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Mixed Foundations: Supporting and Empowering Multiracial Student Organizations

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This paper presents an overview of multiracial student organizing and organizations on college campuses. The authors address common challenges that multiracial student organizations face in higher education, how student affairs staff can challenge institutional practices that perpetuate monoracism, and how to support and empower mixed race students to effectively develop strong leadership skills. Several recommendations for working through political and administrative hurdles are also provided.

Self-identified multiracial Americans are growing at a rate three times as fast as the population as a whole (Pew Research Center, 2015). Within the realm of American higher education, student affairs educators have seen increased enrollment of multiracial students who identify with two or more racial heritages and have parents from more than one federally defined racial/ethnic background (Renn & Shang, 2008). The evolution of college student organizations that serve this population reflects the growing racial and ethnic diversity at American higher education institutions. Interest in building communities to connect multiracial students and individuals with one another began with a critical mass of students self-identifying as multiracial entering college in the 1990s and early 2000s (About MAVIN, 2015). Formal development of mixed student organizations and initiatives started appearing on college campuses in the early 1990s (About MAVIN, 2015).

In this conceptual paper, we begin by sharing current and past examples of multiracial student organizing¹, discuss motivations for such organizing, and address common challenges faced by multiracial student organizers. We also touch upon how traditional institutional lenses and approaches to race contribute to these challenges. Next, we discuss creating inclusive practices for multiracial students and how to foster leadership of these students on college campuses, including how to incorporate theoretical paradigms related to systemic approaches to race and multiracial identity into our work. The paper concludes by providing recommendations for practice to support both undergraduate multiracial student organizers and student affairs administrators. The strategies provided in this paper can better support multiracial students as they develop strong communities and initiatives on campus, while working within (and confronting) the constructs of institutional political and administrative policies and practices.

As higher education professionals, we both self-identify as multiracial women and have experiences both as student organizers and as professionals advising and working with multiracial student leaders and with national organizations such as the American College Personnel Association's Multiracial Network (American College Personnel Association, 2015). We collectively approach our work with a critical social justice lens, which informs our perspectives on how to support and encourage sustained multiracial student organizing that works toward equitable practices at various higher education

¹ The authors would like to acknowledge and thank the participants who attended their NCORE session on May 28, 2015 as some of the insights shared by participants are reflected in this paper. For access to the case studies provided at NCORE or if you have questions, please email the authors at vmalaney@educ.umass.edu or kdanowski@newschool.edu.

institutions. Through our work and this paper, we wish to inspire others to directly challenge conversations about multiracial student organizations to not only focus on identity, but also systemic and institutional racism, monoracism, and societal oppression.

Throughout this paper, we use the terms *multiracial* and *mixed race* interchangeably. We use *multiracial* and *mixed race* to describe an individual who has two or more racial heritages and whose parents or ancestors are from different ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, we acknowledge that individuals who are of mixed racial heritage can both identify with and reject these terms depending on the fluidity of their racial identity (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Multiracial Student Organizing: Past and Present

On college campuses, student clubs and organizations are an integral part of the campus life experience. For multiracial students, student clubs and organizations that specifically address their identity are less common (Ozaki & Johnston, 2008). Ozaki and Johnston (2008) cite several reasons for the creation of mixed student organizations, including the desire for multiracial students to share similar experiences and backgrounds and to socialize with peers who understand their personal and lived experiences. In addition, we have seen multiracial students create organizations to raise awareness about the history of multiracial people, create forums that discuss interracial dating, transracial adoptees, and to celebrate the commemoration of Loving Day.²

² Ken Tanabe founded Loving Day in June 2004 in honor of the landmark Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), which declared all laws against interracial marriage as unconstitutional (What is Loving Day, 2015).

