

Written by Tressie McMillan Cottom
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Shannon Gibney is a professor of English and African diaspora studies at Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC). When that's your job, there are a lot of opportunities to talk about racism, imperialism, capitalism, and history. There are also a lot of opportunities to anger students who would rather not learn about racism, imperialism, capitalism, and history. I presume MCTC knows that; they have an African diaspora studies program. Back in January 2009, white students made charges of discrimination after Gibney suggested to them that fashioning a noose in the newsroom of the campus newspaper—as an editor had done the previous fall—might alienate students of color. More recently, when Gibney led a discussion on structural racism in her mass communication class, three white students filed a discrimination complaint because it made them feel uncomfortable. This time, MCTC reprimanded Gibney under their anti-discrimination policy.

Elevating discomfort to discrimination mocks the intent of the policy, but that's not the whole of it. By sanctioning Gibney for making students uncomfortable, MCTC is pushing a disturbing higher-education trend. When colleges and universities become a market, there is no incentive to teach what customers would rather not know. When colleges are in the business of making customers comfortable, we are all poorer for it.

For the white students who escalated their discomfort to the administration at MCTC, what seemed to upset them most is the concept of structural racism. As a teacher, I find that all students struggle with the idea of structure. The American myth of rugged individualism is alive and well. We love to believe that nothing determines our life's chances but our capacity to dream and work hard, despite reams of evidence to the contrary. For most students, my class is the first time they have ever talked seriously about capitalism or had a black woman as an authority figure. And when the structure in question is racism and someone who looks like me is leading the discussion, white students struggle particularly hard. How can something be racist if they do not intend it to be racist? And why should they listen to me? Sociologists like Joe Faegin and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva have dismantled our post-racial delusions, showing how racism happens without racists.

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Take white flight, for example. Few white homebuyers request only to be shown houses in white neighborhoods. But real estate agents consider this screening part of their jobs. And when neighborhoods get too diverse, white families start selling, sparking a downward spiral of declining home values and tax bases that affects resources such as schools. If you're the brown and black kids in one of those schools, it doesn't matter if anyone intended to be racist. For those kids and their life chances, structural racism is real regardless of intent. Gibney's class discussions sound solidly grounded in mainstream research. A white student may feel discomfort when it's pointed out to him how he has benefited from structural racism, but to compare that discomfort to discrimination is a false equivalency. Hurt feelings hurt, but it is not oppression.

But hurt feelings can be bad for business. And a lot of powerful people think colleges should act more like businesses. When they do, students act more like customers. And our likely customers might not be amicable to discussions about structural racism. If the customer is always right, then the majority share of customers is more right than the minority. While blacks and Hispanics have increased their college participation—and they are projected to continue to do so—61 percent of all college students are still white. A survey from researchers at Tufts and Harvard found that “whites believe that they have replaced blacks as the primary victims of racial discrimination in contemporary America.” A sizable number of male voters seem to believe that men are still more naturally suited to be president of the United States. Young people think racist and sexist slurs are wrong, but “they don't take much personal offense.”

If I want to piss off the majority of higher education's customers, then defying the natural superiority of men by being a female authority figure, countering white oppression beliefs by appealing to structural racism, and making young people feel the emotions of being offended would seem like a good way to go. If, like Gibney, I were a professor hired to teach diaspora studies, doing so would be my job.

Teaching what people would rather not learn is especially tough if you are a woman or a minority professor. Research shows that our customers rate Asian-American, Hispanic, black, and women professors lower than white male professors across all subjects. Most disturbingly, student evaluations of women of color are harshest when customers are told that the results will be “communicated to a third party for the purposes of evaluation.” Our customers are not only disinclined to like tough subjects; they're also inclined to take their discomfort out on minority professors, who are the least likely to have the protection of tenure or support from university administration.

Learning is—should often be—uncomfortable for individuals. When universities have a mission to serve the public good, they balance the needs of individuals with benefits to society and the power of the majority against the humanity of the minority. Calls to “unbundle” the university never talk about what happens to that mission when we only learn what makes us comfortable—what it means for minority students and professors or the counternarratives they produce. The promise of market models of higher education like massive open online courses is that student-customers can build their own degree from a buffet of choices. But the buffet is

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heavy on science and math classes, and light on courses like humanities and social science where structural racism, sexism, and classism are taught. It is easy to imagine that in a college buffet, students who make nooses as a team-building exercise won't take courses that might make them uncomfortable about doing so. Students wanting that choice make sense. Universities giving them the choice to make a few dollars does not make sense. Visionaries who sell us on these buffets allude to a future meritocratic economy. The implication is that the future does not need gatekeepers, leaders, or citizens who understand why making a noose in the student newsroom might be bad for morale.

Of course, nooses in the newsroom are only bad for the morale of some members of the team—the members least likely to make it to the newsroom because structural racism and sexism makes it harder for them to get there. And should they swim upstream to make it to the hallowed halls of higher education, the newsroom, or the technocratic future, we need not worry about their comfort, because profit margins chase market share. In the higher education market, we're being sold "the customer is king." That means a college's highest purpose is co-creating a future that looks a lot like our past: educated but still unequal. That makes me very uncomfortable.

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