



## When Students Listen: A Co-Constructed Autoethnography of Graduate Student Activists Eradicating Racism in Higher Education

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### Abstract

Although anti-racist and decolonial scholars in community psychology have shared valuable ways professionals can promote racial justice and contend with potential barriers (e.g., Lykes et al., 2019; Makkawi, 2017), little consideration has been given to graduate students' resistance to institutional oppression. This paper explores the experiences of five graduate student activists resisting institutional racism at their institution. Through co-constructed autoethnography, it provides narratives addressing three central themes: (1) isolation, racism, and community-building; (2) direct actions and institutional pushback; and (3) internal conflicts and endurance. It considers how graduate students, as individuals who are structurally disempowered in higher education, persist in the face of oppressive institutional structures to challenge them, risks they experience in doing so, and techniques and resources that aid them. It concludes with a discussion of the importance of embracing graduate student activism to advance anti-racist praxis in community psychology.

**Acknowledgements.** We extend our love and deep admiration to all of our fellow organizers and mentors who resisted alongside us, activists who came before us who carved the path for our work, and those who will take the torch after us and will continue to "set the world aflame" as the Boston College and Jesuit tradition calls us to do. Specifically, we would like to thank Bryn Spielvogel for her stealth edits, and Dr. Leigh Patel, for continuing to be a guide and champion for our collective praxis.

Contemporary anti-racist and decolonial movements—including Black Lives Matter, the DREAMers movement, and Rhodes Must Fall—have prompted more psychologists to reckon with institutional racism and colonialism in higher education (Hargons et al., 2017; Kessi, 2017; Pillay, 2016).

Community psychology as a speciality in the United States emerged at a time of sustained agitation for racial justice and related forms of social justice that bore similarities to today's environment (Lykes & McGillen, in press; Meritt et al., 1999). Despite this history, there has been critique within the profession of scholars' and practitioners' lack of personal engagement with anti-racist and decolonial movements, given community psychology's stated commitment to social action, community empowerment, and

pursuit of equity and justice (e.g., Pillay, 2017; Ratele & Malherbe, 2020). The profession's failure to confront white supremacy has been specifically criticized (Furman et al., 2019; Sonn et al., 2017).

To support community psychologists and trainees in becoming more involved in local anti-racist movements and to continue to push the profession toward transformative forms of praxis, anti-racist and decolonial scholars have documented a number of strategies community psychologists may use to help resist and mitigate institutional racism and colonialism in universities and colleges (e.g., Lykes et al., 2019; Makkawi, 2017; Pillay, 2016; Ratele & Malherbe, 2020). Little consideration has been given, however, to the unique perspectives of community

psychology graduate students involved in campus activism, including strengths they exhibit and constraints they must navigate given their lower power relative to faculty and administrators within university affairs (Chesler et al., 2005).

A few recent exceptions to this oversight have appeared in the last decade as community psychology graduate students have begun to be seen and communicate from their standpoints campus activists and individuals engaged in everyday anti-racist resistance in higher education. Centrally, Bell and colleagues (2020) reflected as an international collective of community psychologists of color who have contested racism and colonialism in their universities in South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Mahwahi (2017), Kessi (2017), and Lykes et al. (2019) as faculty allies have also documented the significance they perceive in students' activism, a reflection echoed by students Távara and Moodley (2017). To date, however, no in-depth exploration has appeared in the community psychology literature concerning graduate student activism in higher education and its significance for the profession.

In this article, we take the position that as community psychologists seek to engage in and foster liberatory praxis, it is imperative that we not only create counterspaces in the classroom (e.g., Case & Hunter, 2012) but also work to eradicate institutional policies and practices that bolster racist, colonial, and neoliberal ideologies and structures in higher education (Sonn et al., 2017). We assert in this article that it is important for community psychologists to consider the assets graduate students possess as activists, as well as constraints and risks they face in listening to the profession's principles and answering the call to address injustice in society and on their campuses. To serve these aims, the article presents a critical, co-constructed autoethnography of five graduate student

activists who organized together in a collective known as Eradicate #BostonCollegeRacism (EBCR). The group mobilized together from 2015–2018 and focused on addressing institutional racism within a private, predominantly White university in the historically liberal northeastern United States during the early years of the Black Lives Matter movement and its permeation into higher education (Douglas et al., 2020) and psychology in the United States (Hargons et al., 2017; Winerman, 2016).

## *Our Organizational History*

We situate our work within the larger tradition of student movements seeking racial justice within the United States, explicating connections to community psychology and introduce the context in which we organized. Although the academy has been a site for the legitimization and reproduction of racial inequality in the United States (Wilder 2014; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Ross, 2016; Patel, 2015; Bhattacharyya et al., 2014), it has also been a space where students and faculty have mobilized resources to resist racism and other forms of oppression (Bhattacharyya et al., 2014; Ferguson, 2017; Lykes & McGillen, in press; Rhoads, 2016). Our organizing began as a response to heartbreak and anger that resulted from the highly visible murders of Black people by law enforcement in the early 2010s that sparked the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement (Taylor, 2016). Like many students across the country, we recognized that oppression has historically been housed and legitimated ideologically through academic institutions, where the interests of those in power dictate the needs and realities of subordinated groups (Ahmed, 2006; Bhattacharyya et al., 2017; Simmons 2020). We were one of over

80 U.S. higher education institutions<sup>7</sup> during this period in which students organized sustained movements to address institutional racism.

We are a multidisciplinary coalition who situates our work within the work of community and liberation psychology. Our organizing aimed to counter oppression through naming injustice, disrupting mainstream ideologies, and motivating individuals to seek change and imagine an anti-racist institution. In this way, we aligned ourselves with central values of community and liberation psychology, which aim to foster critical consciousness, liberation, and social change (Montero, 2007; Lykes & McGillen, in press; Martín-Baró, 1994). Moreover, we aimed in our organizing to pursue anti-racist praxis, or a dialectical process of action and reflection directed towards social transformation (Freire 1973/1964; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). In these ways, our work aimed to leverage our skills as psychologists and affiliated professionals in training to advance anti-racism in our university.

