

## Supporting the Success of Students of Color: Creating Racial Justice through Student Activism

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### **Abstract:**

*Despite the increased numbers of students of color in higher education, racial stratification is deeply entrenched in the university system (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013), and it is within these racialized systems of inequality that students of color seek academic excellence. This paper describes three student activism initiatives at Bridgewater State University focused on racial justice, in response to the non-indictments of white police officers lethal brutality toward men of color in New York and Missouri, and in the face of pervasive systemic racism. During the 2014-2015 academic year, students, in collaboration with employees, organized a Black Lives Matter event, an Acting for Justice Troupe, and a state-wide summit focused on the success of male students of color. The paper outlines the relational nature of these student activism initiatives, how non-traditional mentoring relationships with employees support students, and the impact on the campus community as well as higher education institutions across the state.*

### **Key Words:**

Black Lives Matter, racial justice, student activism, student success.

### **Introduction**

Despite the increased numbers of students of color in higher education, racial stratification is deeply entrenched in the university system in the U.S. (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). It is within these racialized systems of inequality that students of color seek success. In order to achieve academic success, significant courage and creativity is required of students of color (College Board Report, 2010). The cumulative effect of racialized barriers can result in students' development of resilience as students of color tap into existing skills in order to navigate the university system (Yosso, 2005; Delgado Bernal, 2001). However, despite their resilience, retention and graduation rates for students of color—particularly for men of color—are significantly lower than those of their white counterparts (Harper, 2013; Keels, 2013; Williams, 2013).

This paper describes three student activism initiatives at Bridgewater State University (BSU) focused on racial justice, and enacted through faculty, staff, administrator, and student partnership teams. During the 2014-2015 academic year, students, in collaboration with employees, organized a Black Lives Matter event, an Acting for Justice Troupe, and a state-wide summit focused on supporting the success of male students of color. We believe that this wave of student activism aimed at racial justice was enabled by a campus culture that prioritizes the success of students, and in particular students from traditionally underserved populations, including students of color. In addition, we believe that genuine and collaborative employee-student relationships played a significant role in the accomplishment of these three student-led initiatives.

BSU is the largest university in the Massachusetts state university system, with approximately 8,426 full-time equivalent undergraduates. Students of color have increased from 10.6% of first-time, full-time students in 2005 to 20.7% in 2013; first generation students made up 47.2% of the 2013 cohort, while students coming from low income families were 37.4%.

The groundwork for our current student of color work was established decades ago by people of color attending or working at the university. More recently, diversity and social justice at BSU has been codified in the institutional priorities. Supporting students of color at BSU has also been facilitated by a campus culture of data-driven student success decision-making (Anderson, 2008; Kling, 2014; Williams, 2013), campus-wide commitment to the success of *all* students (Bauman, Bustillos, Bensimon, Brown, Bartee, 2005; Guo & Jamal, 2007), focus on racial justice and white privilege (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, & Cervero, 2012), a range of high impact student success practices (Finley & McNair, 2013), and faculty/librarian development focused on culturally inclusive and engaged pedagogies (Gay, 2002).

The ethos for employees has shifted from “how can we help those kids of color on campus?” to “how can we understand and address systems of racial inequality and how can we change to better support the students of color attending BSU?” This has led to an intentional enactment of authentic, equitable student-employee relationships and

collaborations which departs from traditional models of mentorship. This model celebrates students' lived experiences and knowledge, supporting student activism in new and broader ways as social justice is co-created.

The capacity for communication and connectivity across potential racial, class, and power differentials reflects the faculty/staff and student relational development that enables translation of passion and knowledge into collaboration with one another. This synergy has been called "relational activism" and this conceptual framework will be utilized, along with critical race theory to examine and understand the student activism initiatives that took place at BSU in order to further racial justice activism on college campuses.

## **Literature Review**

Students of color in the U.S. face numerous obstacles to academic success in predominantly white higher education institutions based on long-standing institutional racism. Culturally irrelevant curricula (College Board Report, 2010), faculty who question the intellectual aptitude of students of color (Harper, 2013), and tokenism stemming from low representation (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005), combine with subtle yet profound racial microaggressions (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009) to create experiences of exclusion and marginalization for students of color in higher education. Microaggressions are everyday invalidating and insulting comments and behaviors towards those in marginalized groups that convey hostile and negative messages (Sue, 2010). Supporting the success of students of color requires a conceptualization of racism and its manifestations as a systemic reality. To cast racism as occasional and frowned upon individual behaviors or attitudes deviating from otherwise race-neutral norms obscures the ways in which racism and racialized ideologies are embedded in multiple cultural/social systems, including the college campus (López, 2003). In this article, racism is conceptualized as a set of institutional practices and a dominant cultural norm.