Through a qualitative study that used grounded theory and a focus group approach, Gasser (2002) found that traditional student programming and advocacy offices focused on race made multiracial students “feel as though they are ignoring part of themselves or dishonoring one of their parents” (p. 51). Additionally Gasser posits that physical appearance could create a barrier to embracing monoracially defined student spaces because multiracial students’ “racially complicated features could make them self-conscious in a primarily monoracial environment” (p. 51). Traditional university sponsored minority groups were also found to cause discomfort for multiracial students because these students felt challenged to prove their ethnic membership to their peers (Nishimura, 1998). For example, in monoracial student organizations, interested multiracial students are often questioned to see if they are familiar with cultural and ethnic traditions that belong to a monoracial group. Being asked the question, “What are you?” causes discomfort and creates the tendency for monoracial clubs to perpetuate critical incidents and multiracial microaggressions that constantly ask the student to demonstrate one or more of their monoracial ethnic heritages through their knowledge of language, cultural customs, or traditional cuisines (Hamako, 2014; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Johnston & Nadal, 2010). We suggest that the support of student affairs professionals can help multiracial students minimize or navigate these potentially jarring experiences. When the dominant view on campuses is monoracial, one suggestion to help minimize these feelings is through the support of student affairs professionals who can encourage multiracial students to create space that gives them a voice by advocating for their unique racial identities (Gasser, 2002; Jones & Jones, 2010; Ozaki & Johnston, 2008).

Mixed Race Student Organizers: Leaders in the “Multiracial Movement”

Multiracial student organizing is not a new concept. Student-led dialogue and community building around the mixed race experience blossomed on college campuses in the early 1990s, with peaks and valleys of activity throughout the 1990s and 2000s (MAVIN Foundation, 2015). In the mid-1990s, student leaders developed communities of mixed race-identified peers, making space for racial identity-based conversations and evolving their generation’s conversation about race in ways that elaborated on (and complicated) multiculturalism narratives. These student groups embraced political notions of identity, too, alongside a growing conversation around “the race question” and its framing on the 2000 Census. Many other community organizations, such as Association for Multiethnic Americans (AMEA), were involved in the 1990s in advising and speaking vocally on best practices for how people in the United States should have their racial identity enumerated in Census collection; college student leaders, as representatives of a growing self-identified mixed race population, became part of this national conversation.

Seeking space to continue their activism and leadership beyond the college experience, several multiracial student leaders founded their own community organization, such as Hapa Issues Forum (n. d.), (established in 1992 by students at University of California Berkeley), MAVIN Foundation (established first as a publication in 1998 by Wesleyan University student Matt Kelley), and Swirl (founded in 1999 by Jen Chau, a recent graduate of Wellesley College). In continuing this work outside of college campuses, these leaders became allies and collaborators with students, connecting them to mixed race organizing on the national level.

History of Nationwide Multiracial Student Organizing Across Campuses

Multiracial student organizers have found ways to connect across their campuses. By 1999, over 30 known active campus organizations dedicated to mixed race students were in communication with each other (Danowski, Stroble & Handy, 2012). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, rapidly expanding possibilities for communication online and through different social media seemed to open doors for an increase in multiracial student organizing and awareness of multiracial students' initiatives. Using online forums like Yahoo! Groups, multiracial student organizers from all regions of the United States made initial efforts to create a coalition of their campus organizations to network and share knowledge (Danowski et al., 2012).

In 1999 the first Pan-Collegiate Conference on the Mixed Race Experience convened at Wesleyan University. It provided an opportunity for students from across the United States to connect in person. These conferences continued on and off for the next ten years, with the MAVIN Foundation (2015) playing a large sponsorship role as events took place on the campuses of Cornell University, Smith College, Seattle University, Wellesley College, Harvard University, Macalester College, University of Washington, Pomona College, and others. In 2005, MAVIN launched the Campus Awareness+Compliance Initiative (CACI), which created an online toolkit, advocacy guide, and forum for budding mixed race student organizers (MAVIN CACI, 2015).

A second iteration of a multiracial student leader umbrella organization came to fruition in the form of the National Mixed Race Student Coalition (NMRSC), which was founded in 2003 at MAVIN's National Conference on the Mixed Race Experience (MAVIN Foundation, 2015). However, this coalition became inactive in the years

following its founding, and the organizing of national mixed race student gatherings began to appear disjointed. At the inaugural 2010 Critical Mixed Race Studies Conference (CMRS) at DePaul University in Chicago, there was little visible presence of current multiracial undergraduate student organizers and their legacies were muted.³ At that conference, two students Kendra Danowski and Jamie Stroble were inspired to form the National Association of Mixed Student Organizations (2010) or NAMSO, an entity intended to share resources through online communication between multiracial student leaders across the United States. Although the creation of NAMSO was spurred by the relative absence of visible and unified student-led initiatives in the 2010s, its mission is nearly identical to the goals set by MAVIN and NMRSC when they were founded in the late 1990s and early 2000s: to create a network of mixed race student organizers nationwide.