EBCR was an extra-institutional organization and grew into a multi-racial collective of Boston College (BC) students, staff, faculty, and administrators, as well as supporters and volunteers around the country. At its peak, approximately 2,000 people followed EBCR's Facebook page, which had a reach of over 34,000 page views, and 888 people subscribed to EBCR's mailing list. Our website received over 23,000 page views over a three-year period, and over two dozen people regularly attended potlucks and weekly meetings. Our overarching mission was to "call truth to power and motivate individuals within systems to change policies and procedures which materially impact people of color in adverse ways" (EBCR, n.d.), and to

create an alternate, affirming space for people of color to heal and imagine a better BC together. We primarily used the following tools to pursue our institutional goals, which we elaborate on in the narratives that follow: (1) public scholarship, (2) direct action, and (3) community-building. Our work was featured in NPR (Caputo, 2015), *The Boston Globe* (Krantz, 2016), *Al Jazeera* (Wilson, 2015), local and campus news outlets, and disciplinary outlets such as the American Psychological Association's *gradPSYCH Magazine* (Zimmerman, 2015) and *Monitor on Psychology* (Winerman, 2016). Although EBCR began as a response to institutional racism, we align ourselves with all movements and organizations that aim to dismantle systemic oppression.

## Method

This article draws on the autoethnographic work of others, specifically critical co-constructed autoethnography (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012), to collectively examine our work as five graduate students engaged in anti-racist praxis. Autoethnography situates knowledge within personal experience, prompting scholars to re-examine familiar events while interrogating them in social, cultural, and political context (Denzin, 2003). Below we juxtapose individual narratives to illustrate the multiple roles of graduate students and student movements in anti-racist praxis. The critical co-constructed autoethnographic process allowed for greater solidarity among us while revealing narrative truths within the events reported. We also draw on adrienne maree brown's (2017) sentiment regarding collaboration in organizing that "[t]here is an art to flocking: staying separate enough not to crowd each other, aligned enough to maintain a shared direction, and cohesive enough to always move towards each other."

<sup>7</sup> See [thedemands.org](http://thedemands.org) for a list of U.S. student organizations and campus movements and their

formal demands for racial justice during this period.

This process began through an examination of our previous work, including archival research, media statements, infographics, and meeting minutes. As we joined together to better understand our lived realities as organizers within the group, we each drew a visual representation of our time within EBCR. We created and made meaning of the drawings as Echo Images (Bhattacharyya et al., 2020), an arts-based inquiry technique in which researchers create images to summarize their understanding of an experience, topic, or story to more deeply explore their positions about concepts which were salient to them. Then we presented, compared, and contrasted the images of our experiences. This allowed us to explore our embodied, non-verbal experiences, and helped us to tap deeper into our salient memories of EBCR. We identified themes that captured shared experiences that we agreed were central to our praxis. Individually, we wrote narratives regarding each theme and engaged in an iterative process of sharing, reading, discussing, and re-writing to construct reading the singular narrative presented here. Collectively, this manuscript represents an engaged dialogue that recognizes the relational and ever-developing nature of anti-racist praxis.

This piece comes after a two-year pause of our collective work within EBCR. It is situated within a historic re-mobilization of the Black Lives Matter movement following the police and white vigilante murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Tony McDade in 2019. As described below, a major contributor to the pause was the naming of ways sexism and patriarchy circulated within the group. Nonetheless, we are re-engaging with BC (EBCR, 2020) and current student movements, as well as reflecting on the broader relevance our experiences have for community psychologists and trainees who wish to address racism within higher education. We

also recognize the benefits of pausing, which provides an important opportunity for reflection (Patel, 2015). In the sections that follow, we provide personal narratives around three central themes: (1) isolation, racism, and community-building; (2) direct actions and institutional pushback; and (3) internal conflicts and endurance.

## **Isolation, Racism, & Community-building**

In the following section, Kimberly Ashby and Gloria McGillen describe the context of institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal racism on our campus and reflect on the isolation born of these forms of racism among students of Color and white students, and our initial efforts to build community around combating racism on campus and beyond.

### *Kimberly's Narrative*

I (Kimberly) am a Black, Afro-Indigenous, queer, cis-woman. I joined EBCR during my third year in the counseling psychology doctoral program because the challenges of life on my campus as a Black woman necessitated that I identify and engage with collaborators who made me feel valued and who felt called to challenge the racist realities and isolation that contributed to making me feel unseen at our institution. Black women have a history of being made to feel invisible in predominantly White institutions of education (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012; Matthew, 2016; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). I was EBCR's Visuals Co-coordinator, often engaging in the creation of infographics and using the arts as a way to build community among organizers. I also placed myself on the frontlines of many direct actions, often acting as a speaker at rallies and protests. Furthermore, I facilitated many of EBCR's potlucks, welcoming in new organizers and encouraging the development of interpersonal relationships amongst the group members.

In 2015, I was coping with the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice, while attending an institution that had little to say about the murder of Black people by the police. While I was a student in the Critical Race course that sparked the EBCR movement, I was one of many students who received a letter (Mogan, & Maturana Sendoya, 2015) from the Thea Bowman AHANA and Intercultural Center and Office of the Dean of Students urging the campus community to "stand up to confront racist and bigoted behaviors." This statement, in light of my university's silence on issues of racism, did not feel comforting. Rather, it felt infuriating that my university would issue such a statement, while at the same time refusing to acknowledge the institutional and interpersonal racism thriving on campus.

In 2015, institutional racism existed in many manifestations on my campus. For instance, faculty recruitment and retention of faculty of color was low, with 86 percent of faculty identifying as White and only 14 percent of tenured faculty identifying as people of color (Cedeno, 2015). Rather than setting specific targets for faculty of color, an administration claimed, "We don't have specific targets - we just keep at it every year." Like the faculty, the Board of Trustees was overwhelmingly white, with students reporting that out of 54 people, only a handful of people on the Board of Trustees were people of color. When it came to the student body, only 32 percent of students identified as Black, Latinx, Asian, or Native American (Boston College, 2015). The university newspaper reported that Black and African American students indicated the most dissatisfaction with their experiences at the university. In a 2010 survey in which one third of the university's Black male population was sampled, 43 percent of Black male students felt that they had been racially profiled by the campus police department (Black Student Experience Project Team, 2012). Furthermore, the university maintained biased admission processes for

undergraduates, particularly in the form of supplemental essays in which applicants socialized in predominantly White, private, Jesuit schools were rewarded. Similarly, the curriculum at the university was overwhelmingly eurocentric in terms of course content and readings. The university also maintained procedural barriers to free speech, such as punishing students who engage in unsanctioned protests. Moreover, at the time, the university neglected to release campus climate data that had been collected in the previous years, claiming that the data were not "publicly accessible," (Longworth & McGee, 2015). When members of Eradicate requested the data, the request was ignored.