Our approach to supporting student activism aimed at racial justice was deeply informed by what we conceptualize as relational activism. Relational activism is an under-theorized concept, and although the capacity to create a community of people working toward social change is a central component of activism, it is one not generally examined in the literature. Relational activism entails attention to consistent interpersonal behaviors which support the development of long term, sustainable relationships between people doing social justice work. In fact, these interpersonal connections lead to networking and community building in a way that spreads activism in a more public sphere, targeting a community audience such as a college campus, to promote social change (O'Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010).

Relational activism protects interpersonal connections that honor students' capacity to create knowledge about their own lives, solely based on their experiences, which is crucial to inform and propel activism for racial justice. Our relationships with each other become "the avenue and the vehicle" for social change (Boutwell & Guhad, 2015). Relational activism differs from conventional activism in a focus on everyday behaviors which create a context and energy for impacting the local community (O'Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010). Within this framework, the vitality of activism is understood to reside in

the collective community, not the individual, and relationships are the central nexus for social change (O'Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010). This intentional focus on relationships was key to both the success of the student activism projects described in this paper—and to the path we charted in achieving that success.

We were also informed by critical race theory (CRT) which interrogates the ways in which race and racism are both foundational to, maintained by, and ultimately reproduced through broader institutional and cultural patterns, practices, and policies (Delgado, 1995). Solórzano (1997) characterized CRT in educational contexts as a transdisciplinary approach grounded in a commitment to social justice, focused on dismantling oppressive structures which impact multiple, intersecting identities. Dominant narratives about race frequently perpetuate the story of low educational achievement as a cultural or race-based deficit (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT centralizes lived experiences, and stories, recognizing students of color as “holders and creators of knowledge” (Delgado Bernal, p 106, 2002).

The employees and students who partnered in the racial justice activism described in this paper are diverse along the identities of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, country of origin, and positions of power. With the understanding that some positionalities have vastly more power and privilege than others, we intentionally discussed and created practices to address these power differentials to ensure as much awareness and reflexivity as possible in our work with students.

This paper describes in detail three initiatives of student activism aimed at racial justice at BSU in the academic year 2014-2015, offers ideas about how relational activism, informed by critical race theory and unconventional models of mentoring, played a part in the success of these social justice initiatives through employee-student collaborations, and offers implications for other college campuses to further student activism. Since members of a BSU student group—Men Integrated in Brotherhood—were involved in all three projects, we begin with a description of this group.

### **Student Activism Aimed at Racial Justice**

Men Integrated in Brotherhood (MIB) at BSU was created in 1998 in response to low graduation rates of male students of color as well as the need to improve the campus climate for male students of color. Students engaged BSU staff and administrators of color to assist with their goals of improving the quality of life on campus and increasing retention and graduation rates through a support/social group focused on male students of color. In the early years of the organization, and as a profound example of the nature of institutionalized racism in the lives of students of color, the group was typically seen as “a bunch of militant black men in black hoodies.” Beginning in 2009, under the mentoring and advising of Richardson Pierre-Louis, a man of color with Haitian roots who has lived in the U.S. for over thirty years, the organization emerged as a leadership group for male students of color. At their weekly student-led meetings, MIB Brothers discuss student success, share challenges and victories, and announce opportunities for leadership and service. Meetings conclude with MIB Brothers standing in a circle and recommitting to “building a foundation for future generations, through education and brotherhood.”

Richardson believes that experiencing America through the lens of a foreign national, coming from a society where everyone in his world looked like him, provided a unique perspective from which to inspire and motivate the young men. Consistently “showing up” was one of the most important factors in the success of his relationships with students, as it was the foundation on which Richardson was able to establish a bond built on trust and respect. Having a profound understanding of the challenges that exist on a college campus for male students coming from urban environments also provided a sense of connection. In addition to ongoing mentoring and intentional leadership development within MIB meetings, a key component to the success and impact of MIB stems from ongoing engagement with campus partners vested in student success.

### **Activism 1: Black lives matter.**

The U.S. based national Black Lives Matter Movement was founded in July 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, after the vigilante killing of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black boy, and in response to anti-Black racism and a “world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Garza, 2014). The movement quickly expanded from social media activism to an international and intersectional social movement focused on the lives of all Black people, including Black women, Black-undocumented people, Black queer and trans people, and Black people living with disabilities (Cullors in Segalov 2015). While the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was already established, it was in the aftermath of community mobilization in Missouri after the police shooting death of an unarmed 18 year old Black man that its underlying message reached national prominence (Casper, 2014). As a vision and rallying cry, Black Lives Matter has surfaced in multiple contexts: from academic conferences (Pagowsky & Wallace, 2015), an entire issue of *Essence*, one of the nation’s top Black women’s magazines (Hing, 2015), from treatment in popular TV (Garza, 2014) to selection by the American Dialect Society of #BlackLivesMatter as the 2014 word of the year (American Dialect Society 2014). As of June 2016, there have been over 1269 Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the U.S. (Elephrame, 2015).