Political and Cultural Context of Multiracial Student Organizing

This history of multiracial student organizing across campuses is significant to higher education staff and administrators for two reasons. First, peaks in mixed race student leadership have coincided with political and cultural moments, which should indicate to staff and administrators a need for consciousness and ability to understand the impact of those moments on college students' experiences (MAVIN Foundation, 2015). The significant 2000 Census "race question" was an impetus for students to make space on their campuses to negotiate and share their understandings of racial identity and categorization, and its relationship to the state, federal action, and other

³ Many of the community organization leaders and scholars present at the 2010 CMRS Conference were once student leaders, but whose professional work around multiracial issues had evolved into academic research or community-based advocacy.

implications. By 2007, presidential candidate Barack Obama's (1995) personal story (as reflected in his book, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*) about race, identity, and heritage was highlighted throughout his campaign, and mainstream media again began to shift its attention to the idea of a mixed race experience. After his 2008 election, a new wave of mixed race student organizations were founded or "rebooted" from their defunct status, demonstrating a willingness to grapple with the concept of a Black President with multiracial heritage, and the relationship of that idea to a national understanding of multiraciality. In 2015, multiracial people's stories are more commonly recognized and named as "mixed" stories in the media, and incoming students arrive at college with more language, tools, and exposure to conversations about not just multiraciality, but about the current significance of racialized experiences and injustice in this country today.

Second, repeated and cyclical attempts to create coalitions across mixed race student organizations and between different campuses indicate a desire for multiracial student-led work to be successful, sustainable, and to have its value communicated to communities outside of a single university's walls. Community leaders provide a wealth of knowledge on mixed race issues and serve as connecting points to student leaders who are exploring multiracial experiences more broadly. However, students also need institutional support on campus from student affairs staff who better understand specific institutional politics and practices and who can help those students navigate challenges that arise locally in their everyday lives. Higher education professionals should consider learning about the history of mixed race student organizing in order to contextualize the particular needs of multiracial student leaders at their own institutions, and introduce

those histories and resources to those student leaders as a means of support.

Considering these two influences on multiracial student organizing, it is important to note that mixed race student organizing is still a relatively new phenomenon on many United States college campuses.

Why Do Multiracial Students Organize?

When students start a multiracial student organization, there are typically two common motivating themes: political activism and advocacy, and the exploration of personal racial identity or experiences. Identity theories have explored the unique experiences of multiracial people (Renn, 2000; Root, 1996; Wijeyesinghe, 2001), which can help explain the various ways that multiracial people identify, express, and vocalize their racial identity. We believe that identity theories help us understand reasons for why students organize: 1) To claim an identity based space on campus (Renn, 2000) and to 2) Claim acceptance of their multiracial identity (Renn, 2004; Root, 1996).

A multiracial student organization that focuses primarily on national politics is less common on college campuses. However, there are several ways in which multiracial student organizations have engaged in political activism. One way students have chosen to express their views to their campus community is by focusing on multiracial policy and student voices. For instance, student organizations and initiatives have hosted conversations on the Census, how multiracial people can support movements for racial justice, like Black Lives Matter, and racial justice health disparities. In some instances, mixed race student organizations approach racial justice activism with a lens towards acknowledging their multiple identities and the experiences of being multiracial in a monoracial world. For others students, participating in a national

conversation about multiraciality centers on an academic interest in critical mixed race studies. Numerous graduate students and an increasing number of undergraduate students across the country are focusing their academic work on the topic and developing that work through dedicated networking spaces like the Critical Mixed Race Studies Conference and Association. Mixed race student organizations and initiatives can serve as connecting points for students pursuing similar scholarship in this growing interdisciplinary field.

Undergraduate mixed race student organizations often serve as the first context for exploring racial identity and racial politics, but some students choose not to be politically engaged in such spaces, aiming to create a community centered on shared social experiences. As one colleague said to us, “Difficult dialogue is a hard ticket to sell,” and students grappling with their own individual racialized experience do not always make connections between that personal process and larger political or theoretical approaches to multiraciality. We define multiraciality as experiences, events, or research that describe the multiracial individual.

