

# Confronting the Racial Divide at Colleges

Campuses can improve public safety and social climate through effective communications and customer service training.

By Lee Struble and Steve Grant

Racial tension between law enforcement and minority populations in the United States is reaching a tipping point. Following the tragic shooting death of Michael Brown, an unarmed black man in Ferguson, Mo., this summer, many cities are looking to improve communications between law enforcement and their respective communities. Although civil rights advancements of the last half century have been encouraging, a deep-seeded historical divide still exists in the fabric of our culture.

While there is plenty of blame to go around for the racial divide, positive action and effective dialogue must continue. A historical review of the plight of the black experience in American society will only further divide the sides that we are so in need of uniting. We must accept that racial discrimination is, and always has been, a systemic oppression of all the races that are not in the majority and/or in control of our society and its wealth and economies.

Shortly after the American Civil War, Frederick Douglass stated that “The relation subsisting between the white and colored people in this country is the great, paramount imperative and all-commanding question for the age and the nation to solve.” In many respects, we are still facing some aspects of the racial divide that were evident in this country more than 100 years ago.

College campuses are a microcosm of our greater society, and even more so now with the proliferation of on-campus “college towns” that are sweeping the nation in order to keep the students on their respective campuses. We also know from our campus climate surveys that the black college student is the most dissatisfied group with respect to his/her campus social climate. Many of the subtle and not so subtle forms of discrimination and segregation continue to exist there.

Our challenge in higher education is to provide the best in racial diversity and communications training to our police and public safety departments, and engage and educate everyone to be assertive, yet respectful, in their interactions with others, especially with police and/or other authority figures. Communication is a two-way street. Unfortunately, a lack of understanding of how to effectively communicate with our diverse populations can cause an avoidable incident. Campus public safety officials must make racial diversity training a top priority in their respective new-hire and continual in-service training programs.



The recent high profile shooting deaths of several black males in our country has further divided us along the lines of race. Names like Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis and Michael Brown are the current backdrop to race relations discussions and debate. Although each case is different in many ways, a breakdown in communication was the constant factor in each tragic outcome. As such, we must begin a national dialogue to address the communication problems that are implicit in all of these incidents, not only for those who have lost their lives, but also for those that were involved in the violence that took those lives away.

Before we can fully address many of the communication barriers that are contributing to this national problem, we must first discuss some societal ills that are feeding this cycle of disrespect. One of the foremost problems that continues to plague our society is the perpetuation of the stereotypes that we have assigned to those who are different from ourselves.

Telling or listening to racial jokes, using labels or other hateful language, and using stereotypical language are forms of racism that help contribute to the ongoing racial divide. We must also teach everyone to be better bystanders and to break the “appalling silence” that Martin Luther King Jr. referred to when he said, “We will have to repent in this generation, not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

After the historical and societal context of our current racial divide is established, we must begin the arduous process of addressing the many barriers that contribute to this communication breakdown. One of the specific communication skills that we use to train campus police and security officers is the “**RESPECT**” communication recovery process. This was developed to provide officers with the skills to effectively recover from a communication breakdown based on a racial misunderstanding. This skill is beneficial for both improving the communication process between officer and individual, as well as help to reduce the number of formal or informal complaints filed against the officer and/

or department. The **RESPECT** seven-step process of recovering from a racial communication breakdown is as follows:

- Recognize the breakdown in communication
- Explain your intent and acknowledge impact
- Solicit/accept the feedback
- Paraphrase your new understanding
- Engage a dialogue to seek better understanding
- Close the dialogue and apologize
- Thank them!

In addition to this new process, it is also important to emphasize the many aspects of effective communications and great customer service. The first key to effective communication is to treat everyone, everyday in every way with **dignity** and **respect**. The second key is to understand the continuum of communication that goes from passive to assertive to aggressive.

While we encourage our own children to be assertive in their everyday lives, those same characteristics displayed by our students or other individuals in which we have an encounter may be deemed disrespectful and challenging. This, as well as other common communication obstacles, must be recognized and discussed in order to create interactions that are positive and enriching. Specific strategies for communicating across racial lines are another important element of an effective racial diversity training program.

Another critical aspect of effective communication is our ability to manage a crisis situation, especially when that situation is also racially charged. Training should address all aspects of the communication process, including initial officer safety, active listening, the power of empathy, personal contact and the diffusing process. Officers must also learn how to deal with complaints and complainants.

Campus public safety administrators have many training and professional development priorities that are in constant competition with our training time and funding. As the leaders within your respective organizations, racial diversity and effective communications should be at the top of your list. While facilitating this new program throughout the country, many colleges and universities are also inviting their respective multi-cultural and diversity affairs staff and/or other vested campus community or local community leaders to attend. Not only can this help offset some of the costs for bringing important training to your campus, it can also demonstrate to your campus and community leaders the priority that your department places on this important and timely issue. **CS**



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