BSU’s Black Lives Matter event, which engaged approximately 350 students and employees, was a campus-wide response to the national crisis of the murders of young Black women and men by police officers. The Black Lives Matter event was a partnership between MIB Brothers and students in an upper level social work course. Each semester, students in the course are tasked with selecting a social justice issue and implementing a social justice campus-based intervention.

During the spring 2015 semester, students selected the criminalization of young black men after two students of color, both mothers, shared their fears surrounding their adolescent sons’ physical survival and emotional well-being. Students with the support of the MIB staff advisor, Richardson, and social work professor Laura Boutwell, sought to honor and amplify the voices of students of color, to highlight the realities of systemic racism and the criminalization of people of color, and to create a socially just space for multiracial dialogue. Richardson and Laura (a white women) provided a bi-racial leadership pair which demonstrated respect and collaboration. In the classroom, students held weekly reflection sessions to discuss the impact of racism in their lives

and in the broader culture, to build community as a group of learners/activists, and to strategize the most effective ways to engage the campus community. These weekly small and large group sessions were significant sites of learning, and coupled with course content addressing community organizing, leadership development, and social justice, served to prepare students to their roles in facilitating difficult dialogues through various forms of activism.

Student activism began with campus-based consciousness raising: in the weeks leading up to the event, social work students created a series of Black Lives Matter fliers highlighting the unjust deaths of young men of color at the hands of the police. Students also created additional informational fliers, a Facebook page, and campus sidewalk chalking to center the criminalization of young men of color in campus discourse and to provide outreach and publicity for the event. Combined, these student efforts created a rich scaffold of multiple entry points into campus engagement about the criminalization of young men of color—and the importance of affirming that Black lives matter.

In the two weeks leading up to the Black Lives Matter event, Tamir Rice, a 12 year old Black child was killed on a playground by police. Then two non-indictments were issued in quick succession for police officers involved in the deaths of unarmed Black men. The criminalization of young men of color seized the national spotlight even more so than it had during protests in September 2015 and these events deeply impacted students of color on campus. The focus in final student planning sessions included dialogue around intentional self-care, the deep emotional impact of racial violence, and the most effective ways to express the intensity of our emotional responses in meaningful ways. Students and employees focused on the critical importance of self-care in relational activism and systemic change work: students of color had courageously and eagerly accepted the significant undertaking of running an event proclaiming that Black lives matter, while being told in chilling ways by the U.S. judicial system, in dominant narratives, and on social media that their lives, in fact, did not matter. These dialogues were especially important for students of color, who were in the difficult position of having to attend to personal grief, fear and anger while at the same time crafting a message and leading an event for all community members to hear and engage with.

The event itself included a resource table; a community mural; a photo booth behind a “Black Lives Matter” sign, where campus community members posed individually and in groups, holding signs reading: we can’t breathe, color is not a crime, Black lives matter at BSU, among others. Activism through art included displays of student made collages, distribution of a student-made zine, two collage-making stations, and a listening booth of three spoken word and social commentary videos unpacking systemic racism and the extrajudicial murders of Black men. At the end of the first hour, a forum began with two original spoken word pieces performed by MIB Brothers. For the next two hours, our campus community engaged in meaningful discussion, shared poetry, and covered topics including the impact of racism including women’s fear for the men of color in their lives, grief and anger over the deaths of young men of color, and visions for change. The event concluded with the audience breaking into small groups to talk

about ways of supporting students of color and broader change on our campus, which included white students calling to action other white students to stand against racism.

The success of this event, coupled with the fact that upper level administrators, members of the campus police department, and professors were in the audience, became a source of great pride for the entire MIB membership. The support, encouragement, and recognition that the young men received before, during and after the event, made abundantly clear that the campus supported their voices, their wisdom and their lives. After the Black Lives Matter event it was evident that the young men became more confident in their ability to succeed as students, and embraced their role as student leaders.

### **Activism 2: Acting for justice.**

The Acting for Justice (AFJ) project was an effort to create a forum for student activism around issues of inequity on campus in an innovative way, one that would initiate dialogue and provide a space to explore and address these problems as a community. Students co-created interactive performances of scenes depicting interpersonal oppressions, which led to audience/actor dialogues focused on the dynamics of injustice and avenues for social change through allyship and social action. The faculty facilitators, Colleen Rua (Theatre and Dance), and Judith Willison (Social Work), both white, sought to empower a group of racially/ethnically diverse students in the troupe to engage in consciousness raising as well as social action around issues such as racism, racial microaggressions on campuses and the success of young men of color, amongst other forms of oppression, through the dynamic presentation of embodying characters that would allow audience members to experience these issues and react to them in real time.