In response to these racist realities, and in light of the letter sent encouraging campus community members to confront racism, I and many other students from my Critical Race Theory class found it appropriate to take some form of action. However, we saw the necessity of looking to the university's history of anti-racist activism to determine the ways that students before us have mobilized. We learned that in 1969, the Black Student Forum was created and the same year, a number of demands were made, including (a) recruitment of Black faculty members, (b) cross-registration with other schools, (c) an increase in course offerings in Black Studies, (d) 50 Black students by September, 1969, (e) The creation of a genuine Black Studies Program, (f) Approval of Black Studies personnel, and (g) A full-time Black administrator to supervise the program and a minimum of two Black administrators to develop plans for an endowed Black Chair. In 1970, Black students took over an administrative building to promote the demands. It wasn't until 1978 that these demands led to the hiring of a Director of Minority Programs. In 1981, the demands led to the creation of the MLK scholarship for students of the African Diaspora. In 2004, nearly 30 years after this first set of demands,

the student movement O.N.E (Obeying No Establishment) was formed and passed out the following demands to administrators: (a) Hiring a Dean of color to the school of arts and sciences, (b) The president of the university disclosing his position on affirmative action, and (c) Creating a major in the Black studies department and giving more funding to student of color programming. In 2006, Black students continued to make demands. A series of hate crimes spurred the creation of TRUTH, a student mobilization that made demands similar to those of O.N.E., including (a) Hiring a Dean of color in Arts and Sciences, (b) The development of a hate crime protocol, and (c) A commitment to a diverse core curriculum. These series of movements created the foundation for the creation of EBCR.

The Critical Race Theory course, where many of EBCR's organizers first met, acted as a counterspace in the institution where EBCR's first members collaborated with critical peers and faculty allies. My memories of this course are some of the fondest memories I have of being in a classroom at my university. The professor, Dr. Leigh Patel, opened class with music videos by artists like D'Angelo and Erykah Badu, urging us to consider the ways in which their music spoke to issues of power and privilege. Dr. Patel's classes introduced us to pedagogy on racism and anti-racism and used popular current events to illustrate the ways in which they impact institutions and structures. Dr. Patel used innovative teaching methods, such as having students respond to quotations and images related to course content by writing their reflections on the walls. This was a classroom in which every voice was valued, leading students to be authentic in their engagement. James Baldwin wrote, "The paradox of education is precisely this -- that as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated" (Baldwin 1963). Dr. Patel's class was responsible for bringing many of us into consciousness and as a result, we began

to investigate systemic questions about racism at our university.

### *Gloria's Narrative*

I (Gloria) am a white woman and joined EBCR in the late spring of 2015, a semester into the group's work, at a time when I perceived organizing meetings and a spirit of anti-racist resistance were growing among students in the department. I became involved in EBCR's institutional research, and later direct action planning and interfacing with administrators. The reactions the group received at all levels of the university shifted my awareness of how white people maintain white supremacy in higher education—including white liberals and leftists who view themselves as allies to racial justice movements, like I did. In organizing, I learned to see and better challenge my participation in the university's culture of white silence, chosen ignorance, and diversion of historical demands by Black students for structural and material change into "diversity and inclusion" initiatives that do not require white people to relinquish resources or substantial institutional control (Ahmed, 2012).

I crashed into EBCR more truly than planfully joined the group. Unlike the other members involved in our organizing longterm, I was a master's student at the time the group formed and was in my first year on campus. It was a mournful year in the master's program in many ways, with class sessions devoted by some faculty of color to processing police violence and other forms of systemic violence against people of color. However, I also experienced the year as a time of isolation and limited community to explore what it would mean to confront this violence as a white person to change it.

Over several consequential weeks late in the spring semester, the urgency I felt to find an outlet for connection and anti-racist action grew dramatically. I learned that a group of

students of color within the master's program had been working privately to secure conversation with department faculty about addressing racism within the master's program. I also learned about the BC Police Department's string of confrontations in the preceding months directed against anti-racist protestors, predominantly student of color, including EBCR co-founder Sriya Bhattacharyya. Finally, administrative leaders

decided to terminate student posting privileges on the department's listserv after a student posted an infographic about the history of campus racial justice activism that contained a quote by a previous student organization identifying the university President as complicit in racism (see Figure 1).

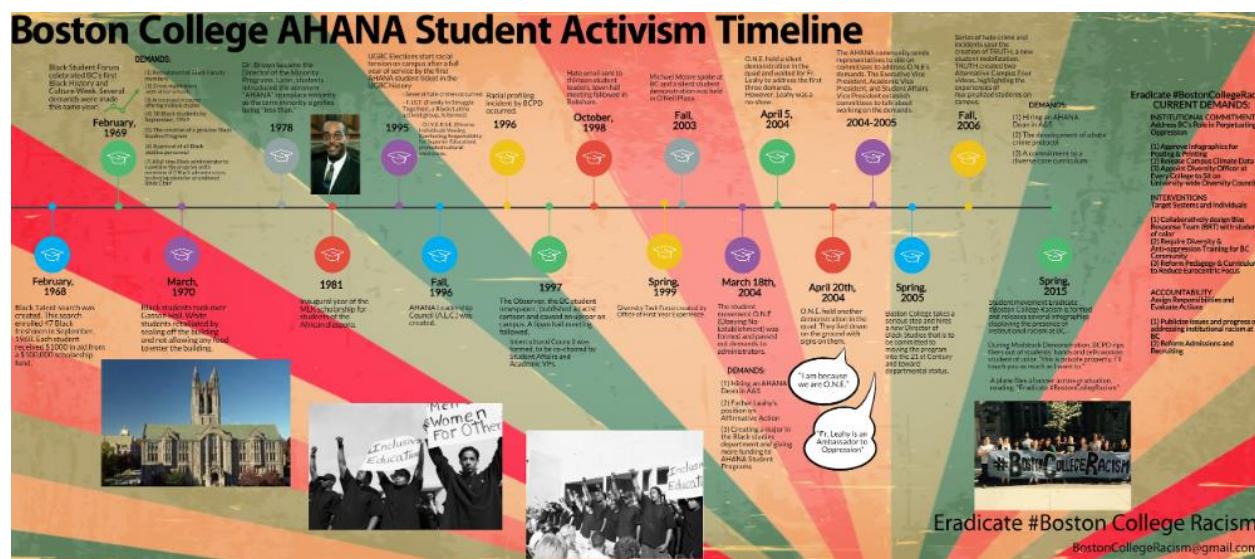


Figure 1. Infographic Timeline on the History of Racial Justice Activism at Boston College (NOTE: AHANA is an acronym at Boston College used to describe people of African, Hispanic, Asian and Native American descent.)

