Privilege, Meritocracy, and the NAC

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Purpose

This presentation will:

- be frank, go quickly

- prompt more questions than it will provide answers
  - That's ok because we have resources (e.g., the EDG)
  - Will follow up

- discuss a small section of a very complex system that creates unfair barriers for Black Americans to fully participate in STEM

- just scrape the surfaces of ideas about privilege and meritocracy

- provide (a few) definitions of relevant terms

- acknowledge the importance of an anti-racist space

- frame the conversation around the need for the National Astronomy Consortium - and RADIAL

Purpose

This presentation will not

- address every barrier that Black Americans face in academia and in society

- address everything about the complex topics of race, privilege, and the meritocracy

- address everything that you hoped I would address

This will not be the only opportunity that we will have to engage in conversation and action

Acknowledgements

- I will miss important points, leave out critical information, fail to adequately describe the scope of our challenge, go too fast
- Black employees
  - Held to higher, impossible standards
- Indigenous, people of color, women also experience discrimination and barriers
- You - Showing up
  - EDG-led conversations
  - NAASC conversations
  - Small group/team conversations
  - Asking for training

Acknowledgements

- The Employee Diversity Group (EDG)
  - Actively doing anti-racist work, learning, leading

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Definitions

A few terms

- BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, People of Color
- Racism - "the air we breathe"
  - "The heartbeat of racism is denial…" - Ibram X. Kendi
  - Denial of racial inequities, denial of particiation
- Anti-racist
  - "… and the heartbeat of antiracism is confession."
  - Acknowledging, changing (self, structures, system)
- Equity (not equality)
  - fair treatment, access
  - removal of barriers

Definitions
A few terms

- White Privilege (Advantage)
  - Privilege is invisible to those who have it
  - The ability to feel "normal"
  - Unearned
- Meritocracy – idea that:
  - praise and reward are deserved because of:
    - Hard work
    - Intellectual ability
  - success is not attributable to
    - Race, class, privilege
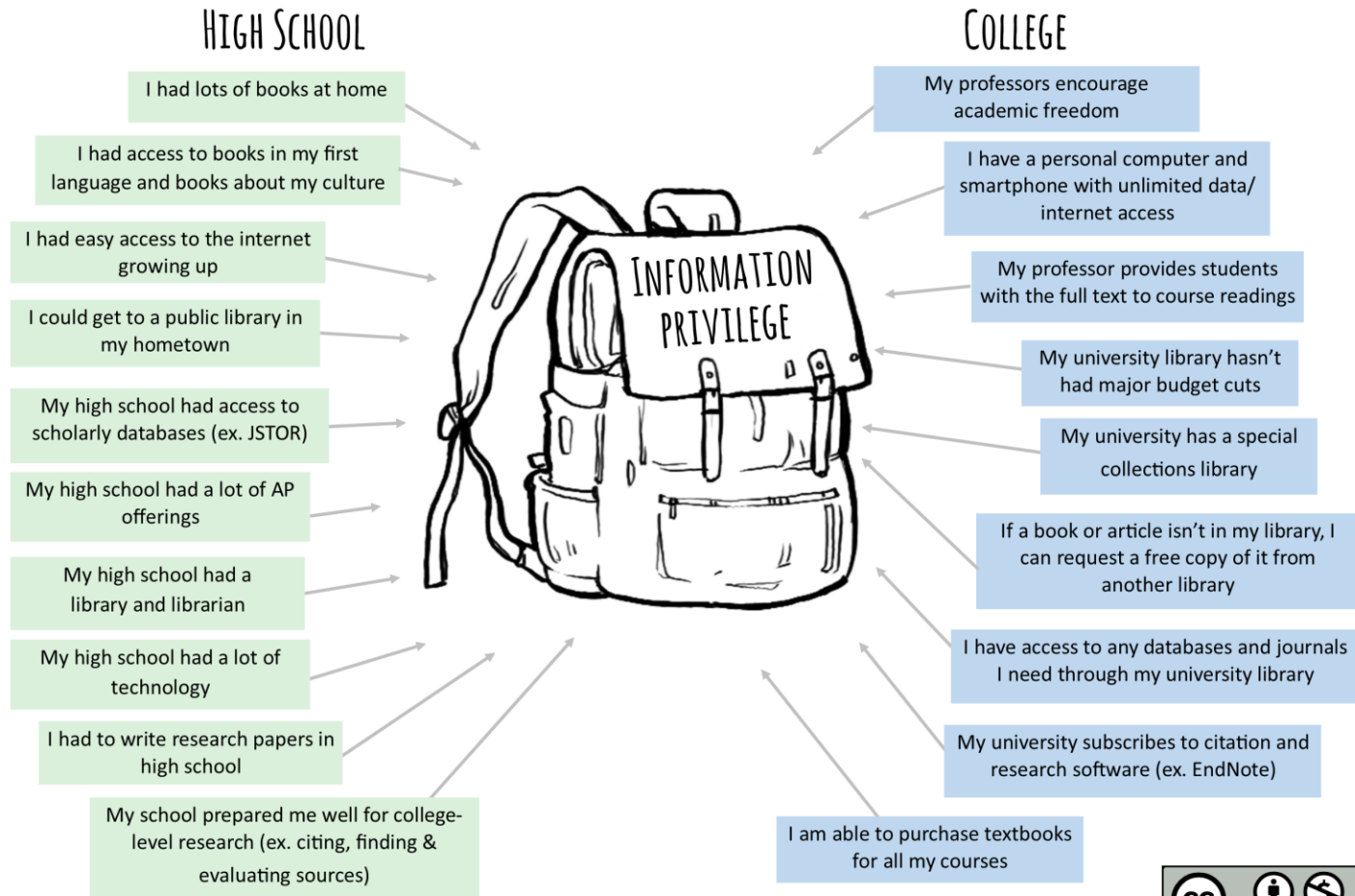   - Unearned advantages