Most multiracial student organizations develop with the goals of asserting a community focused on mixed race identities, and exploring and self-defining individual racial identities within that community. Identity-based organizations often make space for members to share their multiracial stories, feel affirmation and validation as a self-identified mixed race person, and be in community with others who have parallel experiences, particularly for those who have not been part of such a community before (Ozaki & Johnston, 2008). In our observations as student organizers and higher education professionals, we have seen identity-based spaces become vessels for

individual student journeys. Mixed race clubs can be communities where members move from celebrating mixed race identity and experience, to questioning it and asking critical questions about multiraciality, to experiencing a transformative shift in their approach to personal and political conversations about mixed race. These organizations can also become homes for students who miss family dynamics that affirm a mixed racial heritage or, alternatively, become places of safety and healing for students who have experienced pain and trauma stemming from multiracial experiences. Mixed race student organizing, as with many student-led initiatives on residential campuses, can be about finding social community in a new and culturally different environment.

How Multiracial Student Organizing Takes Shape

Mixed race student organizing does not always take the form of chartered student organizations. Organizing can emerge through focus groups or conversation spaces on campus. Having a monthly conversation space gives students who identify as mixed race the ability to come together to discuss identity and politics. For example, at Skidmore College in upstate New York, the Office of Student Diversity Programs financially supported a monthly focus group. Students organized a bone marrow drive on campus and collaborated with the national non-profit organizations “Be the Match” and “Mixed Marrow” to raise awareness about blood cancer challenges specifically for mixed race individuals while recruiting new donors for the National Bone Marrow Registry (Be the Match, 2015; Mixed Marrow, 2015).

On some campuses, students spearhead programming series or “heritage weeks” organized by multiple student leaders who identify as multiracial (Wong & Buckner, 2008). Through our own observations, multiracial students have identified

ways to organize “multiracial heritage weeks” that include a wide range of performances, panels, keynote speakers, and dialogues that involve students, staff, faculty, and guests, all without being part of a formalized student organization. Recurring programming series housed within established student organizations can encourage the retention of student leaders, thereby continuing that organization’s work year to year, and building a legacy that those students strive to carry on. At Smith College, a small women’s liberal arts college in western Massachusetts, Multiethnic Interracial Smith College (MISC) continues a multi-year tradition of “The Identity Project,” a photography exhibition that displays portraits of Smith students alongside their handwritten testimonies of racial identity (Multiethnic Interracial Smith College, 2015).⁴ The annual event is hosted by the Office of Multicultural Affairs and became a tradition that MISC was known for across campus. At other institutions, student organizations have hosted similar exhibitions, and other recurring initiatives that encourage student leaders to stay committed to the organization through the continual exploration of mixed race identity (Multiethnic Interracial Smith College, 2015).

At institutions that provide opportunities for students to practice curriculum building, pedagogical development, or peer-led learning, mixed race student leaders have also self-started academic courses centered on multiracial issues. At Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, students are invited to propose and teach one-credit courses called Student Forums on a topic of their choosing. Through the structure created by the University, in 2009 two students taught a Student Forum housed within the American Studies department that focused on a wide range of mixed race topics.

⁴ This program was modeled after The Hapa Project, an initiative started by Kip Fulbeck (2006), Professor of Art at University of California, Santa Barbara.

From 2008 to 2011, nine students at the University of Washington annually facilitated a class known colloquially as “Mixed 101.” It was sponsored by a faculty member from the department of Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies and took shape as an officially credited course, titled “Mixed Identities and Racialized Bodies.” The group of undergraduate and graduate students that envisioned the course developed it entirely of their own research and created their own facilitation models. The course ran for three successful years, and participants in the class were also invited to connect to MiXed, the University of Washington multiracial student organization. Many of the leading facilitators of the “Mixed 101” course were also involved with the club, as well as with leadership of a “Mixed Heritage Graduation Ceremony” that took place at the end of the spring quarter. It is important to note that while the Wesleyan and University of Washington student-led courses are the only examples we know about, they are significant in demonstrating students’ desire for academically-grounded, rigorous spaces to explore mixed race issues (MiXed, 2015). By investing time and energy outside of their own degree-seeking work to address what they identified as a curricular gap -- and to build community with other students interested in critical dialogue about multiraciality -- the student commitment to these courses identify the ways that institutions may be lacking in supporting mixed race students’ interests and needs.

