



LET'S TALK ABOUT RACE

An Interview with
Beverly Daniel Tatum
President Emerita of Spelman College



ABOUT THE INTERVIEW SERIES

In March 2019, ACE held a plenary session at its 101st Annual Meeting called “Talking About Race.” During the panel discussion, Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” and Other Questions About Race*, and Robin DiAngelo, author of *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, candidly discussed the role of race in America and on college campuses. Moderated by Lorelle L. Espinosa, ACE’s vice president for research, and generously sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the panel emphasized the importance of college leaders engaging on issues of race and racism with their campus communities.

Continuing the discussion started by the panel, the Let’s Talk About Race interview series captures the voices of prominent higher education scholars and leaders as they share their perspectives and experiences on race and ethnicity in higher education.

This series supplements ACE’s *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report*, which examines over 200 indicators, looking at who gains access to educational environments and experiences, and how trajectories differ by race and ethnicity. Additional detail about *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education* can be found at equityinhighered.org. To watch the panel discussion that inspired this series, please visit acenet.edu/ACE2019Race.

ABOUT BEVERLY DANIEL TATUM

Beverly Daniel Tatum is president emerita of Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. Tatum is a nationally recognized scholar and authority on issues of race in America and a licensed clinical psychologist whose areas of research include Black families in White communities, racial identity in teens, and the role of race in the classroom. For over 20 years, Tatum taught her signature course on the psychology of racism.

In her critically acclaimed 1997 book, which was rereleased in a revised and updated twentieth anniversary edition in 2017, *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” and Other Conversations About Race*, she applies her expertise on race to posit that straight talk about racial identity is essential to the nation.



ACE and the American Council on Education are registered marks of the American Council on Education and may not be used or reproduced without the express written permission of ACE.

American Council on Education
One Dupont Circle NW
Washington, DC 20036

© 2019. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Q- What do you feel is the role of higher education in breaking down barriers across race?

We live in a time when most U.S. students are coming to college from segregated environments. Segregated neighborhoods. Segregated schools. And, as a consequence, the higher education environment, which has over time become more and more diverse, is for many people the most diverse learning environment they have been in up to that point. It's an opportunity for students to engage with people different from themselves in more than just a superficial way. Perhaps they are in the same classrooms, or they are lab partners, or they are living in the same residential space. It's an opportunity that could be a very positive learning experience. It isn't always, as we know, because students bring all of their prejudices and misconceptions and the structural racism that they have grown accustomed to as part of that experience as well. But having said that, it is an opportunity to break down barriers if we take full advantage of it.

Q- In your own background, your own preparation, in your field and your career path, how did you personally obtain this knowledge base in diversity, equity, and inclusion and social justice?

I grew up in a very small town in Massachusetts, about 30 miles from Boston. And I came of age in a time at the height of the civil rights era, so it was certainly part of my growing-up consciousness. At the time that I was in high school, Boston was going through a very violent school desegregation process, so it was in the local news all the time. There was a lot of conversation about what was happening in Boston, not necessarily about what was happening in my community, the town that I grew up in, because it was a town with very few Black people living in it. Most of the time I was the only Black kid or maybe one of two in my classes. So I had this kind of insider/outsider experience of being part of this predominantly White community and doing well in school and being recognized as successful in

that environment, and at the same time an outsider listening to people talk about "those Black people in Boston." I was having this kind of "double consciousness," as W.E.B. DuBois might have said.

Fast-forward, I really wanted to get out of that little town and went to college in Connecticut. I went to Wesleyan University and I enrolled there in the fall of 1971. What was meaningful about that time was that Wesleyan had been, certainly, a predominantly White institution, but had been also an all-male institution. My class was the second class of women to be admitted to Wesleyan. When I got there it was probably about 10 percent students of color, which was much more diverse than my high school experience, but it was also heavily male.

Wesleyan is a wonderful institution, where I had a very strong liberal arts experience. I went knowing I wanted to be a psychology major but I also took a lot of courses in African American studies, and in English literature, and some sociology as well. That African American studies background as an undergraduate was very helpful to me when I went on to graduate school to study clinical psychology.

I was planning to be a therapist. But when it came time to do my dissertation, I was particularly interested in doing research on the experiences of Black families living in predominantly White communities. It's not hard to tell why I would be interested in that, given my own growing-up experience. In those undergraduate African American studies courses that I had taken, all the reading that we did on the experiences of African American families was coming from research that had been done in urban areas, inner-city environments, and rural southern communities, and I never read anything that approached the experience that I'd had in Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

I was interested in the experiences of Black families that were not living in predominantly Black communities. In particular, I was interested in understanding how families raising their children outside the context of a predominantly Black community would socialize their kids to have an understanding of their identity

as young African Americans. I was really interested in racial identity development.

That's what I was working on when I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan. In 1979, I was ABD and moved [with my husband] to Santa Barbara, California, which as it happens has a very small Black population. It was a good place to find families I could interview about raising their children in predominantly White communities. So I started doing my research there, but while I was there I was also given the opportunity to work in the campus counseling center at UC Santa Barbara.