The acting methods employed by AFJ were based in the work of Brazilian theatre practitioner and activist Augusto Boal, who revolutionized theatre with the introduction of a non-violent aesthetic movement known as Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979). The techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed allow for an investigation into how and why inequities occur and how social, political, and economic injustices might be remedied. Theatre of the Oppressed encompasses several modes of performance, each arrived at through the work of an ensemble of participants comprised of actors and audience who work toward social change by performing scenarios in which relationships between oppressed and oppressors are enacted and reenacted. Following Boal's model of Forum Theatre (Boal, 1979), AFJ performances presented a series of short scenes in which the protagonist(s) is faced with a situation of oppression, and audience members are invited to discuss the relevant dynamics of oppression and to offer solutions.

Ten students were chosen for the troupe representing diversity across multiple social locations. The students and faculty facilitators co-created the structure of AFJ, including rehearsals being split between acting exercises based in Theatre of the Oppressed methods, and diversity and equity content, and leadership skills. Students brought their passion for social and racial justice, their lived experiences of racism and its effects, and expertise in communicating with and inspiring undergraduate students. The AFJ Troupe members co-created the scenes through a process of mutual authorship with the faculty facilitators, tailoring the dialogue and circumstances to

realistically reflect the current racial climate on college campuses. Students of color shared their lived experiences of racism and white students gained knowledge related to the dynamics of racism on individual and systemic levels, shared their experiences as white allies, and as such, all students exercised and developed their skills as diversity and equity leaders. Colleen and Judith explicitly discussed their commitment to being white allies in racial justice work and opened the door for interchange about white privilege and structures of racial oppression, promoting inter-racial mentoring and dialogue.

The AFJ Troupe performed at three campus events all focused on diversity, social justice, and supporting the success of male students of color, including other higher education institutions from throughout our state. As the nation was called to attention by increasing media coverage of police killings of Black people, and the Black Lives Matter movement, the entirety of our work in spring 2015 was devoted to promoting the success of students of color and in particular, young men of color on college campuses. Scenes addressed racial microaggressions that young men of color face every day on college campuses nation-wide with professors, with other students, and including racial targeting by police at gunpoint. The AFJ students shaped the scenes based on their experiences as men of color and as witnesses to racial bias. The entire performance followed an African American male student through his day and was titled "A Day in the Life" reflecting common experiences of Black male students in the U.S. including a scene taken from a personal account written by Charles M. Blow (Blow, 2015) of his son being held at gunpoint by campus police following a recent robbery in the area. The final lines were a call to action for the campus community: *"Maybe you have been living this reality your whole life. Maybe you just learned about it. Now that we know: What are you going to do to keep my son safe? What are you going to do so that my son walks the campus with pride? What are you going to do so my son knows he belongs?"*

As activists, AFJ Troup students co-facilitated the dialogue with audiences in all our performances. Troup members prepared an analysis of each scene and developed discussion questions for the audience. The response from audiences was outstanding, indicating that potentially significant outcomes were achieved for both the AFJ troupe members, audiences, and the BSU campus community. AFJ students reported that they engaged in ongoing dialogue after the performances with students on campus.

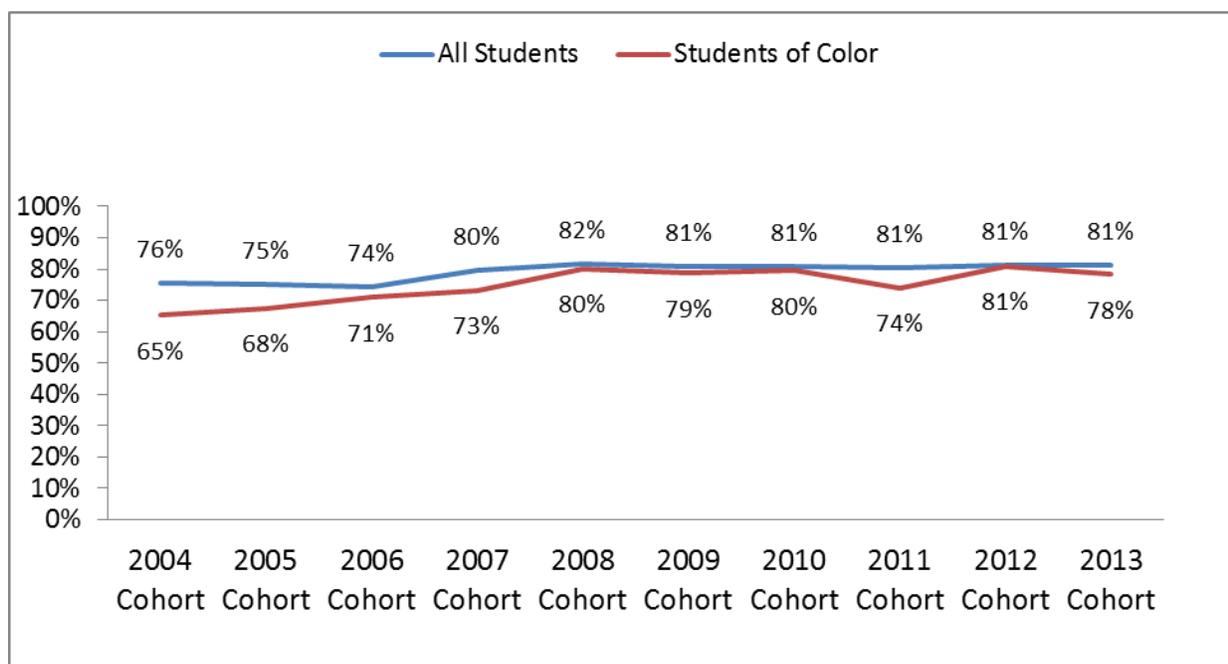
One of the most significant outcomes of AFJ is that the actors of color brought their personal experiences of racial injustice to the process of creating realistic scenes, adjusting dialogue to reflect their own experiences. Through the Forum Theatre format, actors and audience transcended the general feedback of laughter, tears, or applause. Instead, individual voices were heard and multiple points of view expressed through productive dialogue. Those who had been silenced were heard, respected and encouraged to share.