Privilege/Advantage

White privilege/advantage

- Whiteness is 'normal'
  - "Whiteness is the universal standard by which diverse others are measured" (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000, p. 83)
  - "~~White~~ robotics team wins award."
- White privilege **does not** mean that I, as a White person, didn't work hard to get where I am, or that I haven't struggled along the way
- White privilege **does** mean means that:
  - I receive help (often unacknowledged) because I am White
 - I don't encounter barriers because I am White

Whiteness confers privilege **without merit**

Privilege
Academic privilege

HIGH SCHOOL

- I had lots of books at home
- I had access to books in my first language and books about my culture
- I had easy access to the internet growing up
- I could get to a public library in my hometown
- My high school had access to scholarly databases (ex. JSTOR)
- My high school had a lot of AP offerings
- My high school had a library and librarian
- My high school had a lot of technology
- I had to write research papers in high school
- My school prepared me well for college-level research (ex. citing, finding & evaluating sources)

COLLEGE

- My professors encourage academic freedom
- I have a personal computer and smartphone with unlimited data/ internet access
- My professor provides students with the full text to course readings
- My university library hasn't had major budget cuts
- My university has a special collections library
- If a book or article isn't in my library, I can request a free copy of it from another library
- I have access to any databases and journals I need through my university library
- My university subscribes to citation and research software (ex. EndNote)
- I am able to purchase textbooks for all my courses

INFORMATION PRIVILEGE

Inspired by "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," by Peggy McIntosh and Char Booth's work on information privilege.
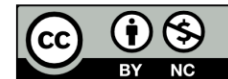
Privilege

Academic privilege

- No one has ever:
  - questioned your intellectual capabilities or attendance at an elite institution based solely on your skin color
  - suggested that you took a 'spot' away from a White person
  - suggested that taking you on as a grad student (because you are White) would be "a risk"
  - interrupted your academic talk to question your credentials
- Established networks of white academics
  - easier for white students, particularly males, to get into the best universities
  - Told about scholarship opportunities and where to find postdoctoral positions, thus advancing their careers faster

