

Can We Be Better Allies and Advocates? A Roadmap for Institutions to Challenge Systemic Racism

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Abstract

Black woman and a college president, Dr. Tuajuanda Jordan, is frequently asked how to be a better ally and advocate — for people of color, for women, for our students. It has been observed that institutions in higher education, K-12, the non-profit sector and corporate America have struggled to find their footing. This article explores the difference between allyship and advocacy, defines systemic racism through the lens of institutions of higher education, and offers a roadmap for social impact sector organizations of all kinds to address these challenges.

Introduction

As a Black woman and college president, I'm often asked how to be a better ally and advocate — for people of color, women, and our students. I've also watched as institutions in higher education, K-12, the non-profit sector, and corporate America have struggled to find their footing. Many have put their feet in their mouths. Many have offered platitudes, but not action.

George Floyd's murderer was found guilty. This was a measure of accountability, and some reforms continue to move forward. But for those leaders — CEO's, fellow College Presidents, Executive Directors, coaches, teachers — who want to challenge structural racism, the question still hangs in the air: *what does it mean to be a real ally? What does it mean to be an advocate for people of color?*

I am a biochemist, not a cultural anthropologist, sociologist, or psychologist. I am a member of the "other" world. As a woman, I represent 51% of the U.S. population. As a Black woman, I represent 6.6% of that population. As a Black woman, PhD biochemist, who is also the president of a primarily white institution, I am one from another world. I have managed to survive, and I daresay thrive, in the world of others. I know a little bit about allies and advocates, as well as allyship and advocacy.

Are You an "Ally" or an "Advocate"?

Let's start with a relatively simple question: **Is there a difference between being an ally versus an advocate?** An "ally" is someone with whom the affected has a relationship. Allies usually offer support, comfort, and/or help. On the other hand, an "advocate" is one that

pleads the cause or promotes the interests of those affected. As the affected gain confidence and understand the structures in place, the best advocate will provide avenues, channels, and opportunities for the affected to speak with their own voice to those “in power” to make positive impact. The best advocate educates the affected about the structures, opens the doors, and helps the affected navigate the unfamiliar or obstructive structures that suppressed voices and oppressed groups of people.

Both allyship and advocacy require mutual respect and trust. The history of this nation ensures that “trust” is not the place we generally begin potential relationships and partnerships with “others.” Nonetheless, “trust” must exist if we are to get to better the nation.

Let’s take, for instance, engineering and the sciences. If you look at the data, it’s clear that the sciences are not nearly as diverse as they should be. Today, the sciences consist of only 28% women and 13% minorities. This is a dramatically lower representation than their share of the overall population. The statistics in engineering are even worse. These groups are clearly excluded from critical sciences and engineering career paths.

So what?

Lack of diversity hampers creativity and innovation and, importantly, leads to disparities and fosters distrust. This distrust gets amplified, especially following periods of social unrest like the last year, when those in power are quick to respond with platitudes that say nothing, are short-lived, or remain unfulfilled. These are typically words describing sentiments without real calls to action, using all the latest catch phrases:

*we will be an anti-racist community
we are all in this together
we will change our curriculum
we will increase our diverse hires by 1000% within three years
... on and on.*

Minorities see this and we’re incredulous. “*Really? All we needed was the power of the pen to make everything good and right?*”. Many allies and advocates who make these pronouncements don’t even understand the true depth of what they claim they will all of a sudden fix!

Women and minorities need *real* allies and *real* advocates.

What they are trying to fix for underrepresented minorities is deep. How deep? It’s so deep that it is a system that essentially touches every aspect of our lived experiences. It *is* the *system* of *racism*. Some call it “systemic racism”. However, a cultural psychologist told me that the term “systemic racism” is redundant as “racism” is by definition, a system.

Systemically, racism is the interrelation of individual, cultural, interpersonal, institutional, and structural factors that create and reproduce racial hierarchies—a term which cannot be, in the Euro-American context, divorced from “White supremacy”. This system of racism reproduces

itself from the top-down and the bottom-up since structural racism influences institutional and cultural racism which, in turn, influences individual racism. The same holds true in the reverse order.

Context: How Institutional Racism Takes Place

Let's take an example of these levels of racism from higher education.

Professor Doe is on the faculty of a primarily white institution. He has little expectation of his black students; they don't appear to be as smart as his white students and seem unmotivated. This is individual racism.

Decisions as to what classes the students need to close the apparent achievement gap and satisfy their general education requirements are decided by the faculty who design the content and integration of those courses. It must be noted that in the US, almost 73% of full-time faculty is white. This generates curriculum through a narrow lens that primarily focuses on the lived experiences of the majority and results in cultural racism. The department chairs pass along the decision to the dean.

