The Role of Critical Race Theory in Higher Education

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Despite the substantial impact race has in generating inequities in society and educational institutions, race continues to be unacknowledged (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical race theory (CRT) is an analytical framework that stems from the field of critical legal studies that addresses the racial inequities in society. This article provides an analysis of CRT in the context of diversity and inclusivity in higher education. In addition, this article also draws from the work and research done by critical race theorists who support the use of CRT in education reform and research.

In 1994, critical race theory (CRT) was first used as an analytical framework to assess inequity in education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Since then, scholars have used CRT as a framework to further analyze and critique educational research and practice (Ladson-Billings, 2005). This article will further explore how the five tenets of CRT can be used to analyze the different forms of social inequities reinforced through the institution of higher education. First, I will provide an explanation of CRT. Second, I will discuss how each CRT tenet contributes to inclusivity and diversity in higher education. Third, I will address criticisms of CRT. Finally, I will share how CRT can further benefit higher education.

An Historical Overview of Critical Race Theory

During the mid-1970s, CRT emerged from the early work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, who were discontent with the slow pace of racial reform in the United States (Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). According to Gordon (1990), CRT originated from the critical legal studies (CLS) movement (as cited in Ladson-Billings), which failed to address the "effects of race and racism in U.S. jurisprudence" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 26). As a result, CRT analyzes the role of race and racism in perpetuating social disparities between dominant and marginalized racial groups (DeCuir & Dixson; Ladson-Billings; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT's purpose is to unearth what is taken for granted when analyzing race and privilege, as well as the profound patterns of exclusion that exist in U.S. society (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). Therefore, CRT can play an important role when higher education institutions work toward becoming more diverse and inclusive. For example, in a predominantly White institution (PWI) simply working toward increasing the amount of students of color enrolled is an insufficient goal if institutional change is a priority. Examining the campus climate efforts to have culturally competent and diverse staff, faculty, and administrators is a more effective way of becoming more diverse and inclusive. Fortunately, the various tenets of CRT can be used to uncover the ingrained societal disparities that support a system of privilege and oppression.

The Relevance of the Five Tenets of CRT within Higher Education

CRT's framework is comprised of the following five tenets: counter-storytelling; the permanence of racism; Whiteness as property; interest conversion; and the critique of liberalisms (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy, 2006). Counter-storytelling is a framework that legitimizes the racial and subordinate experiences of marginalized groups (DeCuir & Dixson; Ladson-Billings; Parker & Villalpando, 2007). DeCuir and Dixson stated that counter-stories are a resource that both expose and critique the dominant (male, White, heterosexual) ideology, which perpetuates racial stereotypes. Counter-stories are personal, composite stories or narratives of people of color (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002).

The use of counter-stories in analyzing higher education's climate provides faculty, staff, and students of color a voice to tell their narratives involving marginalized experiences. Counter-stories can assist in analyzing the climate of a college campus and provide opportunities for further research in the ways which an institution can become inclusive and not simply superficially diverse. This goal is important to keep in mind when institutions work toward creating a diverse college community. An institution can aim to increase the diversity of the campus by increasing the number of students of color. However, if the institution does not make the necessary changes to make the campus climate inclusive, the institution will have a difficult time maintaining diversity. In many cases, counter-stories support the permanence of racism, which is the second tenet of CRT.

The permanence of racism suggests that racism controls the political, social, and economic realms of U.S. society. In CRT, racism is seen as an inherent part
The lack of opportunity in the academic curriculum (garrison, phillips, 1996) and performance of color (docan, et. al., 1999)

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the contributions do not capture all the CRT has to offer.

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According to the research, CRT and critical race theory (CRT) are not new and many scholars were using CRT terms. The introduction of CRT in education has been more formal and recent. The contributions do not capture all the CRT has to offer.

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