



Assessing for Racial Equity Capacity in Field Placements

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Introduction

In the last few years, there is increasing awareness that race and racial disparity continue to persist in significant ways in many, if not all, areas of society. This awareness was heightened, in large part, due to police shootings of unarmed African-Americans as well as current political rhetoric. Social workers can be leaders in bridging the racial equity gap in our field and in the larger society. The profession has a history of addressing macro-level issues and understands how systems impact individuals. This manuscript explores one project that has been developed and implemented over the past two academic years in the St. Louis Metropolitan Area and that can be used as a model for other programs interested in addressing issues of racial inequity.

Background

Before the grand jury announced its decision in November of 2014 not to charge Officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of Michael Brown (an unarmed black youth in Ferguson, Missouri), then-Governor Jay Nixon appointed the Ferguson Commission. The Commission was an independent group charged with conducting a “thorough, wide-ranging, and unflinching study of the social and economic conditions that impede progress, equality, and safety in the St. Louis region” (Executive Order No., 14-15, 2014).

Based on input from the community, the Commission established workgroups that explored the following themes: economic inequity and opportunity, child well-being and education inequity, municipal courts and governance, and citizen law-enforcement relations (The Ferguson Commission, 2015). For 10 months, workgroups met, listened

to citizens' concerns, reviewed current research, and worked with experts in these fields, and this culminated in a report, *Forward through Ferguson: A Path toward Racial Equity* that was released in September 2015 (The Ferguson Commission, 2015). Racial equity was an overarching theme used to guide community discussions and is one of the four signature priorities (along with Justice for All, Youth at the Center, and Opportunities to Thrive) identified in the final report (The Ferguson Commission, 2015). One of the calls to action under the Racial Equity Signature Priority is to "broadly apply a racial equity framework to existing and new regional policies, initiatives, programs, and projects in order to address and eliminate existing disparities for racial and ethnic populations" (The Ferguson Commission, n.d.).

While the Ferguson Commission's report was critical in understanding regional racial disparities, inequalities, and systemic problems, the Commission was not charged with developing solutions to address these issues. Dr. Kira Banks, Associate Professor of Psychology at St. Louis University, sought to address this gap, developing a 10-step arc towards racial equity for Forward through Ferguson, an organization formed to execute the calls to action in the Ferguson Commission's report.

Project Description

In February 2016, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) released a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the Policy Practice in Field Education Initiative funded by The Fund for Social Policy Education and Practice and the Casey Family Programs. This initiative was created to foster the expansion of policy practice opportunities to improve student knowledge and application of policy-related skills in community engagement initiatives and field education (CSWE, 2016). The School of Social Work at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, as part of the St. Louis Field Education Collaborative (other partners included the Brown School at Washington University in Saint Louis, the Social Work Program at Fontbonne University, and the School of Social Work at Saint Louis University), took the lead in submitting and securing two Policy Practice in Field Education grants. The funding allowed Dr. Banks, in the summer of 2016, to develop an agency assessment tool based on the first two steps of the arc mentioned above. The tool, the *Path to Racial Equity Baseline Assessment (PREBA)*, allows social work students in practicum to assess their agencies using a racial equity lens and offers a framework for a way forward.

In July and August 2016, the collaborating universities began recruiting agencies for the pilot project. Students at both the BSW and MSW level and specializations were eligible to participate but required the willingness and commitment of their field instructors and agencies. All agencies that were hosting practicum students from schools in the St. Louis Field Education Collaborative, and who were committed to racial equity, were eligible to participate. In preparation, in September 2016, students,

field instructors, and field education faculty from the four schools were trained by Dr. Banks on the use of her assessment tool. These groups met twice again: at the mid-point of the project and at the end of the academic year as students concluded their work at their field agencies.

The first step of the “Path” is to examine agency data around race, specifically seeking responses to the question, “How does your organization talk – or avoid talking – about race?” (Banks, 2016). To implement the first step, students were asked to examine agency brochures, guiding documents (mission, vision, goals, etc.), and the agency website to investigate how their agency discussed diversity, inclusion, equity, and race. They were to (1) compare their findings with common language suggested by *Forward Through Ferguson*, (2) develop a list of racial equity terms that the agency would utilize, and (3) provide a report to the agency with their suggestions. The second step of the “Path” is to work toward answering the question, “What does your organizational data say about race?” (Banks, 2016). In this step, students had to examine “hires, promotions, racial composition by level, who gets tapped for development opportunities, who gets the best projects and other metrics of value and disaggregate it by race” (Banks, 2016). The results were compiled into a report with the students’ recommendations. The findings of these assessments have enabled participating agencies to have a baseline understanding of where they are in terms of racial equity, either by examining existing data or realizing that their current practices do not allow for the proper data collections to conduct such an analysis.

