

Wabash Colloquy on Race Critical Consciousness Grants

April 1, 2020

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Title: A Part Yet Apart: Teaching and Learning about Race/Ethnicity with International Students in a US Doctoral Program

Abstract:

This grant seeks to equip international students of color enrolled in the DU-Illiff Joint Doctoral Program (JDP) to function in the U.S. racial context through a critical race learning/orienting retreat at the beginning of their studies, followed by a workshop with domestic students of color at the end of the first year. This grant process will also help international and domestic students of color form community in the doctoral program by exploring racial-national intersectional identities in a critical race context.

Framing Question/Problem:

How to enable and equip all students in the Joint Doctoral Program in the Study of Religion (JDP) at Illiff School of Theology/Denver University to realize the importance of race/ethnicity in their studies when most of the students of color are international students who do not feel familiar or comfortable with talking about race in the context of the USA?

The administrators and faculty members of the Joint Doctoral Program in the Study of Religion at Illiff School of Theology/Denver University (JDP) know that having a critical mass of students of color in the program is indispensable to their desire to improve the program's educational experiences for all students by attending to the importance of race in the academic study of religion and theology, especially in this time when white nationalism has developed into an influential sociopolitical movement. Students of color have especially expressed frustrations that in classrooms where they often constitute a clear numerical minority, their experiences and their questions may be either completely ignored or quickly dismissed by their fellow students—and, at times, even by their course instructors. Outside the classroom, they also struggle to find a supportive network, including their need for helpful interlocutors in their academic pursuits.

As JDP administrators and faculty are working hard to address these concerns (such as improving the mentoring practice with JDP students in general and JDP students of color in particular), they observe a rise in the number of applicants from overseas, most of whom happen to be non-White. While this potentially may increase the overall number of students of

color in JDP, this phenomenon also causes a particular challenge. As many studies have underscored, international students' experiences with race and racism in the USA are layered and complex. While many may come without any or much understanding of the racialized histories of the USA, they may also have internalized the racial stereotypes that are being offered through US media. On the other hand, domestic students of color are also not necessarily eager or even ready to accept international students, despite their common racial heritage, as part of their minoritized community or as their allies but treat them as "foreign" — however, White students, staff, and faculty may lump them together, so many international students may experience racial discrimination in ways similar to domestic students of color. Of course, international students of color may well be part of the majority population in their home countries, and they may base their identity primarily on their national origin rather than on race. Because of all these factors, many international students may be reluctant to participate actively whenever the topic of race/ethnicity comes up either inside or outside the classroom even if they are sympathetic to the discrimination experienced by domestic students of color. These complicated dynamics affect not only teaching and learning but also campus climate in general.

The need to teach and learn from international students of color within the JDP is even more pressing because Iliff has long prided itself for having one of the most diverse faculty among the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) schools and JDP has one of the most concentrated Latinx faculty in religion and theology. However, studies have shown that the US racial/ethnic category that international students have the most difficulty grasping is that of the Latinx (Loo 2019); for many international students, they see many Latinx persons as white with cultural heritage from Europe. In other words, what is arguably the greatest strength of the JDP faculty regarding matters of race/ethnicity may turn out to be the biggest source of confusion for international students.

Following the conclusions of many studies, JDP administrators and faculty consider it important that we help international students to become familiar and comfortable with thinking and talking about race/ethnicity in the USA. More importantly, we think that international students actually have much to teach us about race/ethnicity, as they, with their own particular conventions of racial/ethnic categories and hierarchies, can help both faculty and domestic students of JDP gain a comparative perspectives to further reveal the social construction of race/ethnicity and the complicated dynamics of racism (including how race/ethnicity intersects or not intersects with other identity factors such as gender or sexuality). Similarly, engaging in race/ethnicity conversations in the USA will provide international students a comparative perspective to consider critically various oppressive dynamics "at home." Put differently, the point of pursuing this project is not to impose racial/ethnic categories and struggles on international students but to hone everyone's critical acumen. This work that we do with international students can also contribute to building a better supportive network for international students, improving campus climate as a whole, and perhaps make the JDP even more international and less US-centric.

Project Goals:

1. Promote, as an ultimate goal, the raising of not only race/ethnicity but also interlocking consciousness for all students in JDP;
2. Learn from and teach international students of color how they may become familiar with, comfortable with, and contribute to reflections and conversations about race/ethnicity in their studies and the community life of the JDP;
3. Help build a supportive network among international students;
4. Facilitate cross-cultural conversations about race/ethnicity between international students of color and US students of color;
5. Produce a brief document of best practices for JDP and its faculty members to better integrate international students in general and in discussions of race/ethnicity in particular.

Description of Activities:

As director of this grant project, Professor Tat-siong Benny Liew will need to travel to Denver twice; he will be primarily responsible for the planning and the facilitating of the project activities.

1. Hold an over-night retreat early in the Fall Quarter of 2020 to bring together international students to see how they can become familiar and comfortable with talking about race in the context of the USA.

Besides the students, three JDP faculty of color who were born outside of the USA will also be part of this workshop. Having this retreat take place early in the academic year will also serve to facilitate a supportive network for new students who are enrolling at JDP. More importantly, this retreat will help us hear and learn from international students and their experiences of race both in the USA and in their home countries, as well as help them gain some basic understanding of racial dynamics within the USA.