Examples

Privilege/Advantage

- Two conversations:
  - Q to white student: "What's your major?"
  - Q to Black student: "Did you get a scholarship?"
- Conversation with 4th year undergrad:
  - I will need to work for a couple of years before I can afford to go to graduate school

Meritocracy
… and the myth of the meritocracy in Academia

- Success comes *as long as you are the best of the best*
- I made it solely through my own hard work; no one helped me
- Career success largely depends on the prestige of the department/school awarding PhD
- Connections and 'pedigree'
  - Assignment to panels, leadership opportunities, peer review
    - Grants, fellowships, publishing, access to data
- Lack of objective measurement of 'excellence'
  - self-defined by the in-group

Equity
...and Social Justice
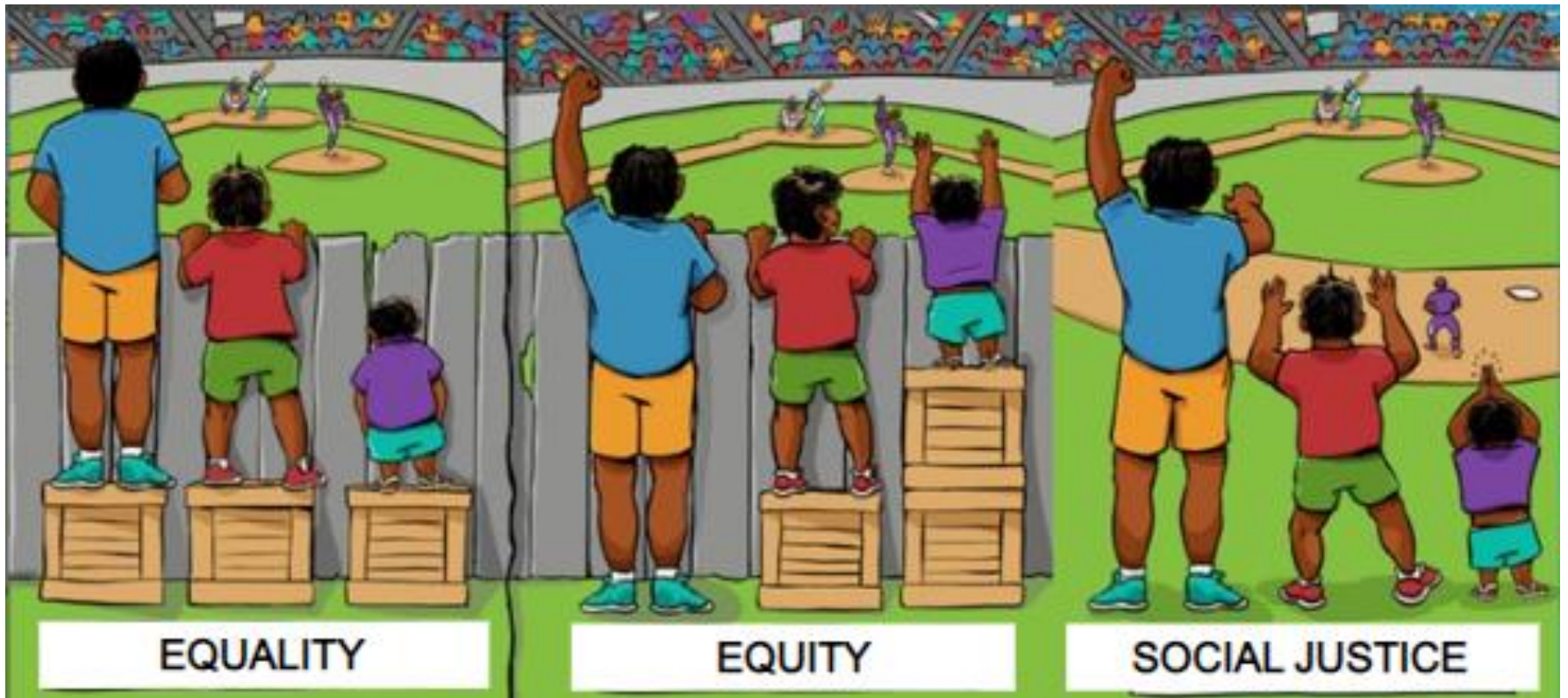
EQUALITY   EQUITY   SOCIAL JUSTICE