The following outcomes of this pilot project were expected:

- key field education faculty from the St. Louis Field Collaborative would be trained on the implementation of the *PREBA*,
- participating agencies would increase their knowledge of racial equity,
- participating agencies would increase their knowledge about how to apply a racial equity lens within their agencies,
- participating agencies would move closer to achieving racial equity through developing awareness, knowledge, and skills, specifically the disaggregation of their own data,
- practicum students would improve their knowledge of the impact of agency policies and structure on racial equity,
- practicum students would understand the importance of conducting an agency analysis utilizing a racial equity lens,

- practicum students could grow in their ability to identify next steps the agency could engage in to help move further down the path towards racial equity,
- the collective impact would mean the St. Louis region would increase its interest and capacity to discuss and move towards racial equity,
- and participating agencies would be encouraged to continue to use the *PREBA* tool.

During the 2016-17 academic year, twelve students from three of the four universities in the St. Louis Field Collaborative participated in this project. Ten students were MSW level students and two were BSW students. Fifteen area agencies began participating in the project in August of 2016, and although five were lost through attrition, ten completed the project through the end of the academic year.

The outcomes of the project at the conclusion of the year were positive. All agencies that participated reported that their knowledge of racial equity had increased, though they all also acknowledged that this was merely a beginning. All practicum students were able to successfully identify projects in which their agencies could engage to move further down the path in achieving racial equity. From establishing “Courageous Conversation” programs (seminars designed for interracial dialogue), to changing agency brochures to have more inclusive language, each student identified something for the site to work on moving forward. Additionally, all practicum students felt that they had increased knowledge on ways in which agency policies and structure impact racial equity and that they are now able to understand how critical this type of assessment is for agencies.

While the authors optimistically expected that more agencies would be involved and added to this work in the Fall of 2017, the reality is that projects such as this, that touch on sensitive and challenging topics, require systematic outreach. However, it is worth noting that, even without any further funding, the project attracted three additional agencies in the Fall 2017 semester.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

This work can readily be replicated in other regions with practicum students in other schools of social work. Several lessons were learned in the first year that may be useful to other programs interested in fostering racial equity in their region:

- ***Importance of buy-in:*** this lesson is likely the most important. While most field instructors are social workers whose professional values complement this work,

not all agency administrators are trained in our profession. Leadership must be on board to make the project a success and to complete specific tasks. Several tasks require the examination of agency data, which cannot occur without institutional buy-in. One suggestion is to discuss leadership support while recruiting agencies and offering to meet with administrators to further discuss the work before placing practicum students.

- ***Being uncomfortable:*** discussions about race are necessary but are often difficult and uncomfortable. Participants need to “lean into” that discomfort for real change to occur (Banks, 2016). Project leaders should consider working with both students and field instructors around gaining skills related to having these difficult conversations *before* beginning the project.
- ***Patience is needed:*** changing individuals, agencies, institutions, and (ultimately) regions is slow. Students may not see their work come to fruition and need to both be patient *and* recognize that the outcomes will evidence themselves likely only after they leave. Setting realistic expectations for students at the onset of the project is important.
- ***Continuity of students at a given practicum site is beneficial:*** the four collaborating universities involved in this project use a student self-selection process for practicum placement. Therefore, it is not guaranteed that an agency will have a new student who will be available to continue the work of a student departing the site. To combat this issue, it is important to be intentional about making students aware of practicum opportunities involving racial equity work. The collaborative partners should work to facilitate consistency across agencies and distribute a flyer to students listing all agencies that can provide this learning opportunity.
- ***More frequent “check-ins” with students and field instructors:*** at the end of year one, students and field instructors indicated that they would like more frequent check-ins with the manager of this project. To respond to this feedback, during the current academic year, participants have met as a large group every other month. In the intervening months, the project manager has communicated with students through email and helped to address challenges or obstacles.
- ***Sustainability:*** the training received from Dr. Banks at the start of the first year was critical in starting this effort. What the collaborating universities have discovered, however, is that a more intensive “train-the-trainer” model is needed for a truly sustainable project. The collaborative partners feel that having such training from an expert in racial equity could enhance the overall impact and longevity of the work.

To reiterate, based on our experience, programs that wish to have students engaged in racial equity work as part of their practicum hours need several resources. The most important resource is the willingness to engage in this work and to embrace the discomfort that comes along with it. Further, an external trained facilitator well versed in utilizing the *PREBA* must be accessible to train agency field instructors, students, and field faculty. Finally, a “point person” should be identified to check-in with students and to convene the larger group several times during the semester.

Conclusion

Social work students, along with their field instructors, are uniquely positioned to be leaders in racial equity work. CSWE (2015) endorses competencies that require students of all levels (BSW, Foundation MSW, and Concentration MSW) to engage to some extent in macro-level practice as part of their field experiences. Agencies wishing to view their organizations through a racial equity lens can involve students in this effort, providing them with a unique and valuable experience in the area of organizational and policy practice. Finally, students will be able to put the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* into practice, particularly the ethical principle that encourages social workers to challenge social justice, “social workers’ social change efforts should be focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination and other forms of social injustice. These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity” (NASW, 2017, ethical principle 2). Applying a racial equity lens certainly aligns with this principle and marries cutting edge frameworks with macro-level practice.

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