

Combatting Institutional Racism in Higher Education

By Lauren Thompson

You cannot escape from racism. I can testify to this; I went to college in the Northeast to escape from confederate flags and racist, old men in the South – only to find that it is no better in Boston. While my classmates might not be driving around in their trucks swinging their confederate flags and my white teachers might not be repeatedly saying the N-word and telling Black students to “go pick cotton,” (yes, these things really did occur at my high school in Texas, and no, no one was punished for them), there are still just as many racist acts that occur at my college in Boston as my high school in Texas. The only difference? My college does a much better job of covering them up.

In May of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, people once again began to call for change in policing and policies that are racist toward Black people. I say once again because this is not a new phenomenon; police brutality has long been an issue that has sparked several movements, such as Black Lives Matter, and pushed for people to recognize the systemic racism imbedded in every aspect of society. To me, the recent protests and backlash against the police seem different than the previous movements. This is primarily due to my increased use of social media, but my status as a college student also plays a significant role in why it feels unlike past protests.

My college, Northeastern University, was one of thousands to send out an email about the recent events. Most colleges expressed their solidarity with the Black community, and some colleges suspended classes for a day of reflection and action. Northeastern’s email consisted of phrases such as “it is our mission to pursue knowledge through love, progress through compassion” and “as we move to reopen our campuses, our core values of inclusion, equality and harmony will be our guiding lights.” This email, as well as others like it, acknowledge the

racial disparities in policing and other areas of society. However, they fail to acknowledge what is right in front of them: the institutional racism in higher education. This lack of acknowledgment is an issue that is simply covered by ostensible expressions of solidarity, leaving behind a student body of white students, like myself, who either directly contribute to the racist atmosphere or are blind to the issues and indirectly perpetuate the issues.

In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the deeply imbedded racism in higher education and describe ways that we can bring to light and combat this problem. I will begin with a brief analysis of Black life and recent acts of racism on campuses around the United States, then dive into Black life at Northeastern University and the racist incidents and policies that have either been covered by administration or gone unnoticed by a majority of students. I hope to provide information for college students who need guidance on how to combat these issues, as well as bring to light the institutional racism in higher education that has been ignored for far too long.

For both Black students and professors, the racism and inequality they experience in higher education can be physically and mentally exhausting. It is often the cultural shock of a predominantly white campus that contributes to this exhaustion, especially for those who come from a predominantly Black area. Darnell L. Moore explores this issue in his memoir *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black and Free in America*. In Chapter 5 of his biography, titled “Run,” Moore dissects his experiences as a Black man in college. He explains how he “was not prepared for a white campus” as he “hadn’t learned how to navigate this strange world where white people’s cares and well-being were centered.” Moore experienced a white security guard grabbing him and throwing him to the ground and a white baseball player throwing large pieces of ice at him, both within his first year at college. Moore describes this as “racial profiling” that

is “so normalized on a college campus,” and this normalization is the problem (Moore, 2018).

Similar to Moore’s experience, ZZ Packer’s “Drinking Coffee Elsewhere” follows the experience of a Black student at Yale. Though it is not autobiographical, Packer claims the emotions conveyed by the main character, Dina, are inspired by her own experiences and those of other Black students in academia (University of Iowa, 2010). Dina experienced extreme alienation at college and ended up dropping out, an all-too-common phenomenon for Black students. Throughout her college experience, Dina was isolated from almost everyone and her only “friend” was a white student. Most Black students describe similar experiences, as they do not feel welcome on campus. This sense of not belonging that is only reinforced by racism on campus can be extremely detrimental to young, Black students, especially if their school does nothing to help combat the inequality and help with the transition.

Both Moore and Dina attempt to become what their white classmates and professors expect of them by upholding certain stereotypes. Moore explains how he had become “a representation of the black thug from the hood” to protect himself from “the threat of erasure” that is common for Black students that conform to white standards. Dina, during a “describe yourself as an object” orientation game, chose a revolver in order to fulfill the expectations of her white classmates and orientation leaders. The constant feeling of being judged as one of the few Black students on campus accompanied by microaggressions and acts of racism is a huge problem on campuses around the United States, and colleges are doing little to address and fix this.

Despite the lack of recognition by colleges, different stories of race-related violence and other incidents have come to light in the past few years due to social media. Melissa Harris-Perry’s article “What It’s Like to Be Black on Campus Now” gives several examples of these

incidents and describes their effects. In 2017, University of Virginia experienced a march of white supremacists chanting “You will not replace us,” American University had bananas and nooses found hanging in their trees, and Harvard Law had photos of Black faculty members defaced. In response to these incidents and others like them, Black students began to organize on campus to demand change in colleges around the United States.