These events conveyed a pattern of suppressing accountability for racism on the campus, and it was jarring to recognize my disconnection from awareness of them despite occupying the same campus and department. It was clear that students of color, particularly Black students and women of color, had been on the front lines demanding change throughout a painful year, and that broad support and accountability from white students, faculty, and staff, myself included, were absent. I went to my first EBCR meeting hoping to break out of my silo and be part of shifting more of the risk and burden of naming racism off of people of color on the campus. This began a process I remain in today of learning through action

and community what anti-racist change for the long-haul, personal and institutional, involves.

As the group began to build community, meetings evolved from fast-paced action-planning sessions, where I vividly remember myself and others sprawled across university lounge floors making signs, distributing t-shirts, and sharing information to work around institutional resistance, to more intimate and slower gatherings, like EBCR's monthly community potlucks. It was in those spaces that I began to recognize and trust myself as a white person who was accepted as part of an anti-racist collective and committed to institutional transformation

and the personal work accompanying it. In those gatherings, I felt in touch with an immense sense of peace, connection to my friends and co-organizers, and generational responsibility as a white person to be part of the critical mass needed to change the deadly systems white supremacy has built and continues to defend. It has been half a decade since my first EBCR organizing meeting or potluck, but those feelings are still alive in me as I reflect on our work and relationships. I believe they helped propel me toward sustained action and avoid staying immobilized by fear and guilt.

## **Direct Actions & Institutional Pushback**

In this section we introduce some of the ways we collectively resisted institutional racism and encountered institutional pushback over our three years of organizing. Kevin Ferreira van Leer and Cedrick-Michael Simmons review direct actions we engaged in with the aim of creating social change within the institution.

### *Kevin's Narrative*

I (Kevin) am a cisgender, queer man who was born in the United States to Portuguese and Colombian immigrant families. I joined EBCR in my second year of the doctoral program as I struggled to integrate my doctoral studies with an ongoing career as an immigrant rights organizer. One of my first experiences of a neoliberal university that centered and reproduced whiteness came as faculty recommended I stop taking courses situated in critical practice, such as participatory action research (Lykes, Lloyd, and Nicholson, 2018) and social movement analysis (Gamson, 2008), and concentrate on completing my main program of study. In addition, I was encouraged by faculty in my program not to enroll in the Critical Race Theory course mentioned previously. It was during this time that I was pulled to the back

of the library by friends who sought my feedback on what later became the first infographic (see Figure 2), which highlighted the contradictions of an institution that called on members to follow in the footsteps of the Civil Rights Movement months after disciplining students for participating in a die-in (EBCR, 2015a; Wilder, 2014).

Without realizing, placing the first infographic across campus became our first act of resistance, as flyers, posters, or other material required approval from the institution to be displayed on campus. While we initially obtained approval, the approval was called into question and subsequently rescinded for failing to be associated with a department or a recognized organization on campus (Sandwick et al., 2018). Despite this, we continued to post the infographic around campus and were swiftly called into disciplinary meetings with College administrators. This began a pattern of bureaucratic barriers which barred us from posting infographics, registering protests on campus, and requesting space for events. Outraged by the institutional silencing and disciplinary threats we rang the alarm, launching our movement.

While we shared an institutional analysis of racism and a vision for how the university could address racism (see Figure 3), our strategies to achieve this goal were the subject of passionate debate. Once a week in the late afternoon, 8-10 of us would pile into a graduate student office, rearranging chairs and the lone couch and putting up posterboard to discuss new developments, check in with each other, and plan next steps. In these strategy meetings we debated the best ways to engage with the university in the face of its opposition. These meetings were a space of laughter and camaraderie allowing us to build bonds as we mapped out next steps and a place of frustration and pain as we disagreed on strategy.