The retreat will include the following activities:

- a. Role plays of several scenarios that involve racial dynamics, both inside and outside the classroom;
- b. Open sharing by international students of how they have experienced race in the USA;
- c. JDP faculty who were not born in the USA share how they have experienced race in the USA;
- d. Brief sharing of racial formation histories in the USA;
- e. Open sharing by international students of the role of race in their own countries;
- f. Brainstorming of how international students may become more familiar and comfortable with engaging race in the USA, both academically as doctoral students and communally as members of the JDP.

2. Hold a day-long workshop (9 am to 4 pm) in the Spring Quarter of 2021 to bring together international JDP students and domestic JDP students of color (including five JDP faculty of color) to talk about the importance of race in their studies and in their interaction with one another.

While we want to review and assess carefully the Fall retreat with international students before making any solid plans for this workshop, we are planning to distribute a questionnaire or survey to domestic students of color as another way to help us make plans for this workshop.

3. Produce an initial set of best practices in the Summer of 2021.

Supportive Literature:

While many US institutions of higher education affirm the enrollment of international students because they contribute to cultural diversity (not to mention their financial “contributions” to institutional budgets), few have made an intentional, substantial, and coordinated effort to involve international students in the necessary conversation about race in the USA (Althen 2009). As a result, literature on this topic is also somewhat limited, although more has appeared in recent years. The following are helpful and informative to our conceptualization of this grant proposal.

Althen, Gary

2009 “Educating International Students About ‘Race,’” *International Educator* (May-June): 88-93.

Bardhan, Nilanjana and Bin Zhang

2017 “A Post/Decolonial View of Race and Identity through the Narratives of US International Students from the Global South,” *Communication Quarterly* 65.3: 285-306.

Chandrashekar, Santhosh

2018 “Not a Metaphor: Immigrant of Color Autoethnography as a Decolonial Move,” *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 18:1: 72-79

Chow, Yung-Hwa Anna

2013 “Race, Racism, and International Students in the United States,” *NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising* (May 16); accessible at <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Race-Racism-and-International-Students-in-the-United-States.aspx>.

Fries-Britt, Sharon, Chrystal A. George Mwangi, and Alicia M. Peralta

2014 "Learning Race in a US Context: An Emergent Framework on the Perceptions of Race among Foreign-Born Students of Color," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 7.1: 1-13.

Hanassab, Shideh

2006 "Diversity, International Students, and Perceived Discrimination: Implications for Educators and Counselors," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 10.2: 157-72.

Lee, Jenny J. and Charles Rice

2007 "Welcome to America? International Students' Perception of Discrimination," *Higher Education* 53.3: 381-409.

Loo, Bryce

2019 "International Students and Experiences with Race in the United States," *World Education News + Reviews* (March 26); accessible at <https://wenr.wes.org/2019/03/international-students-and-experiences-with-race-in-the-united-states>.

Mitchell, Donald Jr., et al.

2017 "Learning Race and Racism While Learning: Experiences of International Students Pursuing Higher Education in the Midwestern United States," *AERA Open* (July 14); accessible at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332858417720402>.

Ritter, Zachary S.

2016 "International Students' Perception of Race and Socio-Economic Status in an American Higher Education Landscape," *Journal of International Students* 6.2: 367-93.

Yeo, Hye Jin Tina, et al.

2019 "Asian International Student and Asian American Student: Mistaken Identity and Racial Microaggressions," *Journal of International Students* 9.1: 39-65.

Assessment, Evaluation, and Response:

The assessment activities, including design of specific surveys, data collection, and analysis, will be undertaken by the Project Director in collaboration with the Project Co-Directors/JDP Directors, and the Director of Assessment at the University of Denver. Before the fall retreat we will gather evaluative information through surveys of international students already in the JDP program as well as the new international students beginning in fall 2020. Another evaluation form at the end of the fall retreat will create a baseline for these two sets of students. This will allow us to compare the experiences of students before and after the institution of the retreat. After the spring workshop we will again survey the students to see how much the fall experience, and our follow-ups on race issues with students throughout the year, have impacted their first-year experience, as opposed to the experience of the first year for previous students.

In addition to using student evaluation forms for the planned retreat and workshops, we will have the project/JDP directors (one for fall retreat and two for spring workshop) take on the role of silent observer and assessor. Given the project directors' knowledge of the JDP and familiarity with both JDP students and faculty, they are in a good position to not only evaluate but give advice for each of the planned activities.

Faculty participants will also be surveyed for their perceptions of the impact of these fall and spring workshops on themselves as teachers and on the students. The survey data will be used to create a “best practices” plan to better support future cohorts of international students as they transition into the US racial environment. These results will be reported to the entire JPD community and will be shared with appropriate offices at both institutions. Our hope is to continue the project beyond these two workshops in order to impact the entire JDP community, bringing white students and all faculty into the work after this grant has concluded.

Future Expansion:

Ideally, we will obtain an additional grant (internal or external) to engage one more phase, an expansion of our learning trajectory farther out into the JDP population. From the initial retreat for International students and faculty (fall 2020) followed by the meeting of international *and domestic* students and faculty of color (spring 2021), we would add a third retreat or meeting for JDP students and faculty of color (international and domestic) as well as *white* students and faculty (fall 2021). In this manner, the lessons learned from each of the three events would ripple out and back so that we are all learning from each other. Although not part of this proposal or budget, we include this vision to help clarify where the present proposal is going. Ultimately, we want the work of this grant and the anticipated extension to a second phase to raise consciousness within our entire community for the complexities of racial and national identities faced by our growing international student and faculty population. We expect this consciousness raising work to impact every aspect of JDP life, including the classroom, extracurricular activities, and social interactions.