The racial disparities in higher education are evident in the graduation rates for Black students; the difference in receiving a bachelor’s degree for Black and white students has doubled from 6 to 13 percent since 1964 (Harris-Perry, 2019). While this can be due to a variety of factors, the lack of adequate scholarships, the low median return on college graduation, and the insufficient employment prospects for Black graduates likely contribute to this difference. The debate over and banning of affirmative action in college admissions only worsens this issue by perpetuating a misled “color-blind” perspective, another ideal upheld by colleges in an attempt to justify their primarily white and racist student body and faculty.

This brings me back to the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent “support” from colleges around the United States, which is a prime example of how colleges provide words of support but fail to *act* in support of reducing the institutional racism in academia. The superficial claims of solidarity from colleges sparked the creation of #BlackInTheIvory, a hashtag built for Black scholars to share their experiences with discrimination and racism in academia. Between Saturday, June 6th, and Monday, June 8th, over 86,000 tweets about this topic were published (Smith-Barrow, 2020). The sheer number of stories that Black Twitter users have on the issue offers just a glimpse into the extent of racism in academia, which is itself only one corner of society that is affected by systemic inequality. From one student being told by the Penn Med Dean she “came in a piece of coal” and was “shined” up (@naharrisonmd, 2020) to

inadequate anti-racism training for students and staff (@DanyDaydreamer, 2020), it is clear that there is deep-rooted inequality that continues to be covered up by universities around America.

It is easy to look at all of these incidents as distant and impersonal, yet they have occurred and continue to occur at every single college in America. Northeastern University is no exception to this, despite its proclamation of diversity and acceptance. While it may be hard to believe that Northeastern's less than 5% African American statistic can be a part of a "diverse" campus, it is not all that different from other colleges around Boston.

The reason Northeastern is considered diverse is because of the large number of international students, making up over 11% of the student body. International students have money, and this is a large driving factor in why Northeastern accepts such a considerable number instead of providing scholarships to lower-income students. Even if it would create a more diverse campus environment and help to correct the educational inequality for Black students, the cost itself is enough for colleges to search for alternatives to boost their diversity ranking.

This phenomenon is common at several colleges in Boston, with the international population averaging at twice the percentage of Black students. In the past decade, Northeastern's enrollment of international students has tripled, with "three in 10 students last year hailed from abroad" (Dungea, 2017). This results in money that could be used to fund scholarships for Black students who cannot afford tuition, yet is used for other university costs. Systemic racism causes this financial inequality for Black students, and colleges are only aiding this inequality and missing the chance to educate the next generation of Black leaders and policy makers.

For the Black students, a part of Northeastern's 5% statistic, their experiences reflect those of Black students at almost any predominantly White college. Characterized by

microaggressions, administrative ignorance, and racist professors, Northeastern provides Black students with their fair share of shocking experiences that are unbeknownst to many white students and faculty. These experiences would most likely be considered isolated incidents were it not for James Lyons, a Northeastern student who started #HereAtNU on Twitter.

Lyons decided to create the hashtag after finding racist graffiti in the bathroom of Curry Student Center and, after reporting it, receiving little help or response from campus police or administration. The hashtag implores Northeastern students and staff to share their experiences with racism on campus, and hundreds of tweets were published from marginalized students. One Black student describes her experience of being racially profiled by the Northeastern Police Department and being stopped in buildings to be asked if she was a student. Multiple students discussed how their participation in class is often unwelcome and ignored, while others mentioned how fellowships and scholarships are only available for white students.

Six months after reporting the racist graffiti in Curry, Lyons received a response from university administration and was then ignored completely after an attempt to discuss how to combat the issues that the #HereAtNU hashtag brought to light. Despite the several tweets that tagged Northeastern and President Aoun, there was no communication between university students and faculty (Schwartz, 2019). While Northeastern did not actively attempt to cover up the situation, they acted oblivious to the issue and missed an opportunity to learn how to create a more inclusive campus.

While I have provided several examples of racism at Northeastern and colleges around the United States, I am by no means saying it is obvious for everyone. I personally had no clue that any of the aforementioned events took place at Northeastern, and I have never seen let alone heard of the #HereAtNU trend. While this is due in part to Northeastern's lack of

acknowledgement of any incident that could harm the image of their “diverse” campus, it is also largely because of my white privilege, ignorance, and previous lack of knowledge on the issue of institutional racism.

Before I discuss what students can do as individuals to combat institutional racism, I would like to mention that, while writing this piece, Northeastern sent out another email on systemic racism and discrimination in our society. Unlike the prior emails, this one outlined actions that the University will take to improve the experiences of Black students and diversity at Northeastern. For example, a Community Advisory Board will be established for NUPD, there will be a conscious effort to increase the number of Black students, faculty, and staff. Furthermore, new ties will be built with the university and local businesses, as well as Boston youth. This email is the first sign of self-evaluation that I have personally seen from Northeastern administration, and I really hope the actions will be carried out. This is only the beginning to addressing the institutional racism at Northeastern, but it is nevertheless a step toward increasing communication between students and staff.