The dean, the provost, and the president meet to discuss the institutional funding needs. In their discussion, they realize that to obtain the funds they need, they will have to raise tuition. Raising tuition disproportionately affects underrepresented minorities, especially African Americans and Hispanics, who generally do not have access to wealth. This is because policies have been developed to restrict wealth access and accrual. This is structural racism; the results of which is a leaky pipeline with underprepared underrepresented students who appear to be unmotivated to engage in the material presented to them.

From this example we begin to see the integration of the levels of racism that perpetuate the problem and how they might translate to your own sector -- corporate, non-profit, government or otherwise.

As leaders, how do we challenge this institutional racism? I sincerely believe that to be the best ally or advocate you can be for an underrepresented minority, you must take the time to acknowledge the system that is racism. Furthermore, we must all resolve to dismantle it. That is the only way to induce lasting change. To get there, we *must embrace and respect the diversity of who we are and include every voice in the conversation.*

Here's how.

Social Innovation and Solution: A Roadmap for Challenging Racism in Your Institution

As leaders, we must first create an environment where all who enter will thrive. To ensure that all thrive and that the institution is sustained over the long-term, EQUITY must be at the center of EVERYTHING we do. Everything.

What does equity mean? It means meeting individuals where they are and doing what is necessary to facilitate their success. It means defining success with criteria that do not advantage one group over another. It means you must examine and revise what you do, how you do it, and how success is evaluated. It means you have to listen to your stakeholders, hear and act on what they say they need to feel supported, and how you should present that support to them. It means you must look at your institution's policies, procedures, and metrics for success through different lenses. Analyze the data. If the data shows disparities, know that it is a failing on your part, not that of the affected individual or group. Equity means holding each other accountable.

Creating an environment where all thrive needs placing EQUITY at the center of everything we do. This is not simply to placate the calls for social justice across the nation. It challenges the very foundation upon which structural racism is built. It will produce a woke citizenry and masses of people who collectively can change the structures that came into existence after Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. The masses can then work together to dismantle all structures that support and perpetuate the socio-political foundation of racism, ensuring an inclusively diverse and equitable society.

Second, we must all evolve from thinking about "D, E and I" as separate endeavors. Instead of DEI, I refer to the work as I.D.E.A.A: Inclusive Diversity, with Equity, Access, and Accountability. Access is not a term most of us have associated with our diversity initiatives in the past, but it should have been. Access is about understanding who gains admission to the "Club" and how; then working to address any inequities. Recall my earlier example about the interrelatedness of the levels of racism. I spoke about tuition and racism's control over wealth. This wealth impacts access by determining who can pay for college and how prepared they are. Until we address the root causes of racism, we will never be able to adequately address the pipeline and achievement gap issues no matter what we do internally at our institutions and organizations.

The second "A" in IDEAA stands for Accountability. To advance any goals, there must be a way to measure progress. Thus, **metrics**, both qualitative and quantitative, must be developed and made visible. **Progress** must be evaluated, assessed, and rewarded. The Washington Post's tagline is "Democracy dies in darkness". To move these efforts forward, perhaps institutional taglines should be "inclusive diversity happens where there is light". That should get us moving with a greater sense of urgency.

Finally, you must take steps as an individual.

In order to push our institutions beyond racism, those who want change must be empowered to engage. We must first, however, examine our individual selves and personal biases to become cognizant of the lenses through which we interact with the world and make adjustments accordingly. It will take commitment and consistency to do that. Few people ever admit they have biases, but we all do. The challenge is how to recognize them and mitigate their impact.

The best allies and advocates listen first. Listen more. Talk less. Do more. They are seekers of knowledge and truth. They are empathetic. They acknowledge disparities. They work

collaboratively with the underrepresented to effect change. They hold themselves and others accountable.

Conclusion

To effectively move this country to a better place and better diversify all our organizations, we must all be working to achieve the singular goal of dismantling racism, sexism and other “-isms” to create a more just, humane, and equitable society for all. We can all be better allies; we can all be better advocates. We can all create a culture of effective allyship and advocacy.

As individuals, use your voice and work to change the culture of your environment. Cultural change leads to institutional change. Racism is a socio-political construct designed to accrue and maintain power. Organizations and institutions, made up of enlightened and determined individuals, have tremendous power. When we band together individually and institutionally, we not only change our institutions as leaders but can compel this nation to be better.

All you need to do is take that first step.