

Why So Fragile? How a University Lost an Opportunity to Denounce White Privilege

by Tray Geiger & Jessica Holloway-Libell — May 11, 2016

In this commentary, we take a look at the response to an Arizona State University (ASU) course titled, “U.S. Race Theory and the Problem of Whiteness,” which sparked protests and death threats for the course’s professor. We examine the media’s reaction, as well as ASU’s quiet response to the controversy. We argue that ASU failed to use the national spotlight as a platform to shed light on racism in higher education.

This past year was a brutal reminder of how far we still have to go in ridding the U.S. of racism. While African American boys and men continue to be killed at over twice the rate of their white counterparts due to law enforcement action (Krieger, Kiang, Chen, & Waterman, 2015), we have prominent political figures making blatantly racist remarks that have ruptured one of our major political parties. College activists have simultaneously fought to bring attention to other, often more implicit, forms of institutional and systemic racism that are manifested in the everyday routines of people of color living in a society of white privilege (Ross, 2015). These protests have been met with a great deal of resistance (Iyengar, 2016), only highlighting the need for more conversation concerning the state of racism in the United States. Universities serve as fertile ground to push these discussions and cultivate greater understanding, awareness, and action.

A recent survey conducted by the American Council for Education found that nearly 50% of university presidents expressed that their students campaigned around racial justice issues (Espinosa, Chessman, & Wayt, 2016). This presents an acute awareness of student appeals for leaders to better address the injustices that their marginalized learners regularly face. While many university administrators have been slow to respond to such pleas, some faculty members have attempted to address these issues in their own way. For example, one Associate Professor at Arizona State University (ASU) introduced an undergraduate course titled “U.S. Race Theory and the Problem of Whiteness.”

This Fall 2014 course covered typical topics for a survey class about race and racism with a specific focus on white privilege. The course was far from the first of its kind nationwide, yet it garnered a unique backlash after *Fox News* caught wind of it. An ASU student who was a correspondent for *CampusReform.org* accused the university and professor of blaming white people for U.S. racial intolerance and social inequality, and implying that being white was inherently wrong. The ensuing melee from *Fox* resulted in death threats against the professor and protests from hate speech groups. While the protest groups were allowed to maintain their presence at ASU and their speech protected by the First Amendment on the campus of this public institution, the university’s administration’s silent acquiescence left many progressive scholars and students outraged.

ASU’s quiet reaction, along with similarly tepid responses by other colleges and universities to racially-charged events (e.g., University of Missouri, University of Kansas), speaks to what scholar Robin DiAngelo (2011) has called “white fragility.” This term means white people feel such uncomfortable stress from racial issues that they display outward emotions including “silence” and “leaving the stress-inducing situation” (p. 57). DiAngelo further notes that these behaviors perpetuate white privilege and a “White racial equilibrium” (p. 57). Evidence of white fragility can be frequently seen as we white people forbid ourselves and other groups from talking about race-based views that make them uncomfortable (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This is exactly the stance ASU seemed to take as evidenced by its apparent indifference to the controversy.

As students and employees of ASU at the time of these events, we were compelled to understand both the initial reaction to this timely and necessary course and the subsequent overreaction from a misguided public. Our specific interest was two-fold: we were initially interested in understanding the mainstream media’s uptake of the situation, and also in ASU’s response to what could have been a powerful platform to outwardly discuss institutional racism. To this end, we examine how the mainstream media discussed this course and ensuing reactions, and how ASU’s response contributed to the discourse on the topic. We started our work by conducting several online searches in Google and Bing’s search engines, and in several online news sites, including *USA Today*, *Fox News*, *CNN*, *The New York Times*, etc. to find articles related to these events. We used a variety of keywords, such as “problem of whiteness + ASU,” “racism college course Arizona,” and “problem of whiteness course + Arizona State University.” After excluding all non-news sources (e.g., blog entries, commentaries, etc.), we identified 28 unique articles from nine different local, regional, and national news sources.

We qualitatively analyzed these articles to explore how the media contextualized the course, racism, and ensuing reactions to this incident. We then compared this against ASU’s reactions to the protests and hate speech to draw inferences about the counter-response to the controversy. What we found was that the majority of media articles focused on reactions to the course, rather than using the controversy and responses to it as a platform to discuss why a course like “The Problem of Whiteness” is so necessary. While the university administration remained silent on the underlying reasons why a course like this is so important, reactions within and outside the ASU community were much more impassioned. There was a clear disconnect between a university willing, and perhaps wanting, to offer a course on the “Problem of Whiteness” but forgoing the opportunity to become an active part in combating the racism and racist diatribes stemming from this academic offering.

Based on similar incident occurring recently at many post-secondary institutions across the nation, it is evident that many universities are grappling with this same issue. This leads to an interesting question: what is the best way to support university students who are victims of inflammatory and incendiary remarks, and systemic and institutional racism, without taking a vocal stand against the very practices that have historically allowed higher education in the U.S. to flourish and support a small segment of the American population? The reaction to the “Problem of Whiteness” course at ASU is exactly the reason for offering it. The media did not problematize the *need* for the course, but perhaps more importantly, ASU also failed to use the controversy as a means to bring attention to a dire need for directly confronting racism.

While all institutions of higher education are full of politics and bureaucracy, not taking an active stand during or after racially-charged incidents occur, or when microaggressions come to light, seems like both a purposeful and poor political move. Perhaps universities do not want to create waves, disrupt the status quo, or risk offending potential donors. However, if universities’ goals and missions really are what they claim to be, these institutions need to take a stand and teach their students about systemic and institutional racism, the white privilege that undergirds it, and the white fragility that sustains it.

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