is often impossible to gather information about the reason for departure. However, if interviews are routine (again, CDAs may be able to assist here), that will strengthen campus understanding of the experiences of students of color. Comparable routine checking in with faculty and staff of color may also be advisable.

The study of history results in a mixture of impressions, feelings, and lessons. As someone who has taught and worked at Whitworth for more than thirty-five years, this project has evoked many moments of sadness upon discovering incidents that have caused a great deal of pain among our students of color. I have felt personally embarrassed at moments upon being made aware of my own blind spots regarding challenges some of my students have faced on and off-campus.

However, like my colleagues through the years, I have been inspired by the many students of color who have overcome obstacles to flourish not just at Whitworth, but in lives they have led after graduating. For me personally, this study has provided an opportunity to learn about individuals I previously had not known. Hopefully, this project highlights impressive accomplishments previously unrecognized. Hopefully, this study will serve as an encouragement to those who continue to work and study here to keep on struggling to make this a place where all feel that they belong. As one of Whitworth's alumni of color told me in an interview, the one thing that he has always appreciated about Whitworth is "its willingness to keep trying to make it a better place for students of color. If one approach doesn't work, they [Whitworth administrators, staff, and faculty] are willing to try another one."

Whitworth's history has included Blackface minstrel shows, racial covenants, and myriad acts of racism. It has also included bold actions to welcome Japanese Americans during time of war, to recruit African Americans out of Harlem, New York, and to initiate an Act Six program that changed racial dynamics on campus. Those bold decisions should provide courage for similar decisions in the future.

Beginning in the late '60s, Whitworth committed itself to a path that recognized the importance of building a community of racially and ethnically diverse students, staff, and faculty. This effort, while taking twists and turns, has never retreated. Remaining steadfast in this goal is more than a preference or an aspiration; it is essential to maintaining Whitworth's mission. While this study has exclusively focused on racial diversity, commitment to ethnic diversity has influenced ways in which the university has approached other forms of diversity, from gender issues and sexual orientation to varying forms of ableism. These multiple diversity efforts are all still works in progress.

My hope is that this study prompts conversation about the relationship between the past and present, including what we can learn from our own rich history. Whitworth's journey has followed a long arc toward inclusion, an arc that has not reached its end. The university's path ahead is yet to be determined. However, the history of Whitworth strongly suggests that a commitment to a diverse student body, a diverse faculty and staff, and an ethos that encourages and celebrates the richness of all ethnic identities will be essential to Whitworth's future effectiveness, and to living out Whitworth's Christian mission.