As we have illustrated, multiracial student organizing has taken shape in a wide range of forms, including a divergence from the “traditional” student organization model. There is flexibility in standalone programs that often emerge from the passions, interests, and political moments influencing student leaders. With the goal of creating singular or a series of opportunities for dialogue and learning about the mixed race

experience, leaders of these initiatives organize in the moment, working with college staff and mentors, fellow student leaders, and faculty members who lend support in a variety of ways.

However, the “traditional” model of the student-founded, student-led organization is common and encouraged on most college campuses in the United States. As we discuss in the following section, institutional structures and policies create barriers for many student organizers seeking sustained recognition and resources from their college. Many student organizations that maintain a long legacy of activity on campus, or an ongoing active membership body, or both, face these barriers. Multiracial student leaders working to establish an organization mission, identity, and vision, risk replicating these barriers if they are not aware of them, or if they do not have support and allies who can help them understand past histories of student organizing at their institution.

Barriers to Mixed Race Student Organizing

Political, cultural, and administrative hurdles faced by multiracial student organizations are ongoing and frequent. One of the biggest barriers to sustained success is absent or limited financial support. During a presentation we made on the topic of multiracial student organizations at NCORE on May 28, 2015, students indicated that the timeline from establishing interest in creating a student organization to actually becoming a recognized student organization by the student government association takes about an entire academic year, during which students aim to identify mentors or advocates (staff or faculty) on campus who can help them with the process of becoming a recognized organization or managing a budget.

Without committed funding (and an organizational track record of impactful spending with which to advocate for more funding), many multiracial student groups feel restrained by what they can accomplish and are unable to create a visible presence on campus. Multiracial student organizations often choose to partner with allied student groups on singular events that have financial or space costs, but for their base budget, they are in competition for resources with other groups supporting students of color.

Another barrier is the impact of the cyclical nature of student populations. As a class of students graduates yearly, student organizations strive to maintain sustained interest in mixed race initiatives from at least several active members *and* create effective transition plans to help with frequent changes in student leadership perspectives and vision. Part of these leadership transitions require an organizational culture of intra-group mentorship, which is often found difficult for multiracial student leaders because of conflicting or evolving goals for participation in the group. For example, a first-year or sophomore student may seek a mixed race space that provides opportunities for identity exploration and sharing social experiences with others, while a senior ready to graduate may be more interested in connecting their multiracial activism or academic interests with their future career plans. This potential disconnect between generations of student leaders within an organization can create confusion around the organization's future mission and goals, and diminish excitement or clarity during leadership transitions.⁵

⁵ One way to confront this phenomenon is by implementing a staggered leadership model, which encourages passionate first or second year students to take on an executive leadership role, allowing them to develop skills and cultivate commitment to the organization among newer members. The Harvard Half Asian People's Association (Harvard HAPA) implemented a co-chair leadership system that included a senior or junior president and a first-year or sophomore president, enabling smoother leadership transitions in between academic years and grooming younger members to feel ownership of the organization's mission and goals early on in their college career (About Harvard HAPA, 2014).

A major hurdle that multiracial student organizations face is not being seen as a legitimate racial or ethnic club. At predominantly White institutions with established racial or ethnic clubs (i.e., Black Student Union, Asian Student Union), a multiracial student organization may be met with confusion and questions from monoracial student leaders or administrators who believe that there is no need to create a new racially-based student organization. Mixed race student leaders face particular tensions as people who are representative of changing demographics of the student body and whose active and self-defined presence on campus confronts a historical lens that the institution itself may perpetuate.

Intersections with Institutional Monoracism

We contend that the concept of monoracism is a lens that can be used to understand the structural tension between the current student population and the past historical legacy of the institution. Monoracism is defined as “a social system of psychological inequality where individuals who do not fit monoracial categories may be oppressed on systemic and interpersonal levels because of underlying assumptions and beliefs in singular, discrete racial categories” (Johnston and Nadal, 2010, p. 125). Further expanding on the definition of monoracism, researcher Eric Hamako defined multiracial oppression as “the systemic privileging of things, people, and practices that are racialized, as a single-race and or racially pure” (Hamako, 2014, p. 81). Many multiracial students are challenged in college for the first time in their lives to define the specification of their racial backgrounds according to federal guidelines. They face challenges that include filling out surveys and forms that do not accommodate the fluidity of their racial identity, navigating personal and romantic relationships, lack of

representation of their ethnic heritage or experience in the curriculum, and encounters with support service and academic offices (Gasser, 2002). On the other hand, Root (1992) would call these challenges part of the “squeeze effect” (p. 5). The squeeze effect is when biracial people feel oppression as people of color *by* people of color. For example, Root (1992) illustrated a young woman in her book, *Racially Mixed People in America* who had many personal experiences in which she felt too light to be Black and too dark to be White when questioned by monoracial peers to define her racial background. Many multiracial people experience interpersonal racism differently than monoracial people of color.