It is important to note that techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed have been employed at various college campuses across the U.S. as a way to address racism and other social justice issues. Programming ranges from workshops to an entire course devoted to Theatre of the Oppressed at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Other universities using this method include The University of Michigan, Berea College, Northwestern University, and Harvard University. Our initiative was inspired by the work

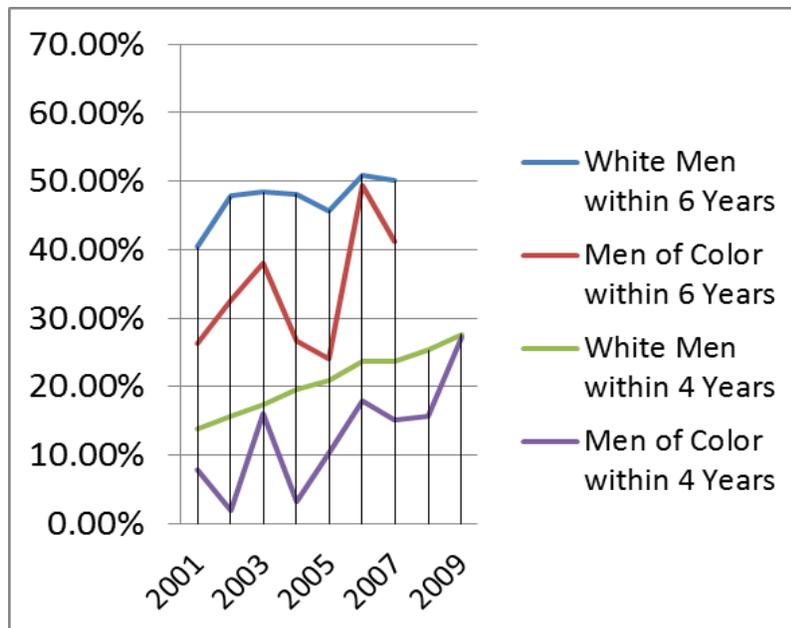
of these educator-student collaborations and we were assisted early on by The Illumination Project at Portland Community College in (Portland, OR) who provided models of scenes that influenced those written by the Acting for Justice troupe.

### Activism 3: Summit on supporting the success of male students of color.

Even before the MIB Brothers played an integral role in organizing the Black Lives Matter Event in December of 2014, the group was pursuing an initiative which took its activism for racial justice to a new level. After seeing data regarding the closing of the retention and graduation achievement gap for males of color at BSU (see figures 1 and 2), Marvin Ezhan, the student president of MIB and the group's senior advisor, Richardson Pierre-Louis suggested to BSU administration that BSU host a summit focused on supporting the success of males of color.



**Figure 1. First to second year retention rates, first-time, full-time cohorts**



**Figure 2. Graduation rates of white men and men of color who began their studies at BSU in the year indicated. Because there are fewer men of color, there is a larger expected annual variation year to year. Even so, we see clear trends of a narrowed gap in achievement between white men and men of color**

The idea was endorsed immediately and Sabrina Gentlewarrior, who functions as the institution's Chief Diversity Officer, worked with the MIB leadership to plan and implement the summit. Meeting weekly for seven months, a planning committee was formed of the MIB student leadership and BSU employees. MIB Brothers collaboratively planned the summit, bringing their expertise in resources that had furthered their academic success and obstacles they had faced. Employees on the planning committee worked to diffuse power differentials such that students' ideas and lived experiences were honored. For example, Sabrina as the only white person on the planning committee shared in the beginning that her role was to use her role as an administrator to support the process, but that the expertise of the people of color—students and employees alike—was the foundational knowledge guiding the work; this project was built on long-standing collaborations and loving relationships between all on the committee, so conversations about power and privilege occurred easily and often.