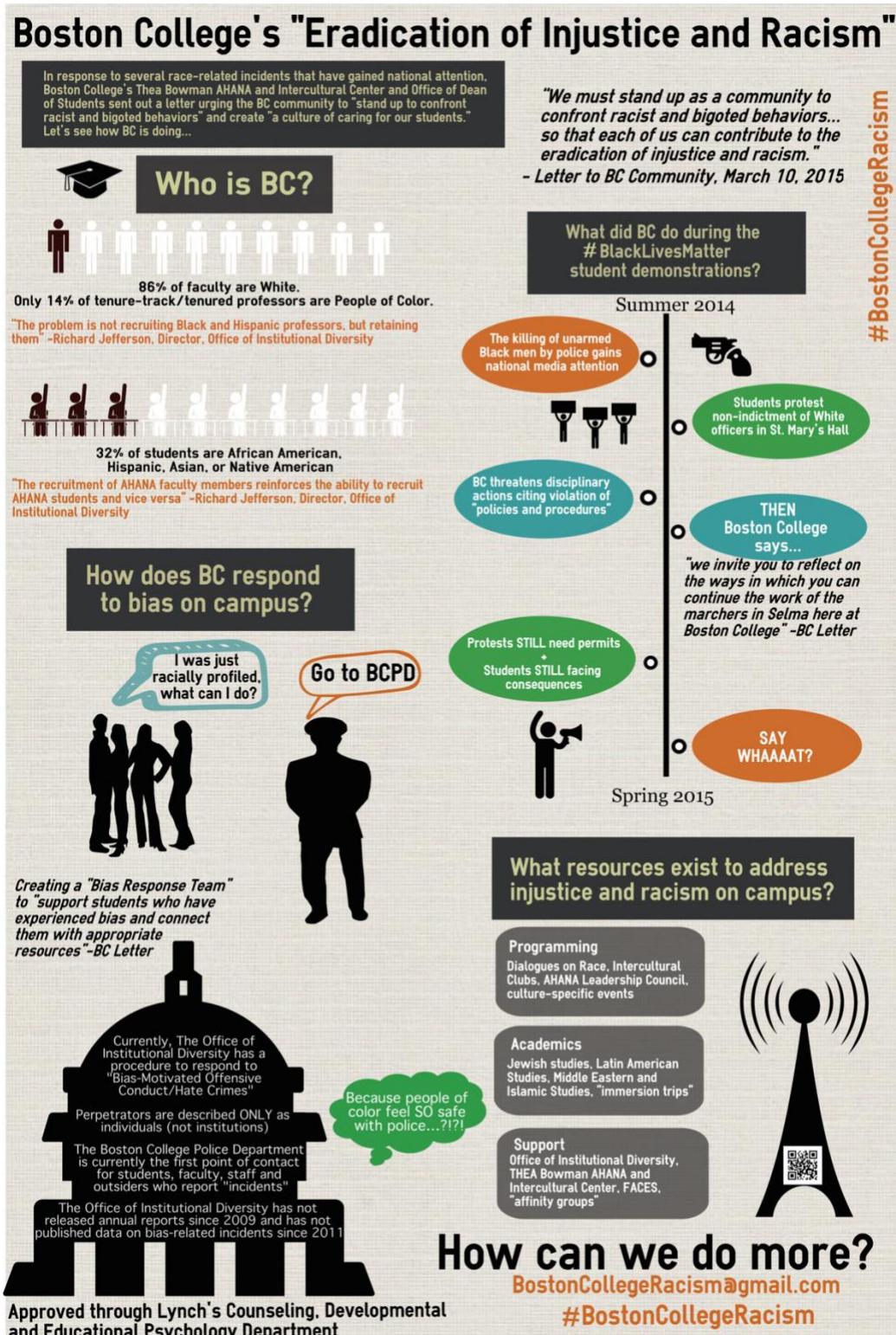
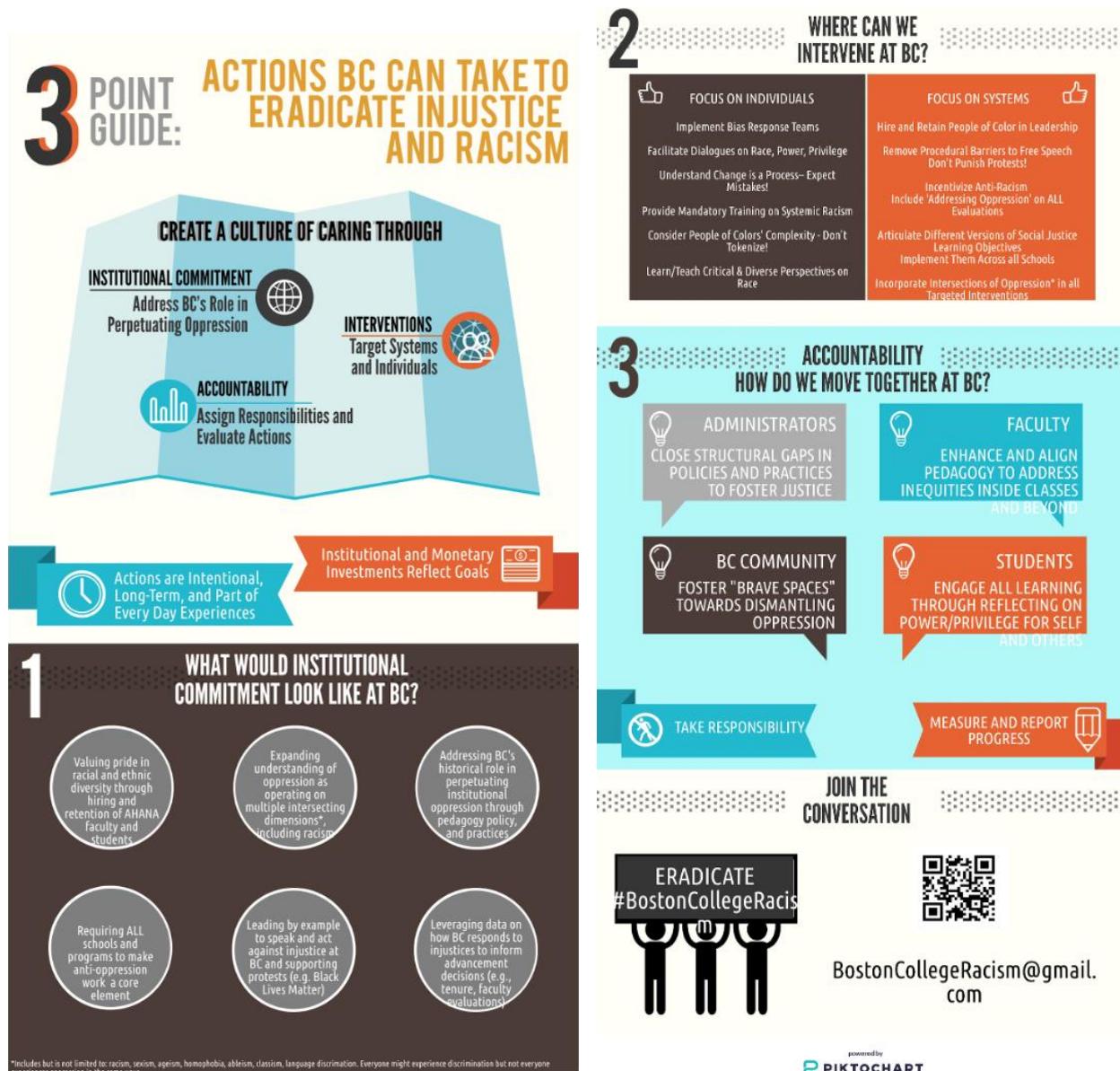


Figure 2. Eradicate's First Infographic Juxtaposing Institution's Call to Action with Campus Events



*Figure 3. Infographic Outlining Actions to Eradicate Injustice and Racism at Boston College (NOTE: The infographic has been modified from its original format to enhance readability. The infographic originally appeared as one full-length column with the panel on the right appearing below the panel on the left.)*

We each came to strategy building informed by our disparate experiences and knowledge. I came to EBCR with previous experience organizing in immigrant rights movements and trained in the structure-based traditions of Saul Alinsky, Heather Booth and the Midwest Academy (Schutz, 2015) which

encouraged targeting power brokers who can make the changes sought. This meant we often tried to meet with specific administrators. Many of us were also influenced by liberatory pedagogies of Paulo Freire (1970) which informed strategies, such as our use of infographics and public

campaigns, to problematize the popular narratives about racism as an interpersonal phenomenon. Infographics became a mainstay of our strategy, an accessible way to highlight the contradictions within public discourse of diversity and inclusion by the institution (and their representatives) and the lived reality of students. Over time, our strategies evolved as we connected with other local organizers and schools of thought. For example, a handful of core members attended Momentum's social movement training, infusing new strategies that aimed to activate greater popular support and grow our movement. We continued to target power brokers who could make change but also began more intentionally leveraging our potlucks and strategy meetings as ways to absorb others energized by our work.