Another example of monoracism is when multiracial people are encouraged to view themselves as monoracial by the mainstream media (Knaus, 2006) and are socialized through peer culture to assert a monoracial identity, including when they attend college. Moreover, Hardee (2014) would argue that many postsecondary institutions fail to embrace programs that help to change the dominant culture. Embracing programs that focus on multiple identities could successfully allow for multiracial students to feel like their multiple identities are not just possible, but also fostered by the institution in the form of affinity-based spaces or mixed race student initiatives.

While many higher education institutions have made strides to address the rapidly changing needs of students of color and while those needs vary dramatically based on campus and geography, institutional ignorance of mixed race issues (including data collection, lived experience, and identity formation theory) remains embedded in policies and practices that impact student life. This ignorance is perpetuated by administrators

who, in a lack of understanding, may align with the notion that “multiracial people are too complicated to be served by the model” that may otherwise successfully support students of color. On the other end of the spectrum, some institutional staff may believe (as is commonly thought) that multiracial students do not need support in the same way as monoracial students of color because their racial fluidity intuitively grants them skills of resilience, an assumption that negatively upholds a harmful post-racial perspective on the lived experiences of students of color as a whole (Shih & Sanchez, 2009).

As the student body evolves demographically, student affairs administrators who are invested in improving their campus climate should consider how their multiracial population is affected by racism as it arises in campus climate issues. One recommendation is to use the Integrative Model of Multiraciality (IMM) to analyze campus climate for multiracial individuals. The IMM was developed in 2012 by Guillermo-Wan and Johnston to help scholars and practitioners address issues of race and racism as it applies to multiraciality (Guillermo-Wan & Johnston, 2012). The IMM helps administrators see that “traditional racisms targeting monoracially-constructed groups and monoracism intersect in the campus racial climate, and to propose proximal climate processes that can be followed in order to appropriately assess and improve campus racial climates for multiraciality” (Guillermo-Wan & Johnston, 2012, p. 29). While research is still developing to help us understand the campus racial climate within the context of multiraciality at our higher education institutions, mixed race student groups often face barriers that impact their student organizing on campus.

Connecting Organizing to Campus Relationships

Mixed race student leaders have also connected organizational programs and goals to their relationships with faculty whose scholarship or personal interests intersect with mixed race topics, often in departments like sociology, American studies, art, literature, history, or political science. Such relationships often evolve from an organization's outreach to faculty members (for example, inviting a faculty member to speak on a panel connecting their research to multiraciality). In our NCORE session, participants recommended the importance of making these connections with faculty members and deans to get support around organizing. Faculty can also help disrupt institutional monoracist practices by offering courses on the mixed race experience or addressing gaps within curricula. Organizations that develop faculty advisory boards and/or connect with staff members outside of formal advising capacities can expand their network of invested campus community members, inviting others to take part in sustaining the organization and its legacy of mixed race space at an institution. Unfortunately, depending on the size of an institution and the systems in place for sharing information with students, many colleges and universities do not have clear pathways for students to seek out staff allies, particularly staff who may identify as mixed race or who are interested in multiracial issues.

In looking at barriers to creating student organizations and the ways they are currently being addressed, we believe that campuses must consider how institutional monoracism and structural oppression influence the existence of these barriers. Multiracial student organizing continues to strive towards sustainable, long-term organizational models that mimic histories of other student groups geared for monoracial students of color. Institutional best practices and student government

systems commonly place greater value on chartered student organizations; by becoming chartered, the leaders of these groups have demonstrated that they have taken the effort to complete formal recognition processes and are thus worthy enough to receive institutional resources. However, the concept of a student-led organization can be seen as an example of monoracist policy in itself. The practice of valuing a group that has long-term and clearly defined mission, vision, and values over an organization that is fledgling and evolving emulates the practice of privileging monoracial categories that fit neatly into an understood or assumed definition, and denying legitimacy to the experience of fluid, transitional racial identity. Through this comparison, higher education administrators should consider what leadership pathways they advocate to multiracial students and whether the “best practices” set in place at their institutions are actually best suited for mixed race student organizers.

