

Necessary Actions to Establish Equity and Justice at Winchester University
as Depicted in Justin Simien's Film, *Dear White People*

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Introduction

A critical social justice lens is integral to understanding the dynamics of a school committed to multicultural education. This lens requires individual students and campus leadership to reflect, gain understanding, and act for equity according to a collective and democratic process. Unfortunately, most schools do not operate through this lens. The fictional account of Winchester University portrayed in *Dear White People*, demonstrates layers of oppression at work in complex ways. Winchester is a top-tier Ivy League school that has benefited from white supremacy for generations. White students can see themselves in all levels of the faculty and staff. Like most school settings in the United States, white voices are heard and considered primary in almost all social and academic settings. Viewers are introduced to Sam White at the beginning of the film as she is working to maintain the demographics of the mostly African American dorm from being lost to diversification. She jeers that the school is assuming that a regularly congregating group of mostly black students must be planning an insurrection! She wins the dorm presidency (with the help of some election fraud), and begins her term by kicking out any non-Armstrong Parker residents from the house dining hall.

Throughout the film, viewers are given glimpses of the varying experiences of people of color on the Winchester campus—from Lionel, the gay, afro bearing African American who knows very little about “black culture,” to Dean Fairbanks. It is clear from the experiences of the students and staff of color Winchester has layers of racial injustices. As tensions build throughout the story it all culminates in a release-your-inner-Negro-themed party that is thrown by the nearly all-white staff of *Pastiche*, the acclaimed campus satirical magazine. This essay attempts to speak into this complex situation with three important considerations to help enact social justice reform to reflect a just and equitable campus environment for all Winchester’s students.

Action One: New Leadership

The leadership of the school must engage in self-reflection around issues of multicultural education. It is clear the current president cannot engage with the necessary concepts. His quote, “Racism is over in America. The only people who are thinking about it are, I don’t know—Mexicans probably,” shows how disconnected he is with the actual happenings of this country and his own campus. Therefore, President Fletcher must be dismissed from his role. Winchester must select a new president that is willing to engage in the self-reflective exercises necessary to begin the process of social reconstruction. Similar to the assertions that a secondary school principal holds the necessary influence to support a long-standing commitment to cultural responsiveness (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, p. 1274), a university president is the likened position at the post-secondary level. Fletcher is clearly unable and unwilling to engage in the required reflection to begin to correct the generations of inequity Winchester continues to propagate. The new president would need to lead in self-reflective transparency. This practice, when embraced by school leadership, gives license for vulnerability and honesty at all levels of the organization (Sensoy and Ali-Khan, p. 514). This leadership transformation sets the stage for the next consideration to be implemented at Winchester.

Action Two: Implement Critical Social Justice Curriculum

The school must implement a campus-wide curriculum for Multicultural education. The decided coursework would be required for graduation in any major field of study. This curriculum would also be a recurring requirement for all faculty and staff. The Critical Social Justice curriculum would include four semesters of content (one semester each year of enrollment) titled:

CSJ 101: Developing a Critical Lens: Reflections on social positionality

CSJ 201: Applying Our Critical Lens: Seeing more than we can see

CSJ 301: Extending Our Critical Lens: Action for equity and justice

CSJ 401: Critical Lens Case Studies: Exercises for life beyond WU

First and foremost, the experience within this curriculum would define key terms of social justice. For example, the difference between racism and racial prejudice. Confusing these terms is a common misconception, but clearly defining them helps dominant groups begin to see the unequal distribution of social power. This quote from a white student at the end of the film demonstrates confusion of these terms: “I mean, the fact that we can joke about this proves we’ve moved on, obviously, right? I mean, this day and age, if you can’t take a joke...Shit, I’m just saying this is an attack on my freedom of speech. I’m the victim here.” Although he may experience some racial prejudice (as we all do) as a white man, he is not victimized in the same way as someone who experiences racism. Racism is racial prejudice that is backed by institutional power—a depth of momentum that cannot be felt by those that are a part of the dominant group. These required courses would create the necessary space to free participants to collectively consider these various perspectives and, most importantly, for non-dominant voices to be heard and taken seriously (Sensoy & DiAngelo, p. 201). It is important to note that cross-identity dialogue won’t change Winchester in and of itself. But, it will set the school up for the changes that will lead to a transformed space (Gorski, 2011). Then a collective and purely democratic process of doing the complex work of seeing and dismantling the structural oppressions of the Winchester University campus must occur. This work may uncover that everything—from housing and admissions practices to donor events—need reformed.

Action Three: Equity Audits for Accountability and Improvement

The final change that would need to be put in place at Winchester is regular, 3rd party equity audits to apply critical awareness to all aspects of the campus. This is a widely accepted expectation of culturally responsive schools that helps confirm that education spaces flex with new needs and perspectives of students (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, p. 1284). The intended goal is to *continuously* provide equitable access to resources for all students. Over the years of filtering all staff and students through a critical social justice curriculum, faculty would be held accountable to make necessary changes to conform the curriculum they teach and their pedagogies with their new learning—instituting campus-wide Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP). This pedagogy is directly linked to culture—a fluid concept; therefore, it must mirror its subject in fluidity. This will allow a continual refining of the action outcomes to eliminate unintentional marginalization of all intersecting identities (Alim & Paris, p. 11). Alim and Paris continue that CSPs must align with asset-focused teaching for pluralistic outcomes (read: non-White, non-middle-class-centered), not be entrenched in outdated or simplistic cultural representations, and always be willing to address social justice problems even within the CSP framework itself. To borrow a for-profit business term—"continuous improvement" is supported when professors and students work together to critique current practice, continuing to raise a collective critical consciousness. The data collected during an equity audit helps inform future decisions about structures and policies to add or remove to create the necessary space for this continuing work.

As a white, cis-gendered, able-bodied, man, I see the irony that I place myself in the role of an Ivy-League school's equity consultant. Even as I am implicated in my critiques of Winchester University, the school must make changes, and clearly new learning needs to occur.

At the film's conclusion, President Fletcher says, "I'm sorry. We don't condone this egregious event. Believe me. Dean Fairbanks and I are looking into different ways to address issues of diversity." This is nowhere near sufficient. The learning I have done in a single multicultural education course has opened my eyes to the discrepancies that some are oblivious to and other are outraged by. It is for these reasons, as a social justice advocate, I recommend to the board new school leadership in replacing President Fletcher, an organization-wide Critical Social Justice curriculum that further raises critical consciousness in all social settings and curriculums, and measuring progress through regular equity audits. Lionel's article in the Independent Observer at the end of the film poses the question, "Can there be harmony?" The answer is yes, but only after structures for equitable access to power and opportunity are in place. Winchester must work to establish an equitable and just space, *then* they can begin the work for conflict resolution and peace. [1,381]

References

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