In shaping this initiative, students communicated that they wanted the summit to both offer an opportunity for male college students of color to have an opportunity to network, learn from and affirm one another, as well as to act as a catalyst for student success efforts focused on supporting this student population. In order to broaden the impact, the planning committee decided to partner with the Leading for Change Diversity in Higher Education Consortium, a group of over twenty campuses across Massachusetts dedicated to data-driven student and employee success efforts, with an emphasis on closing opportunity gaps, through uniform and transparent use of data, institutional benchmarks and reflective practice (see <http://www.bridgew.edu/the-university/diversity-consortium>). As these campuses have already made a commitment to engage in proactive work to support the success of students from under-represented groups, the planning committee believed that the summit would be attended by

institutional members who would implement changes upon return to their home campuses.

The keynote for the summit was delivered by MIB Student President (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTTcj2QC1vo>) who discussed strategies that male students of color, as well as predominantly white campuses, can employ to support the success of male students of color attending their institutions. Followed by the Acting for Justice Troupe's performance, "A Day in the Life" that highlighted the microaggressions too often experienced by males of color on our campuses, participants had an opportunity to discuss strategies for addressing and eliminating these forms of biases on our campuses.

Employees attended a workshop focused on campus best-practices for supporting the success of male students of color. MIB Brothers created and led a two-hour workshop for the students participants entitled "Transforming Our Pain to Success: Males of Color Leading for Change on Our Campuses." During the workshop, students were encouraged to participate in small groups and to document ways their campuses could do more to support them, the campus resources that are helpful to them, and strategies they could employ to support their own success (Campuses interested in implementing a similar workshop should see <https://www.bridgew.edu/sites/default/files/relatedfiles/Discussion%20Guide%20Pain%20to%20Success%20.pdf>). The information compiled by the students was then shared during a 90-minute session with the employees who were asked to simply listen to the students as they spoke. This session elevated the male students of color as leaders in activism for racial justice on campuses across the state. The students spoke about how too often our campuses dishonor them and their lived experiences, resulting in a sense of alienation, and the absence of a sense of home. They described processes, policies, and pedagogies that, while unintended, communicate they are not expected to succeed—so therefore too often they do not. They shared that in order to support their success, they need not only racially diverse student bodies, but racially diverse employees; they also stressed that whatever the social identities of employees, we need to demonstrate our belief and support of students of color in very tangible ways.

The final session of the summit focused on the campus employees and students from each campus meeting together to create action plans for their campuses to support the success of males of color. The mutual partnerships between students and employees that were forged and strengthened during the summit can provide the foundation for lasting social change on campuses across the state. (Campuses interested in creating male of color student success action plans can see <http://www.bridgew.edu/sites/default/files/relatedfiles/FINAL%20CAMPUS%20ASSESSMENT.pdf> (For an overview of the entire summit agenda, please see [http://www.bridgew.edu/sites/default/files/relatedfiles/Leading\\_for\\_Change\\_Program\\_MARCH30\\_2015\\_8.5x11.pdf](http://www.bridgew.edu/sites/default/files/relatedfiles/Leading_for_Change_Program_MARCH30_2015_8.5x11.pdf)). While no formal evaluation has been conducted of what campuses achieved as a result of the summit, informal conversations have revealed that some campuses are now meeting more regularly with male students of color on their campuses in order to deepen relationships, and engage in action planning and goal attainment focused on male student of color success.

## Methodology

Approval was gained through the BSU Institutional Review Board to conduct two focus groups with students and employees involved in the racial justice activism described above. The first focus group was with six students in the AFJ Troupe all of whom utilized a written self-assessment concentrated on their learning about diversity and social justice, their growth and confidence as leaders, and their beliefs about their capacity to effect social change. The second focus group included three students and four employees involved in all three projects who shared what they learned through these partnerships. The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed and two employees read and coded the transcripts to identify emergent themes.

## Findings

For the purposes of this articles we will present findings that reflect two salient themes identified through analysis of the focus group transcripts and the written assessments: (1) the promotion of social justice/racial justice through genuine student-employee collaboration, and (2) the perceived impact of these initiatives on the wider campus community.

The first theme addressed the role of student-employee partnerships in building racial/social justice initiatives.

