

What does systemic change look like?

by Dominic J. Ledesma

During the Talking & Reflection Circle we hosted in early June, a colleague posed the rhetorical question. With regard to issues of institutional racism, what does systemic change look like? This is a big question, one that gives us a lot to think about. So, if the movement following George Floyd's death has prompted Extension to seek systemic change, and I argue that it has, then action on all levels of our organization is needed. This is why we will release a Call to Action this month that reinforces Extension's strategic commitment to inclusivity and anti-racism work. As details about the initiatives are released, here are a few key factors we need to keep Extension on the path toward collective action and positive, sustainable change.

Strategy and coordination

Strategy and coordination are necessary for sustaining a commitment to change on any level. In order for Extension's systemic response to intentionally focus on broader change, any and all efforts taken must be designed and implemented in a strategic and coordinated manner. This is why multiple initiatives are necessary for addressing multiple opportunities. In a large, dynamic, and decentralized organization, no single person or office can single-handedly influence all change that needs to occur. In Extension, we are seeing how leadership is centering issues of race and racism into our respective roles, with greater attention to identity-based forms of privilege and power. Statements drafted by leadership that denounce systemic racism, new and more self-directed resources and learning opportunities for colleagues in Institutes and Areas, integrating a more holistic equity focus in developing Program Plans of Work, the creation of committees with an equity focus in different Institutes, program areas, and operations are a few examples of what is already happening. These efforts will complement the initiatives outlined in the Dean's Call to Action that will be shared and discussed in the next few weeks. All of these actions and efforts are grounded in, among other things, confronting the uncomfortable truths about how we can, should, and will demonstrate our commitment to improving our organization on multiple fronts.

Opportunities to better educate ourselves

The current movement has created an opportunity for more people to be a part of dialogues and action that address systemic racism. If nothing else, it has prompted more people to consider how their identities and experiences have perpetuated racism in a variety of ways. The current movement has provided our organization with a "gut check," offering new opportunities to [re]examine our own values, culture, and relevance within the 21st century. The opportunity I see stemming from this involves greater investment of our resources, time, and energy toward educating ourselves. The purpose: to raise our critical awareness of issues that are inherently connected to a person's (and an institution's) own racialized identity.

Engaging in the "politics of acknowledgement"

The politics of acknowledgement require us to consider multiple points where our organizational presence and work has not centered the voices of diverse communities. The politics of acknowledgement is both a practice and a principle. It is a non-political act that consciously draws attention to our own positionality as professionals acting on behalf of our Division. This includes the intentional acknowledgement of who we are serving well, as well as acknowledging specific populations within the state that we could be serving better.

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Collective engagement and accountability

Multiple initiatives outlined in the Dean's Call to Action include opportunities for colleagues to be involved with initiatives. Involving colleagues to assist with shaping goals, establishing accountability measures, and contributing to the overall process will help produce initiatives that are positioned to be impactful and sustainable. With the support of colleagues, initiatives will be driven by our present needs and aided by an appropriate structure, whether that is a work group, steering committee, or otherwise.

The set of initiatives framed within our Call to Action represent one of many organizational responses. It is not intended to be a panacea for addressing all issues overnight nor is it intended to supplant current efforts already taking place at the Institute and Operations levels. It is another set of steps we will take forward, together. So, what does systemic change look like? Systemic change *is* as a systemic response *does*.