Creating Inclusive Spaces and Building Leadership

Student affairs staff and other higher education professionals can and have served as generational bridges for student leaders seeking institutional memory, knowledge of effective practices in navigating an institution, and models for understanding what kinds of leadership are encouraged and welcome on campus. In their roles, these staff are positioned to enable student leaders to work on initiatives that support their own growth, learning, and leadership skills to create new programs that challenge past institutional practices in a way that faculty-led or staff-led programs cannot. By activating their knowledge and capacities in a way that intentionally supports multiracial students, higher education professionals can play a role in influencing how their institutional policies and practices critically address race, monoracism, and fluid

racial identities and experiences on campus.

We encourage higher education professionals to reflect on these questions: What responsibilities do staff and administrators have in disrupting institutional systems that do not support sustainable multiracial student organizing? What practices should we develop or deepen in order to better support multiracial student leaders? How can faculty and staff at higher education institutions disrupt both recurring barriers to student organizing and institutional monoracist practices to better address the needs of multiracial students?

In seeking answers to these questions, staff, administrators, and faculty should consider our recommendations for practices thus far, but with a critical lens toward monoracist institutional policies. Staff can intentionally create space on campus to cultivate leadership of students, working with them to develop goals, and helping them to build smooth transitions over time between generations of mixed race initiatives. Student affairs staff are also well-suited to facilitate network-building between mixed race and monoracial student leaders of color, especially for the purpose of fostering solidarity in racial justice activism and initiatives on campus. By being well-researched in national resources and tools outside of the university (through maintaining a small library of mixed race books, introducing students to national organizations like MixedRaceStudies.org, MAVIN, Loving Day, Multiracial Americans of Southern California (2015), Mixed Roots Stories, Critical Mixed Race Studies Association, National Association of Mixed Student Organizations, and others), staff enable students to explore topics on their own. As we have articulated earlier in this paper, it is critical for staff to identify alternative or supplemental sources of funding for mixed race student

leaders, who encounter a range of barriers to securing a stable budget for their programs. Several of these particular suggested practices have been outlined in past research by Ozaki and Johnston (2008), who articulated various ways student club advisors can best support mixed race students.

Staff and faculty should utilize their position within the university to actively share the work of student leaders and communicate the value of archiving multiracial student leadership efforts. This practice can effectively disrupt aspects of monoracism within institutional culture. Student affairs professionals can stress and encourage the importance of capturing (through some archival process or other method) institutional memory. For example, some successful student groups have designated “club historians” who partner with university libraries and archives to submit organizational documents at the end of every semester or year to the official institutional archives, and others have created and maintained unofficial archives in the form of Wikis, Dropbox folders, or Google Sites which contain the semester’s meeting minutes, flyers, and sign up sheets. Having a dedicated electronic space that student affairs staff can manage (since they often serve a more permanent role in the institution) also helps to transfer the institutional memory each subsequent academic year as students rotate in and out of their leadership roles.⁶ By acting as the steward of multiracial student organizers’ archived efforts across student generations, staff advocates can present evidence and narratives to administrators who can encourage institutional shifts away from monoracist practices. As liaisons between student leaders and administrators

⁶ This documentation practice is significant for initiatives led by both multiracial and monoracial students of color; recognized institutional memory of students of color is often lacking because of systemic erasure or omission of the voices of people of color in the central narratives of institutional histories.

influencing institutional decision-making, student-facing staff should create opportunities for those administrators to interface with students and see their work in action, identify university resources and allies and share those connections with students in order to facilitate formal partnerships, and communicate on a daily interpersonal level with other staff peers to challenge ideas about racial binaries and champion an intersectional approach to supporting students of color.

We acknowledge as student affairs administrators that we need to keep working on improving our understanding of racism and societal oppression as we continue this work in higher education. It will be imperative for student affairs administrators to speak up about the multiracial student population on their campuses, especially in the context of supporting students of color more broadly. Having conversations about the mixed race student experience will help convince senior level administrators that multiracial students have a place in the institution and that we should move to be more inclusive of the needs of our mixed race students by dedicating relevant resources, academic offerings, and staff responsibilities. To further examine student needs, more qualitative research will need to be conducted. Facilitating a focus group is one way administrators can better understand the voices of students (Patton, 2009). By acknowledging the presence of the mixed race student body, administrators can break down structural monoracial categories that were formed in our institutions to categorize solely monoracially-identified students. They can do this formally, by transparently including student leaders and organizers in institutional dialogue about how multiracial students complicate more “traditional” monoracist practices. Including students in these processes empowers them and helps bring to the forefront their knowledge and lived

experiences.