Marvin, the MIB student president, explained the beginning of the working student-employee relationships:

So with Black Lives Matter, it started off when Laura and her class actually came to our MIB meeting. Our MIB meeting was moved to a different room, they still came, and spoke on the event and showed us that they support what we were doing. They said they have all our support; they were ready to partner up. And that right there was a huge step. That was the first day I met Laura. That day I could tell her passion. They came, they had a PowerPoint, they explained their reasons, and she showed us what she's done before. As college students still, we can tell when...staff are...real, when they're being serious about something. You could tell obviously from that, Laura really wanted to start-in.

Jovan, a student member of MIB, described the working relationship with employees:

...Sabrina kept asking us 'How do you feel about that?' And...with her partnership she let us dictate everything, let us run the show. But...sometimes where (we would) be stuck...And Sabrina, or even Richardson too, he will come by and...when there's silence in the room and he's like, 'Ok, what do you think about this?' And he will ask us questions to make us think more. And they allowed us to think in ways that we never thought we would think that helped the summit be successful.

Judith, one of the AFJ faculty facilitators stated:

So one of the things about AFJ was Colleen wrote a draft of the script that we were going to use for the scenes but then we presented them to the students and the students said, "A college student would never say that", or, "Why don't we

add something here to the piece about racism or homophobia"...it was a very much a collaborative partnership about developing the scripts.

And Marvin followed up:

...for Acting for Justice...we really did work off each other. After we would go through scenes, we spoke about it and everyone, the students and professors, we spoke. How did we feel about a situation? What could we do differently? How could we have acted it out differently? How are we going to facilitate it to groups? And if you've seen it, it was all equally done. Judith would be the MC and then she would leave it to us to ask questions to the audience. That was a perfect, perfect balance I believe.

The second theme was reflected in students' observations about changes on campus in response to their activism.

As Ruby, a student member of AFJ, put it:

In Acting for Justice I learned the ability to inspire. Someone came up to me in... my dorm hall...recently and were like, "Wow I recognize you from Acting for Justice, I really want to get involved in that. I loved your character in it and it was so inspiring and makes me really want to seek social justice and learn more about it."

Marvin shared the following about AFJ:

After we did those skits and had those questions, you know, the follow-up questions...you could really see people thinking and start making action as well. Like, "We have to do this, or we have to enforce these types of rules." So obviously through those skits, it was enforced and there was people that said, "Hey, we've gone through the same thing as this skit has shown me. I've been through that. And this has shown me a way I can get out of it or this has shown me a way that I can bring it up on campus." So I think it has made a difference.

Jovan also spoke about the changes he felt occurred on campus:

I want to talk about the Black Lives Matter, even though I wasn't initially a part of it, I felt like I was a part of it. Especially with like Marvin and a bunch of other MIB Brothers speaking, you know I felt like me being a part of MIB that I played a huge part. Not even me sparking conversation with the other people that went to the event, but people actually came up to me that I've never talked to, that I've never seen on campus and from different races too. And that day...just seeing the whole BSU community finally come together and talk about something that's really hard for others to talk about.

## Discussion

The three student activism initiatives described in this article were aimed at racial justice and supported by employee-student partnerships that embodied relational activism as informed by critical race theory (Delgado Bernal, 2001; 2002). Through the mutual and collaborative partnerships that were forged between employees and students, communities of social change were developed and sustained. Employees

were committed to supporting student activism in roles outside of traditional mentorship, which allowed an examination of power and privilege. This reflected the importance of recognizing the ways in which established systems of oppression, including racism, can impact employee-student relationships if unexamined. For employees, our position as “experts” is reified through the academy and in order to establish truly mutually empowering relationships we must be aware of this (VanderPlaat, 1999).

Relational activism seeks to intentionally dismantle prescribed power dynamics in order to create genuine and mutual relationships. As reflected in the quotes above, these relationships both serve to support activism in the public sphere and are also in and of themselves a form of changing the status quo (O’Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010). For instance, the workshop in the Summit Supporting the Success of Male Students of Color wherein the employee participants were asked to listen to the lived experiences and wisdom of the male students of color transformed the status quo by privileging the wisdom of students rather than that of the university employees. When AFJ Troupe student members advised faculty how to re-write scenes to more accurately to reflect their lived experiences, we sought to undo the traditional model wherein students are recipients of faculty expertise. Further, at the Black Lives Matter event, while faculty, staff and administrators were in attendance for support, the event was entirely student led and the focus throughout was on student voice, student experience, and student collaboration.

The experience of students and employees of authentic relationships as a central component of the racial justice initiatives reflects our grounding in critical race theory which elevates students lived experiences and personal knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002). By engaging in non-traditional mentoring and collaboration between employees and students, we sought to break down institutionalized procedures that support racism and oppression (Delgado, 1995). The student activism initiatives described in this article demonstrate how supporting the success of students of color includes fashioning safe spaces where students can engage in counterstorytelling, by sharing personal stories about experiencing and responding to racism and other intersections of oppression.