So, where do we go from here? That is the question that I have been asking myself for the past few months, and I cannot say that I have a solid answer. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss three actions that students can take to advocate for change at the institutional level. While I will cover a few things that I have learned, this is not to say that you are limited to those options. There is a lot of work to be done, and I hope that this will help to get the ball rolling.

The first thing that students can and should do is educate themselves. I cannot emphasize this point enough, and it is especially important for white people to understand. I had no idea the extent of racism at Northeastern, and that is the problem. How can we expect there to be change when we do not see the problem in the first place? One Google search of racism at Northeastern

or a quick scroll through #HereAtNU on Twitter will provide an array of Black stories about their time at Northeastern. Read about their experiences, and remember them when you are walking on campus. Black students cannot forget about the time racist graffiti was plastered on the bathroom wall when they walk into the student center, so you should not have the privilege to either.

In addition to learning about the experiences of Black life at Northeastern, there are several ways to educate oneself about institutional racism in America. Black writers have published thousands of books and articles to educate white people on how they can take action, and reading Black literature, in general, can provide a valuable glimpse into the systemic racism plaguing the United States. By failing to educate yourself because you are not affected by the issues, you are contributing to the issue. At a school that is predominantly white, the only way the voice of the student body will be heard is if white students contribute.

This leads me to the second thing that students can do, which is use their voice. Northeastern sent out two emails on the murder of George Floyd before sending out the third email that addressed student comments and complaints. President Aoun stated in the email that he had listened to the ideas and calls for action of the student body, showing that using your voice does in fact work. If you recognize a problem or have an idea for change, email, write, and call. If you notice that a professor is discriminating against a Black student, report them. If you see any act of racism on campus or anywhere else, say something. If you are white, use your privilege to fight for those that society has silenced.

I have heard so many times by my white friends and family that they do not want to get involved with race issues because it is not their place. This mindset only perpetuates the issue by ignoring it; it *is* your place to advocate for basic human rights and equality. Pretending like

racism does not exist is an inherently racist act, and both students and universities need to recognize this. The more people who talk about race and institutional racism at Northeastern and colleges around the United States, the more attention the issues will get. This can mean participating in protests and marches. However, it is important to go past performative activism and argue for change in places that Black people have historically been excluded from. Change will not occur if people refuse to talk about that which needs changing, so use your voice.

The third thing that students can do is join communities of students dedicated to change. If there is not a club or community that encompasses what you would like to accomplish, create one. Student organizations are one of the most powerful tools for sparking change at universities; they provide a space for students to come together and discuss problems and ways the fix them. Student clubs can also engage in direct conversation with campus administration and talk about methods of change and, as the saying goes, there is always strength in numbers.

The student communities do not always have to be dedicated to social change to talk about it; I personally am a part of Husky Ambassadors, Northeastern's tour guide organization, and we routinely talk about race at Northeastern and how we, as campus representatives, can initiate change at the University level. In your all-white sorority, you can discuss methods of increasing diversity. In a club that partners with low-income elementary students, you can explore how institutional racism functions at different schools and educate younger generations about racism.

These communities provide students with a chance to advocate for change to a large group of people, which is something that not a lot of people can do. Use your platform to speak about institutional racism at your school and others around the United States, and use your audience to initiate change.

Like I said earlier, these three actions that students can take are only beginning steps to confronting the layers of systemic racism in society. However, the majority of white people are simply ignoring the problem, so these actions could provide substantial change at many universities. It is clear that institutional racism is real and present at every college in the United States, yet many white people are oblivious to this fact and the cycle continues. Northeastern's latest email provides the first steps that the university will begin to take to achieve the diversity that they preach about, and the student body needs to continue to push administration to implement these changes.

When I moved to Boston from Texas, I thought that I would escape from the racism of the South. I soon found out that there is racism everywhere, from the most conservative town in Texas to the most liberal school in the North. It is simply more hidden in Boston, which makes it worse because people are not aware of the extent of the issue. Northeastern brushes over the topic of institutional racism, and its predominantly white student body is oblivious to the experiences of their Black classmates. The result of this reality is a lack of acknowledgement and an absence of long-lasting change, and this cycle will continue unless the students demand change.

If you cause a problem, you do not expect someone else to come along and fix it. So why do we think it is okay to step back and let Black people try to address institutional racism in higher education? Use your voice to advocate for Black students because you have the privilege to do so, and the numbers to be heard.

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