

On Race and Cultural Competencies

Professor Deirdre Cooper Owens, Queens College

CUNY Faculty Diversity Dialogues, Office of Recruitment and Diversity

November 27, 2017

“You can’t exclude your way to excellence” – workshop attendee



University Dean Arlene Torres welcomed all to the fourth in a series of Faculty Diversity Dialogues, noting that the enthusiasm and interest generated by these conversations had resulted in broader discussions on the campus level, a positive impact of the programming for the University. Linking her own academic background as an anthropologist with that of the invited speaker, historian Professor Deirdre Cooper Owens of Queens College, she highlighted the relationship between science and culture. The Dean cited the American Anthropological Association’s Race Project (link: <http://www.understandingrace.org/about/>). Professor Cooper Owens’ new book, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender and the Origins of American Gynecology*, traces the relationship between slavery and women’s professional medicine in early America.

Beginning the session with the recent CUNY film on race and racism, Professor Cooper Owens then moderated a lively discussion. The film is one in a series that resulted from the Chancellor’s Campus Climate Working Group; its hyperlink follows: [Interview on Race and Racism. Dr. Deirdre Cooper Owens with Bob Herbert CUNY TV](#) Though the civil rights era ended just over 50 years ago, the notion of systemic and structural ‘racial amnesia’ remains a powerful force when examining the cumulative effects of deficit education, housing, healthcare and policing on communities of color. Professor Cooper Owens further underscored this by emphasizing that Jim Crow was not too far in the past.

As a self-styled storyteller, Professor Cooper Owens offered the audience clear and cogent examples while she presented her research on race and cultural competencies in the academy. She recommended thoughtful strategies and tactics especially needed by junior faculty. In order to thrive at CUNY faculty need to learn how to best navigate higher education’s hiring philosophies. She added that it’s also essential for people to broaden their horizons in order to develop intra-cultural competencies and to avoid insular thinking. As critical thinkers, it’s helpful to provide context, to ask questions, and provide examples from our personal lives. Yes,

this takes a lot of work, and is frustrating at times, but one goal as educators is to express excellence as we define this concept for our students and our peers.

Guiding Questions

1. Diversity is often a coded and not so coded term for increasing college enrollments related to race. CUNY has a very racially diverse student population, the track record is not as balanced for faculty. How do we create parity in this area?
2. Racial fatigue is real for many faculty of color. How can we all work, especially white colleagues, to help shoulder more of the heavy burden of doing intellectual and emotional labor that centers on race and racism?
3. Conversations about race/racism are often boiled down to binary categories that privilege black-white relations. CUNY campus statistics demonstrate that racial groups and identities are varied. How do we expand these conversations?