Engaging the media was a central component of our strategy. One of my main roles within EBCR was our traditional media contact and twitter account holder. In this role I documented our direct actions via twitter, organized collective writing of press statements and liaised with traditional media. As we planned actions, we constructed a press release sent to the media in advance, setting the context and main goals of our action. These were written collaboratively, often behind the glow of a computer screen, where the colored circles at the top of the google document became a virtual representation of our community. In fact, I fondly remember these moments of writing, editing, and commenting where we collectively narrated and framed our work. During direct actions we each had a role, and I often could be found on the sidelines furiously writing notes, live-tweeting quotes and pictures and attempting to capture key moments. These fieldnotes became the fodder for quotes and images that were embedded into the press statement which was sent after the event. The goal of our media outreach was to (1) increase external pressure to change policies and practices and (2) play an active

role in framing the narrative, a critical component of social movement building (Polletta & Ho, 2006).

Our core framing, that racism is located within institutional policies and procedures, was central to our movement and is encapsulated by our name, EBCR. Nonetheless, this framing was contested by university officials and media outlets alike. In a quote to a campus newspaper the university spokesperson stated, "The supposition that BC is an institutionally racist place is a difficult argument to make," (Reardon, 2015), going on to emphasize individuals' beliefs opposing racism by campus community members. Here the university aimed to counter our frame by reinforcing notions of racism as interpersonal in nature. Similar tug of wars occurred with media outlets, for example a journalist affiliated with a well-known national media organization requested to shadow a student and document the racism they faced. Over a flurry of emails, we strategized on to shift the story's focus from individual acts of discrimination to institutional policies and practices while preserving their interest. We compromised, allowing the reporter to meet with a group of students, not an individual, who could collectively speak to their experiences of institutional relationships. As a result, a piece was published that spoke to both interpersonal and institutional racism and we preserved a relationship with the journalist. These framing contests mirrored the larger disagreements in public discourse regarding racism as located within individuals (e.g. individual policemen as "bad apples") rather than within systems (e.g. policing and systems of mass incarceration).

### *Cedrick's Narrative*

I (Cedrick) am an African-American man that was born and raised by a working-class family in the United States. I joined EBCR during my first year of graduate school, and I

quickly learned about the paradox for people who dare to speak about racism at postsecondary schools that Ahmed (2012) highlights in the book *On Being Included*: “Describing the problem of racism can mean being treated as if you have created the problem, as if the very talk about divisions is what is divisive” (p. 152). Specifically, anti-racist graduate students are simultaneously told by administrators and faculty to use our research as a resource for combatting social injustice, but we are treated as punishable “troublemakers” whenever we actually use our research to push against institutional racism at our own campuses.

I joined EBCR after participating in a graduate student seminar about Critical Race Theory (CRT). While CRT began as an academic and political project by legal scholars, the instructor of our course, Dr. Leigh Patel, rightfully pushed us to examine the relationship between diversity discourse and the reproduction of racial inequality. For example, the promotional materials highlighting racial representation and inclusion as values can not only be used as a “move to innocence” (Tuck & Yang 2012), but also used as a tool to displace the responsibility for addressing institutional racism onto students labeled as “diverse.” After the threats of expulsion to me and other students for participating in a silent demonstration called a “die-in,” which was an expression of solidarity with the thousands of other anti-racist student activists in the country, the CRT seminar pushed me to believe that resistance could be successful--even if institutional change seems impossible. EBCR gave me an opportunity to explore those possibilities.

One of the most rewarding aspects of EBCR was the chance to develop creative tactics to expose the contradictions between the “racial justice” discourse on campus and the inaction to address racism and racial inequality. For example, after the pushback to our

infographic, some members of EBCR used their social ties to secure a small airplane that would fly over the spring graduation ceremony. The large message trailing the airplane read, “ERADICATE BOSTON COLLEGE RACISM.” To the dismay of the administrators and trustees present, the plane circled around the graduation ceremony for approximately 30 minutes. Fortunately, we didn’t violate the arbitrary codes of conduct by displaying our message above the heads of hundreds of students, faculty, staff, administrators, trustees, alumni, and parents.

In December of 2015, we decided to contribute to the holiday spirit at our Jesuit university by providing songs and gifts to the most powerful stakeholders at a university: the board of trustees. Undergraduate and graduate members of EBCR decided to sing Christmas carols and provide gifts to the board of trustees at their on-campus meeting. We didn’t sing ordinary Christmas carols. Instead, we provided an anti-racist remix to popular songs , like “Deck the Halls with Walls of White Men,” “Leahy Baby,” and “Walking Through a White Man’s Wonderland” to highlight the fact that the most powerful decision makers on campus tend to be white men despite their rhetoric about diversity and inclusion. Our “gifts” were scrolls that listed our demands for institutional change. We attempted to also bring a plate of cookies along with our “gifts” to the president of the college, but we were told that he was unavailable. To ensure that the president didn’t feel left out of the celebration, one of our members recorded their personal rendition of “Leahy Baby” for the school’s president, William Leahy.

We knew that the spectacle was necessary if we wanted to get any media coverage of the demonstrations. Since BC is a prestigious research-oriented institution, and since the “proper channels” are managed by at-will employees, it was imperative to use media

coverage to exert pressure on the senior administration. To prepare ourselves—and any other allies on campus pushing for different institutional changes—for the inevitable pushback, we organized several workshops and training sessions. The trainers included alumni who organized their own anti-racist campaigns at BC in the past, lawyers who teach activists about their rights both on and off-campus, and members of antiracist groups throughout the city of Boston. Finally, we used these workshops and training to make informed decisions about the risks of civil disobedience that we were willing to take, such as ascertaining whether or not we have enough money to bail students out of jail.