Barriers to/during Undergraduate Education
A few…

- Segregated and underfunded high schools
  - Force many Black students to play catch up in college taking longer to complete their studies

- Established networks of white academics
  - Easier for white students, particularly males, to get into the best universities
  - Learning about about scholarship opportunities

- Social and academic isolation in STEM
  - Relatively few Black students in STEM departments
    - No support system
    - Exclusion from important activities (study sessions, social)

Barriers to Graduate School – BEFORE Acceptance

A few...

- GREs
  - No statistical correlation to success in grad school
  - Exam is expensive; sending add'l copies expensive
  - Access to prep opportunities
- Application fees
  - Expensive - $75+ per school
  - Limits to 'best chance' (see Imposter Syndrome)
- Lack of access to The Network
  - No one to explain process, put in a good word
  - Letters of recommendation (Prestige bias)

Barriers to Grad School – AFTER Acceptance

Examples of individual experiences

- Accepted into PhD program
  - No $$ to move to new city
  - Deposits on housing prohibitive
  - Access to credit

First stipend check 90 days away

- No BIPOC family or friends in new city
- No BIPOC students/faculty in Department
- Safe, accessible housing
- No network
- How do I **do** this?

National Astronomy Consortium (NAC)
Goals

- Increase the number of underrepresented (BIPOC) students in Astronomy (and fields that support the Observatory)
    - More representative of U.S. population
- Increase NRAO's expertise/value
- Create safe, supportive space for BIPOC students
- Build substantial mentoring/support system
- Remove systemic barriers
    - GRE fees
    - Application fees (1-3 schools vs 5-6 schools)
    - Research opportunities, enabling successful grad school application
    - HBCU/Community college to R-1 grad school

THE NAC UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

THE NATIONAL ASTRONOMY CONSORTIUM (NAC) IS AN INNOVATIVE, COMPETITIVE PROGRAM DESIGNED TO PROVIDE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES & LONG-TERM MENTORING SUPPORT TO UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS IN STEM FIELDS.

Next steps?

- Stages
  - All-White
  - Token
  - Multi-cultural
  - "Diversity & Inclusion" ➡ Anti-racist
- Keep your passion for change alive
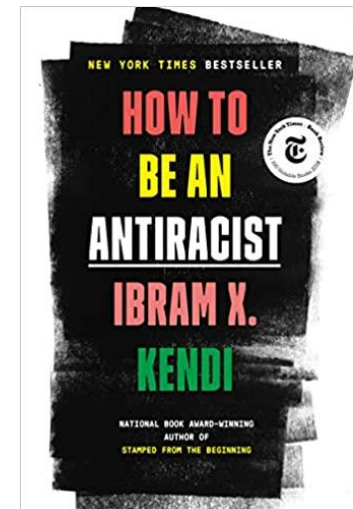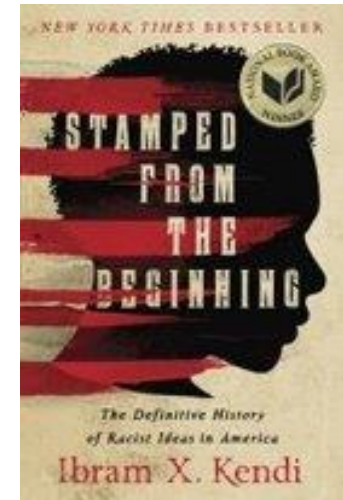
Goal

Anti-racist organization – Are we ready?

- Honest

- Willing to apologize when we get it wrong

- Watchful; vigilant

Resources

- The Employee Diversity Group

- Particles for Justice

  - [Resources]

- Anti-racism

  - [How to Build an Antiracist World] (article) - Dr. Ibram X. Kendi

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Insert Date-Meeting Name