Communication Equity Audits:

Eliminating Racialized Responsiveness among College Admissions Counselors

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HACK THE GATES
RADICALLY REIMAGINE ADMISSIONS

THE PROBLEM: RACISM AND COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

Despite the growth of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at colleges and universities across the country, racism within admissions offices continues to frustrate the educational and professional aspirations of students of color. This can be observed in the recruitment and evaluation policies and practices instituted by senior admissions administrators as well as racial biases (implicit and explicit) and discriminatory behavior on the part of individual admissions counselors. Yet, there is no convincing evidence that colleges and universities are seriously working to ensure that their admissions offices are free from racially discriminatory policies, practices, and personnel.

Conventional diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, such as the now ubiquitous implicit bias trainings, can be well intentioned, but because they do not address the multilayered and multifaceted character of racism, they are incapable of doing so. Often touted by colleges and universities as evidence of a meaningful commitment to a racially equitable admissions process, most of their DEI initiatives are not rigorously assessed. In fact, the institutions that attempt to assess their DEI initiatives typically rely on surveys and other self-reports. This is a deeply flawed approach. Social scientists have long documented the problems with trying to understand the prevalence of racism solely or largely through such means.[1] Indeed, it is nonsensical to assess the incidence of racism and racial discrimination within admissions offices by asking those most complicit in its perpetration (i.e., admissions counselors; 80% of whom are white) to disclose whether and how frequently their racist ideas influence their interactions with and evaluations of Black students and non-Black students of color. Yet, this is precisely what results when admissions offices continue to rely on implicit bias trainings to combat racism.[2] Even the Academy of Management, comprised of nearly

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[1] Bonilla-Silva, E. (2001). *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-civil Rights Era*, Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, CO. https://www.rienner.com/title/White_Supremacy_and_Racism_in_the_Post_Civil_Rights_Era

[2] Khan, Jonathan. (2017). *Race on the Brain: What Implicit Bias Gets Wrong About the Struggle for Racial Justice*, Columbia University Press: New York, NY. http://cup.columbia.edu/book/race-on-the-brain/9780231184243

20,000 management and organization scholars, recently reminded the public that implicit bias trainings are largely ineffective.[3] More importantly, these trainings do nothing to address the comprehensiveness of racial domination within white-administered organizations.[4] As such, for admissions offices to operate in an antiracist manner, they must adopt alternative approaches. Two recent and widely reported nationwide studies investigating the college admissions process show how racially discriminatory policies and practices can thrive despite the presence of conventional diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

In the first study, higher education scholars Crystal Han, Ozan Jaquette, and Karina Salazar found that colleges and universities' recruitment visits tend to target whiter and more affluent high schools, to the detriment of lower income and Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students.[5] Regardless of any economic pressures to maximize recruitment expenditures, these findings certainly betray the commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion that these institutions assuredly profess. And while the pattern that these scholars detected is unlikely the result of a cabal of racial bigots conspiring to quash the college dreams of lower income students of color, it does not preclude the possibility that various admissions administrators responsible for identifying high schools for recruitment visits knew precisely the racial and social class implications of their decisions. Still, racism and its terrible harm does not hinge on intentionality. The students whose high schools were studiously avoided as sites of recruitment are adversely affected irrespective of admissions professionals' desire to produce that outcome. Indeed, the outcome—not the intention, must be the principal focus when attempting to address patterns of racial inequity in admissions offices and beyond.

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[3] The Academy of Management. (16 June 2020). "Science explains why unconscious bias training won't reduce workplace racism. Here's what will." https://www.fastcompany.com/90515678/science-explains-why-unconscious-bias-training-wont-reduce-workplace-racism-heres-what-will

[4] Ray, Victor. (2019). A Theory of Racialized Organizations. *American Sociological Review,* 84(1): 26-53. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0003122418822335

[5] Han, C., Jaquette, O., & Salazar, K. (2019). Recruiting the Out-of-State University: Off-Campus Recruiting by Public Research Universities. https://emraresearch.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/joyce_report.pdf

In the second study, sociologist Ted Thornhill, utilizing an experimental audit design, found that white college admissions counselors were significantly more likely to ignore the emails of Black prospective students who communicated their commitment to advocating for racial justice compared to those who did not.[6] This discriminatory racial screening occurred at the inquiry stage of the admissions process, strongly suggesting that racially equitable treatment at the application stage would be elusive. The unfortunate irony is that these Black students are exactly those most likely to contribute to moving historically and predominantly white colleges and universities toward greater racial equity. And it is all but certain that the admissions counselors who ignored these Black prospective students' emails were employed at institutions that claim to value diversity, equity, and inclusion. Colleges and universities should be concerned with how their admissions counselors treat all Black prospective students and applicants, as well as their counterparts of color. In a brief follow-up essay,[7] Thornhill suggested that the way to identify and prevent racially discriminatory responsiveness is for admissions administrators to audit the email communication of the staff within their offices. That proposal was likely met with displeasure on the part of many admissions professionals, who often profess a value for diversity, equity and inclusion. These audits should still happen.