There were some faculty who helped us deal with the pushback by the administration. For example, some faculty voluntarily accompanied us at our disciplinary hearings with the dean of students despite the fact that they were not permitted to speak or intervene (unless the administrator granted them permission to do so). Their participation was important because they were able to witness administrators' attempts to rationalize the restrictive conduct policies and the evidence of institutional racism on campus. In addition, over a dozen faculty even organized their own program to describe the legacy and benefits of anti-racist protests on campus, and they articulated why it was incumbent upon administrators to expand the scope of permissible speech for faculty, graduate instructors, and students on campus.

As a result of my experiences with EBCR, I have concluded that administrators can use the language of "social justice" as a branding exercise. We did not have any clear allies in the administration. No diversity managers, student affairs administrators, or any other administrators publicly defended or supported us. Instead, we were constantly met with silence and contempt. I even almost

left EBCR after a small meeting with an administrator who presented themselves as an advocate for students of color on campus, but suggested that our actions could cost the jobs of our faculty allies. Overall, it seems clear that administrators tend to use lost-cost efforts like diversity statements and programs centered around dialogue and "bringing people together" as a buffer rather than a mechanism for addressing racism. Furthermore, those symbolic gestures provide far more benefits for the administrators themselves and their employers than the targets of racism on their campus.

### **Internal Conflicts & Endurance**

In this section, Sriya Bhattacharyya reflects on internal conflicts, personal tolls, and difficult losses our group faced, and how, despite these hardships, we found ways to maintain our collective resistance and celebrate our wins. She also shares ways our group maintains continued solidarity with present-day activist groups at BC.

#### *Sriya's Narrative*

I (Sriya) am a femme presenting, brown South Asian, who helped start EBCR because it was vital for me to hold a mirror to BC to witness its own complicity in racism and to create a liberatory space where Black and Brown students' voices were not silenced, rather, celebrated. In the group, which formed during the third year of my PhD program, I helped organize and plan creative direct actions, facilitated potlucks, scheduled trainings with the ACLU & activism training institutes, spoke with media outlets, and hosted the majority of our meetings, healing spaces, and action planning gatherings in my living room. When I think about my time organizing in EBCR, I largely recall joy and community-building, and resistance and direct actions. My fondest memories of graduate school are staying up late painting

banners, writing funny lyrics to anti-racist Christmas carols, and remembering all the laughter and tears with some of the most brilliant, dedicated, and fun people I have ever had the pleasure to be in close relationship with. Sometimes I do not understand how we had the time to take classes, teach, research, do clinical work, write our dissertations and organize, but from what I remember, for each of us, the organizing is what fueled our energy to get through all the other aspects of our lives and graduate school. We ate together, went kayaking together, had sleepovers, watered each other's plants and watched each other's dogs. We made care packages for each other whenever we had big life hoops to jump through - whether it was weathering the highs and lows of activism or burnout or taking comprehensive exams and proposing our dissertations. EBCR felt like a space where our full selves could exist, we could critique the elitist institution we were in while still moving towards securing power within its confines. At our potlucks, we had check-ins, where we shared about our identities, and about how we were truly, deeply, doing as people walking on this messy Earth. Everyone also was invited into a team or a role at our potlucks, an organizing technique we picked up from Momentum, to help with "vibes", "nurturance", "connection", or "clean up". I think this helped everyone feel like they had a small part in the movement, whether their voices were loud or soft. We tried to emulate these team structures in our organizing work too.

However, there also was a shadow side to the brightness EBCR brought into my life. When I remember what I struggled with during our organizing together, all I can think about is patriarchy. As a multi-race multi-gender collective, dynamics informed by our identity socialization were regularly at play. I remember feeling sometimes like women planned the gatherings, drew in and fed the people, while men sat back and

intellectualized theory, and mocked our desire and attempts to build caring, healing-centered activism spaces. When we raised this concern, male-identifying members in our group denied this reality. So, the women in the group started meeting separately and collectively reflected on our experiences to share within our group, highlighting relevant research and offering resources and suggestions.

Movement spaces are regularly disrupted by patriarchy and in-fighting (Walia, 2006) and one of the resources which supported our healing were practices we learned from a movement training institute called Momentum. Their model of training built in a gender analysis, recognizing women do a lot of caretaking work, and explicitly ask men to serve and clean at meeting spaces. They also emphasized the power of song, which we utilized in anti-racist caroling (mentioned above) during our "12 Days of BC Racism" action (EBCR, 2015). Many of the gender dynamics we faced were also problematized by the idea that men try to fight other powerful men in institutions and measure winning by defeating them in institutional and policy-focused battle, while women more often engage in healing and creating transformative, liberated, community spaces. I ended up organizing an activist healing retreat for the women and nonbinary folks in the group, where we wrote ourselves and each other love notes, had tincture making, nail painting, and face mask stations, and took a pause from fighting. It was so needed to keep our work going.

To sustain activism with EBCR, nurturing our friendships were essential, which we did through holding community-building potlucks, activist healing nights, and dreaming up creative resistance together. Years have passed, and we have reflected on the dynamics that built us and broke us, and ultimately, I believe we each draw on our experiences in EBCR and our friendships with

one another as sources of wisdom in our day to day lives. We also keep an eye on current activists at BC (peep @blackatbostoncollege) and stand in solidarity with our power as alumni, just as historic activist alumni did with us. We offer to send funds, buy dinner, and write letters of support to leverage our collective power as alumni to demand changes within BC.

## Conclusion

EBCR was one of over 80 student-organized anti-racist movements in institutions of higher education within the U.S. and one of an even greater number across the globe in the mid-2010s. Our narratives above interrogate the ways in which we, as graduate students within community psychology and across disciplines, contest the ways we were expected to participate in the racist and neoliberal practices of higher education and create liberatory institutions of higher education. Over three years, we generated awareness regarding systemic racism on campus, fostered conditions for changes in policies and programs on campus, and created counterspaces for many students of color on campus. Through informational campaigns, such as infographics, as well as direct actions, such as protests and rallies, we problematized the everyday conditions of the university and engendered critical awareness of how the university perpetuated inequity through programs and policies. Such problematization and de-ideologization aims to help others interrogate their understanding of reality and their role within it so they can begin to dismantle oppressive ideologies (Martín-Baró, 1994; Montero, 2009). Our potlucks further nurtured this critical awareness and allowed students of color, alongside white students, to find community, feel empowered, and know that it was the system, not them, that was the problem. These actions also aided the push by faculty and students for the creation of an African Diaspora Studies major. Furthermore,

a group of faculty, Faculty for Justice, formed to support the work of students resisting institutional racism, including EBCR. This group of faculty has remained active since its formation 2015, supporting student action and publicly commenting on the institutions action, including most recently calling for more concrete commitments to address anti-racism on campus (Faculty for Justice, 2020)

