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
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 participation
- **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

Inspired by “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” by Peggy McIntosh and Chair 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
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 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

• No BIPOC family or friends in new city

• No BIPOC students/faculty in Department

• Safe, accessible housing

• No network

• How do I do this?

First stipend check 90 days away
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
www.nrao.edu
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