There is no evidence that colleges and universities routinely audit the email communication of their admissions professionals or their planned recruitment visits to ensure that they are not acting in a racially discriminatory manner. This is a problem, because a large and decades-long body of empirical research shows that Blacks and non-Black people of color routinely receive inequitable treatment (including lower levels of responsiveness) across a broad range of social domains. Social scientists have consistently documented racial discrimination in, for example, housing and labor markets, retail and dining settings, within religious organizations, and as noted above,

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[6] Thornhill, T. (2018). We Want Black Students, Just Not You: How White Admissions Counselors Screen Black Prospective Students. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity,* 5(4), 456-470. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2332649218792579

[7] Thornhill, T. (2018). Black student activists face penalty in college admissions. https://theconversation.com/black-student-activists-face-penalty-in-college-admissions-101009

in the college admissions process. As a result, two things are evident. First, significant racial discrimination continues to exist across and within social institutions and organizations. Second, colleges and universities are not immune to these practices of racial inequity. Therefore, it is likely that some number of admissions professionals and organizational units at nearly every college and university are to varying degrees engaging in or unwitting vessels of racially discriminatory behavior (whether emanating from implicit bias, explicitly racist views, and/or seemingly race-neutral policies and practices). It is also likely that this racism is disrupting some students' desire to pursue a higher education, as well as compromising their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Scrutinizing the email and other recruitment and outreach practices of these organizational gatekeepers can help create a more transparent and antiracist admissions process.

A SOLUTION: COMMUNICATION EQUITY AUDITS

Colleges and universities know well the imperative of academic assessment and financial auditing. Accreditation bodies, states, and the federal government require routine, comprehensive documentation, assessment, and reporting of all manner of organizational policies and practices, financial data, and student outcomes. Yet, few colleges and universities apply a similar level of scrutiny to their policies, practices, and personnel for the purposes of ensuring racial equity.[8]

Fortunately, the ability to assess whether specific offices and individuals are engaged in patterned, communication-based racial discrimination already exists at nearly all institutions of higher education. Colleges and universities must simply ask the right questions and utilize appropriate tools to reveal extant patterns. For instance, do the admissions professionals at your institution respond equitably to the emails of Black, Indigenous, Latinx,

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[8] Over the past 10-15 years researchers such as Dr. Estela Mara Bensimon and her colleagues have convinced dozens of colleges and universities that there is considerably more that can and should be done with available data to identify and eliminate racial inequities in student outcomes. The emphasis here has been interrogating extant institutional data with a race-conscious lens to ensure that seemingly race-neutral programs, opportunities, and conventional higher education outcomes do not hide and maintain racial inequities.

Muslim, and Asian prospective students and applicants? Most admissions administrators would be unable to readily respond to such a question with empirical evidence, but most possess the ability to ascertain this information.

Below I offer a brief outline of the communication equity audit[9] (CEA), which I define as a rigorous examination of the electronic communication of employees in order to identify, discourage, and ultimately eliminate racialized responsiveness which contravenes legal and organizational prohibitions against identity-based discrimination. Colleges and universities that adopt and maintain a communication equity auditing program recognize that authentically diverse, truly equitable, and proactively inclusive colleges and universities regularly and rigorously examine their electronic communication policies and practices to ensure they are not generating or sustaining racial inequities.

In the college admissions context, the prototypical example of a communication equity audit focuses on the email communication of admissions counselors to ensure they are equally responsive to students across sociodemographic groups.[10] The basic steps of a CEA are straightforward.

1. First, the college or university email client administrator (or an appropriate designee) would extract the date sent, time sent, student identifier, and recipient name (or email address) for all emails originating from students with profiles in the respective institutions' admissions management system.
2. The second step would be to append students' and recipients' self-reported race and gender to the data file using the student identifier and employee identification number, respectively.