Our organizing built on previous student movements at our institution, as well as traditions of scholarship that address injustice. Institutional analysis of student activism at BC from 1969 through 2016 revealed a legacy of student activism over 5 decades where students consistently demanded racial justice (EBCR, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Our finding that many of the demands remained the same over this time period reveal the entrenched nature of white supremacy as well as the perseverance of student activism, of which EBCR was a part (see Figure 4). Our infographics join a larger tradition of public scholarship which aims to engage the broader public, supports social justice and resists perpetuating settler colonialism (Kezar et al., 2018; Dache-Gerbino, 2018). We encourage others to utilize mediums such as infographics, which can accessibly illustrate institutional racism and challenge dominant narratives to the broader public.

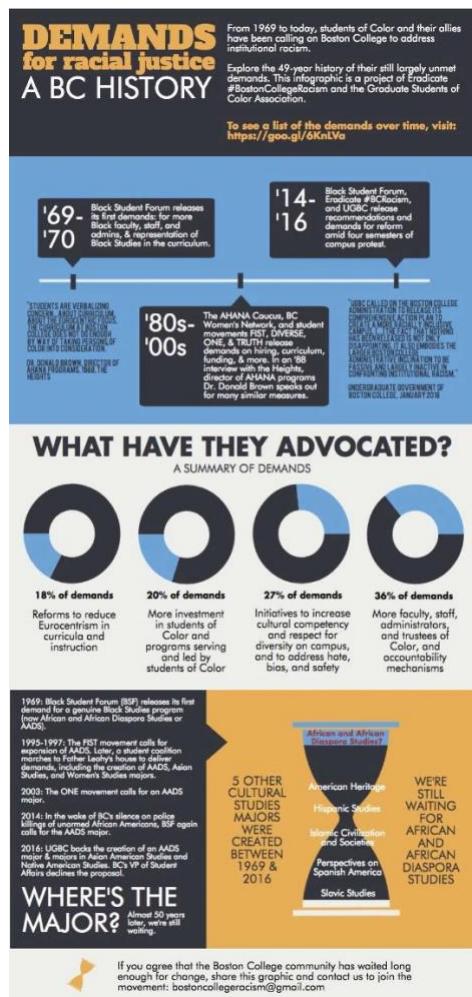


Figure 4. Infographic Outlining Demands for Racial Justice at Boston College from 1969 to 2016

Throughout our narratives, the importance of relationship-building and friendship is clear. This reinforces empowerment as a relational phenomenon (Christens, 2012) and the centrality of relationships in creating collective change. Relational labor, the creation and maintenance of relationships, is necessary for the functioning of a group and for a group to achieve its goals (Ellison, 2017; Fletcher, 1999). As our collective aimed to address racial oppression embedded within the university and society-at-large, patriarchal oppression was reproduced within the group. The reproduction of patriarchy within organizing spaces has been

identified in other movements (Walia, 2016) and researchers have identified ways that counterspaces and organizing groups can mirror societal oppression (McConnell et al., 2016; Ellison, 2017). Future organizers, and community psychologists, must recognize that oppression can be replicated in anti-racist praxis and other change making processes and invest in the examination of relational labor resource distribution and actions to address it when inequitable distribution occurs.

Our analysis includes implications for students seeking out and leading anti-racist praxis. First, we identified multiple types of resistance over our time organizing that reveal the many ways institutions maintain white supremacy. The institution utilized university policy to create a Byzantine maze of bureaucracy that aimed to slow down and silence our work as well as create barriers for allies (students, faculty and staff) in supporting us. The university deployed threats of disciplinary action, invitations to dialogue in lieu of material action, and changing policies through this bureaucracy. Moreover, the university publicly competed with us over our core frames, creating alternative narratives of our work and challenging our institutional analysis of racism. Second, we identified key practices for students interested in anti-racism that expand on previous practices encapsulated in a toolkit developed in 2016, and used by organizers on other campuses (Caputo, 2015). Third, we learned that engagement in this type of anti-racist practice will be emotionally draining, taxing on relationships and may lead to feeling betrayed. In short, the work is intense. It is important for movements to build a practice of celebrating victories, create a practice of pausing and develop shared commitments to assess problematic dynamics. Lastly, beware that in retrospect, when movements become popular, others will try to capitalize on your work and co-opt it as their own. We will not

be surprised if in 20 years, EBCR is celebrated by the administration.

This analysis also has implications for those faculty and university staff interested in supporting and fostering student-led change. A clear example of interest-convergence, we found that faculty and staff, even those with relatively high levels of security, such as post-tenured faculty, would disassociate themselves from Eradicate. We urge faculty and staff to stop protecting their own power and support student-led anti-racist praxis on their campus. Current initiatives by the university demonstrate a continuation of rhetoric used to perform condemnation of racism while continuing to pursue actions to oppress students of color and others within and outside of the institution. Most recently, the institution has stated Black Lives Matter while simultaneously sending BC Police Department officers to work with Boston Police at a protest in response to the murder of George Floyd in Boston (not on or near campus; Baker, 2020). Moreover, the institution has announced the "Forum of Racial Justice in America" which will be a place "for listening, dialogue, and greater understanding about race and racism in our country" (University Communications, 2020) while simultaneously moving between censoring and "listening to" the stories of racism posted by current students and alumni of color (Kelly, 2020). These Forums represent another iteration of performative listening and dialogue while ignoring the present and historical demands of students which has advocated for material changes within the university.

As white supremacy and settler colonialism persist and manifest in new ways within higher education, community psychologists must contest their expected participation in these practices and create liberatory spaces. Community psychologists must embrace extra-institutional challenges and recognize that institutions and disciplines need to be

pushed towards justice. We invite others to join EBCR and a larger tradition of community psychologists and other scholars in imagining and creating universities as radical, anti-racist spaces (hooks, 1994; Bell et al., 2020). As they do so, we ask them to anticipate that graduate students and other community psychologists in-training will take up the call as well, and prepare to support and join them in eradicating the institutional policies and practices that bolster racism.

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