There are national resources for staff and faculty interested in committing to these changes. Student affairs professional organizations such as the American College Personnel Association's Multiracial Network (MRN) demonstrate that the multiracial population has gained a presence and voice in higher education (American College Personnel Association, 2015). MRN's primary goal is to raise national consciousness and awareness of multiracial issues in higher education (About MRN, 2015).

Concluding Recommendations

Throughout this paper, we have described effective strategies for multiracial student organizers and made recommendations for higher education professionals to better support those student leaders. Similarly, Wong and Buckner (2008) described existing multiracial student services as "precedents," saying that it was "difficult to determine a set of best practices" because of the "newness of underlying theoretical constructs" (Wong & Buckner, 2008, p. 50-51). While a wide range of consolidated research on best practices for supporting mixed race students in their organizing and leadership is still yet to be developed, there is now more of a record of such practices. We are in a different political moment than 2008 with particular regard to the systemic dynamics of race and racism in the United States, and many of the influences that we discussed in this paper (i.e., technology, social media, gradual institutional recognition of multiracial experiences) have driven varied and continued responses from student affairs staff in supporting mixed race students.

Institutions still have not solved racial injustice – as is clear from the currently growing movement of students holding their colleges and universities accountable for

systemic racism – nor do they know how to respond to racial tragedies. As such, we feel it is very important for student affairs professionals and students to be cognizant of researching their institution’s history with regards to the inclusion and exclusion of certain student voices and groups who have been historically marginalized on campus. Multiracial individuals too experience interpersonal and systemic racism on a daily basis (Johnston & Nadal, 2010) and with the recent shooting and death of Tony Robinson, a biracial Black and White 19 year old killed by a White police officer, we continue to be reminded of the importance of connecting multiraciality with the impacts of white supremacy on people of color, and with ongoing struggles against racism and systems of oppression (Shoicet & Mullin, 2015). We particularly want to stress that higher education institutions are operating under monoracist ideology, and still often adhere to practices that consider their multiracial students as monoracial. Higher education institutions struggle to support students of color, and when multiracial students request support on campus, their demands often complicate institutional definitions of race and the aptitude for support offices to be inclusive of their needs (Shang, 2008).

We suggest that student affairs assessment professionals will need to work towards streamlining policy and practices to reflect the complexity and racial fluidity of their multiracial student population. For example, one student shared in our NCORE session that multiracial student organizers should facilitate collaboration with monoracial student groups in order to articulate their mission and goals for a mixed race space, and gain support for advocating those goals to the student body and administrators. Student affairs professionals should additionally provide open leadership opportunities to

strengthen the skills of students who are interested in organizing, but who are disconnected to leadership workshops and campus events.

Many institutions are still at the beginning stages of collecting data on multiracial students. Institutional research still needs to make strides in race data collection and assessment to consistently and accurately reflect the numbers of the multiracial student population within the dominant context of a monoracial institution. We recommend using the Integrative Model of Multiraciality (IMM), which we previously mentioned, to apply to the multiple-race data classification of the distal systems/policy from the U.S.

Department of Education data collection. Research and assessment professionals can use the IMM for clearer reporting options for the Two or More Races categories by being transparent about how the data will be used, and allow for collection of data from multiracial students at various points of time starting from their initial application to matriculation as students explore the fluidity of their racial identities (Guillermo-Wann & Johnston, 2012).

Students' times at institutions are formative. Institutions should consider their responsibility for cultivating a supportive experience for mixed race students and also identify how their practices must transform -- not just adapt to current models -- to effectively support these students. Multiracial students have different experiences and their mixed race student organizing efforts will look and operate differently depending on the campus context, geography, and cultural and political climate. The need to sustain the development of multiracial student organizers and their initiatives will be paramount to actively grow support for multiracial issues. At the same time, we (student affairs and higher education professionals) collectively must challenge the dominant monoracial

lens that continues to impact multiracial student experiences on college campuses across the United States.

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