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Faith Ngunjiri

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The Challenge of Inclusion in the Ethics Classroom



Concordia College observed MLK Day 2020 on the theme of “Not Racist: A White Moderate Myth.” My ethics students were required to attend the events and reflect on three questions: What was the primary message? How did that message resonate with you? And: What questions did

the speeches and workshops raise for you? Inevitably, as a predominantly white institution (PWI) working on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) ideals, Concordia met the topic with some resistance. I am the only Black woman tenured faculty member, so the resistance came as no surprise. How are we ever going to get to sufficient, sustainable livelihoods for all (as the ELCA social statement has it), if we cannot discuss one of the reasons for economic inequality—racism and racist structural arrangements in the United States? As an intersectional scholar, I introduce my students to issues of race, gender, sexual identity, religion, and other sources of diversity and marginalization in organizations. MLK Day offered the perfect entry point for talking about race in class this semester.

As I read through my students’ reflections, it was clear that, on the one hand, they were profoundly moved and informed by the messages from the speakers. One of the speaker’s talk focused on the question of “who has a right to belong here”—an issue we obviously struggle with as a PWI. We are not yet an inclusive campus; in fact, most minority students would describe the climate as hostile. As such,

our retention rates for minority students are insufferable. My ethics students’ comments such as “everyone belongs here and everyone should be accepted here” suggests that some students are open to expanding their worldview. As an example, through student activism, a meal bank fund was begun last semester to help food insecure students.

On the other hand, statements such as “white people do not have to interact with colored people,” or “the power behind [white privilege] is considerably smaller and less impacting to colored people”—and, indeed the fact that they use the term “colored people” to refer to minorities—suggests that we have a lot of work to do to educate our students to become more culturally competent. We have far to go to become a welcoming institution *for all*.

During our next class period, I led the class through a discussion on race and racism, beginning with a five-minute *New York Times* documentary, “Conversations with White People about Race.” My goal was to help the students collectively process what their experiences in a safe space, and to help to destigmatize these taboo topics. We can only truly learn how to be ethical leaders in the issues of race and diversity by openly engaging with these topics. Students resonated with the views expressed about the discomfort that white people have towards talking about race. They also talked about how they first came to realize that they were of a certain race. My goal in bringing such difficult conversations to the ethics classroom is to equip my students with the ethical tools to engage in dialogue. We must do better, as an institution committed to helping our students “BREW”: Becoming Responsibly Engaged in the World.

Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, Ed.D. is an associate professor of Ethics and Leadership and Director of the Lorentzsen Center for Faith and Work at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota. Dr. Faith is interested in women and leadership, and issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion in higher education. She was a participant in the consultation in July 2019 involving professors from business, leadership, and management departments.