Both students and employees were changed by the student activism outlined in this article. In truly relational activism and empowerment, all parties understand that they are “both an agent and a subject in the empowerment process” (VanderPlaat, 1999, p. 777). These types of employee-student relationships are characterized by a joint acknowledgement that everyone contributes to knowledge and social justice, regardless of position of power or disadvantage (VanderPlaat, 1999).

In addition to personal change, the enactment of relational activism can, in fact, contribute to institutional change, as observed by students in the focus groups. If students of color believe that employees are working toward racial justice, this contributes to the inclusive campus environment necessary to support the success of students of color. Students who engaged in the activism outlined in this paper reported that they believed their activism had and was changing the BSU campus community in the long-term. O’Shaughnessy & Kennedy (2010) argue that “...relational activism intentionally uses the private sphere in a public way, contributing to mid- and long term change.” (p. 555).

If higher education is going to eliminate achievement gaps, nothing less than a campus-wide commitment to this goal is necessary. As a result of intentional, engaged and culturally relevant curricular and co-curricular work, an emphasis on diversity and social justice, and the use of relational activism, we have seen strong success in promoting equal success of all students at BSU. In fact, the Education Trust (2015) ranked BSU as ninth in the nation among public 4-year institutions of higher learning for our ability to support the success of all of our students, while simultaneously closing the racial achievement gap. (See page 5, [https://edtrust.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/09/TheRisingTide\\_120115.pdf](https://edtrust.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/09/TheRisingTide_120115.pdf)). This article simply shares three of the many interventions being employed campus-wide.

Student-employee partnerships focused on supporting the success of students of color at BSU continue to deepen. Dr. Tom Kling, a tenured physics professor, a white man with a long history of commitment to student success and social justice, was approached by students of color who are all majors in the college of math and science, and asked if he would advise a new student group focused on supporting the success of students of color in that college. While Dr. Kling is well-known across the region for his research on student success, students know him simply as an extraordinary professor who is deeply committed to them. This group, Inclusive Advancement of Students in STEM (IAMSSTEM), is another example of the dynamic partnerships that can develop when students of color know that authentic caring exists.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, it must be acknowledged that while it is beyond the scope of this article to fully delineate the efforts on many campuses world-wide who are making extraordinary progress in closing the achievement gaps experienced by students of color, suffice it to say that our efforts are informed, with great admiration and appreciation, by their work (Anderson, 2008; Bauman, et al., 2005; College Board, 2010; Guo & Jamal, 2007; Harper, 2103). And while BSU has made substantial gains in supporting the success of students of color, much work remains. In order to accomplish this work, employees will continue to partner with student activists as they share their lived experiences, wisdom, and vision for racial justice. As Julian (MIB Brother) put it:

Seeing the positive impact these projects had on the BSU community, made me proud but not satisfied. I am hungry to see more, especially of my brothers. [My] MIB brothers, all have a great responsibility. They must utilize the foundation we have created and take it to unthinkable heights. We must play a vital role in how we implement the necessary changes to build a better future for our next generations. Personally, I want to come back; 10, 20, 30 years from now and see how far projects like these have come along.

This shared yearning for racial justice, and the success of students of color will only occur with concerted efforts that combine the intellectual rigor expected in higher education, with the relational activism that too often is missing from our institutions. An established institutional capacity to support activism and student leadership is key; students, particularly those from under-represented groups, must be partnered with in very real ways if we are going to create campuses that will support their success as students and activists. Similarly, faculty and staff need institutional support, training,

skills, and a supportive campus community that values partnerships with students. These types of projects not only promote racial justice but allow students an expanded role on campus as leaders, giving voice to their lived experiences and are therefore consistent with other student-centered methods of enhancing student success.

At BSU, for example, this means that the Acting for Justice Troupe must continue to meet, write new plays, and involve new students. The existence of this faculty-led structure provides a platform on which new generations of students can identify and respond to their emerging concerns. Likewise, faculty and student affairs professionals will continue to engage in partnerships with students in social justice initiatives that include faculty and student research collaborations, residential learning communities, and mentoring programs to area youth. In addition, an innovative structural development at BSU that may translate to other institutions of higher education is the creation of a new Division of Student Success and Diversity which collaborates with faculty and staff across Academic and Student Affairs to identify potential student leaders and causes in which student-led, relational activism can improve the education and ethos of the university community.

Because student leaders graduate from our universities, a constant cultivation of new student leaders represents a required opportunity. With support, new leaders are able to emerge, and the number of students who can play important, and different, roles within student activism can become substantial when this cultivation is made an institutional priority. The authors of the current study are excited to continue this process with new groups of student activism leaders, and encourage all institutions of higher education to identify structures within their campus that can support student-led activism. We will all be the richer for it.

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