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[9] Communication equity audits (CEAs) should not be confused with equity audits (EAs) which typically rely on survey instruments, which may or may not be administered as part of a larger organizational climate study. While they can be valuable, EAs are an insufficient option for colleges and universities seeking to prevent, document, and eradicate the most hidden, subtle, and resilient forms of identity-based discrimination on campus.

[10] Students working within offices of admissions should also have their email communication audited for the purposes of ensuring racial equity.

3. The third step would involve appending the date sent and time sent for those cases where students' emails were responded to.
4. Fairly simple statistical analyses would then determine the presence of racialized responsiveness on the part of one or more admissions counselors by race and gender.[11]

In order for communication equity auditing to eliminate racialized responsiveness within admissions offices it needs formal and enthusiastic support from senior administrators; key stakeholder involvement (i.e., students, faculty, staff, and administrators); transparent development, use, reporting, and quality-control; appropriate sanctions for employees with a pattern of racial discrimination (up to and including employment termination); and consistent and equitable enforcement to maximize admissions counselors' compliance with expectations of racially equitable communication practices. Communication equity auditing should begin with a historical analysis of the responsiveness of all admissions staff to identify the extent of racialized responsiveness within a given admissions office. This will inform senior administrators whether there is an ongoing pattern of racialized responsiveness among certain admissions counselors that must be immediately addressed.

Social scientists, community groups, non-profit organizations, and government agencies have used the experimental audit method for decades for the purposes of advancing racial equity. That colleges and universities have not adopted this long-validated, equity-enhancing tool is unfortunate because communication equity audits can also improve at least two related metrics about which most colleges and universities claim to care deeply, namely the recruitment and retention of underrepresented students of color,

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[11] Institutions would have the option of utilizing additional variables within their respective admissions management systems. The communication equity audit delineated herein does not address the content of admissions counselors' emails. While institutions could devise a means to audit the content of admissions counselors' emails, which I contend would likely yield evidence of identity-based differential treatment, such an undertaking would be considerably more resource intensive and also present design, implementation, and interpretation challenges. Still, it is worth serious consideration, particularly if a communication equity audit reveals significant statistical evidence of racialized responsiveness.

particularly Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students. The bottom line is this: admissions counselors' responsiveness should not vary by the race or gender of the student nor by that of the counselor. Without auditing admissions counselors' emails, you cannot know the extent of racialized responsiveness; studies have already shown that it is occurring.

There are ethical and equity reasons why senior admissions administrators should move expeditiously to implement communication equity auditing. As most colleges and universities proudly and publicly profess a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, it is essential that admissions offices have robust and adequately resourced assessment and accountability measures in place to ensure that their admissions staff treat prospective students and applicants of color equitably.

Still, some admissions professionals, including some administrators, will likely resent that their email communication with students would be audited for the purposes of ensuring racial equity. That is to be expected. Indeed, most individuals would prefer not to be monitored such that deviation from legal and organizational expectations of non-discrimination could result in disciplinary action up to and including termination. Yet, if an individual does not engage in racialized responsiveness (i.e., racial discrimination), they have no reason to be concerned. This is because a fair, clear, collectively, and transparently developed policy would specify the actions to be taken when documented patterns of racialized responsiveness are detected. Therefore, vigorous and sustained opposition to communication equity auditing on the part of admissions professionals can reasonably be viewed as 1) a desire to maintain the prerogative to engage in racial discrimination unencumbered and without consequence, and/or 2) an expectation that Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Muslim, and Asian students (as well as their parents and advocates) blindly trust that they will be afforded equitable treatment. Both of these racist positions must be viewed as unacceptable.

CONCLUSION

Most businesses claim to value and trust their employees, yet they still verify, test, monitor, investigate, scrutinize, and, yes, audit them and their work. They sometimes refer to the process as "quality assurance," "loss/fraud prevention," or "continuous improvement." The point is that it is universal business practice to ensure that employees are adhering to relevant laws and organizational policies and practices. Colleges and universities should be doing the same with respect to ensuring racial equity. Communication equity auditing can help ensure that Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Muslim, and Asian students are accorded racially equitable treatment in the admissions process. Without communication equity auditing, admissions offices are broadcasting, albeit unwittingly in some cases, the absurd and harmful view that their admissions professionals are somehow different from the general public in their subscription to racist ideas and their propensity to act on them—there is no evidence that this is the case. Indeed, practices of racial inequity emanate from admissions offices, and a fair amount likely manifests through admissions counselors' electronic communication (or lack thereof) with students of color. Senior admissions administrators have the ability and moral obligation to immediately begin to rectify this racially inequitable status quo. The question is, are they willing?

Acknowledgements

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The Joyce Foundation