While I was working as a therapist in the campus counseling center and starting to get ready to do my data collection in the vicinity, I was offered a job to teach on a part-time basis in the Black Studies department. They had a course called Education and the Black Child, and asked me if I thought I could teach it since my focus was on Black children and on their identity development. I thought, "Sure, I can teach the class." Even though there was a learning curve in terms of the content around education, it went well, and so as a consequence of that I was asked to teach something else. And the second course I was asked to teach was called Group Exploration of Racism. Let me just say I had not taught a course called Group Exploration of Racism before. But I did know how to facilitate groups.

I became familiar with a book by Judith Katz called *White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-Racism Training*. It was intended to be an interactive teaching manual for leading people through a process of learning about racism and what antiracism was, and it was full of exercises. It was a gold mine for me, and I really relied heavily on it as I was developing my course. I taught it for the first time in 1980. And at the end of the quarter when students filled out their evaluations they wrote really glowing evaluations about how much they had learned, and they said things like, "This was the best course I have taken at the university. This course has changed my life. Everyone should be required to take it." The feedback was so

affirming that I felt like, "Wow, this was very powerful. I need to keep doing this." I too had learned a lot in the process, so I just kept teaching it.

We lived in Santa Barbara for four years. During that time, I had repeated opportunities to teach the course. Because they are on the quarter system, I probably taught it nine or 10 times during that four-year period. When we decided to leave Santa Barbara I was applying for a psychology job. Our plan was to move back to Massachusetts, and I interviewed at Westfield State College, now known as Westfield State University. They were looking for someone who could teach child development and psychology of the family and theories of personality and those were all courses that were right in line with my clinical work and training. But when asked what I might want to teach as an elective, I said, "I have been teaching this course on racism and if I come here I'd like to teach a course on the psychology of racism." I got the job and that's what I did. I taught the traditional psychology courses but I also taught psychology of racism, and I did that probably every semester while I was at Westfield. I was there six years when an opportunity presented itself at Mount Holyoke College. I went there to Mount Holyoke to teach Psychology of Racism, as well as other things. So it just became a signature course for me and I learned a lot about how to teach it by doing it, and also by reading a lot, and connecting with other people who were doing similar teaching. I went to meetings like the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE), and took advantage of other professional development opportunities to deepen my own understanding.

Q· If we could do anything, without considering resources or other obstacles, what is the right way to educate students to be more critically conscious and equity minded?

If I could wave a magic wand I would deepen students' knowledge of American history. And I say that because it was always surprising to me in my Psychology of Racism class how little information students had about the history of racism in the United

States. Everybody knows there was slavery and we all know that Rosa Parks sat on the bus. But they don't know much more. There is such limited knowledge or understanding, for example, of Reconstruction, a progressive period when Black people were voting and some were even elected into statehouses in the South, and its aftermath. They don't know what happened after Reconstruction when the North withdrew from the South and the federal protections went away, leading to the reinstatement of very oppressive laws and hostilities, the rise of the Klan and the violence that was happening in the South. They don't know the ways in which public policy led to housing segregation across the nation, not just in southern communities, and the intentional underfunding of schools serving Black students, and the differential treatment of veterans of color and White veterans, and the differential access to resources. They need to know all of that and more.

When someone says to me, "My father worked hard, how come other people aren't working hard," I realize that perspective is so ahistorical. It seems to me that person has no clue as to the ways in which public policies made their White parents' lives easier, no understanding of the ways in which policies and practices open doors for some people but close doors for others. When people know that information, their view of the world does start to shift. They do become more equity minded. That has been my experience teaching about racism. You couldn't just talk about psychology. You had to give people some basic historical information which they just did not have, even about things like internment camps and the treatment of Asian Americans during World War II. You would think that people would know that. But you'd be surprised how many people would say, "I never learned this."

Q· What about training faculty, because they are the ones in front of the classroom, regarding this historical information as well?

Of course it's not just the students who don't have that information. Unless you [as a faculty member] have sought it out for yourself or it is your discipline, you are likely to not know it as well. Having professional development opportunities that are interdisciplinary in nature that allow faculty to expand their own understanding of these issues can be very beneficial. I had the privilege of doing professional development with K–12 teachers early in my career, and often it included providing historical as well as contemporary information about social issues that they just didn't know about. Much as it was helpful to the college students we were just talking about, it was certainly helpful to those teachers in terms of thinking, helping them challenge some of their assumptions about their students and where those students come from and what their experiences have been.

So in the same way, college professors also need to have a broader understanding of their own social context, the academic and intellectual history that informs the college classrooms beyond just knowing their own subject matter, whether that is chemistry or art history. Creating more of those opportunities, formal and informal, for faculty to expand their own knowledge base is really important. Of course, you have to take advantage of the opportunities when they are there. Colleges and universities are learning environments. We invite speakers. Our colleagues publish books. There's lots of ways to get information beyond your own particular discipline in a college and university environment, but the question is, "Are we taking advantage of those learning opportunities?" And what is the institution doing to encourage that kind of knowledge expansion?

Q- How have race relations on campus changed since you first became involved in diversity, equity, and inclusion work? To what factors might you attribute those changes?

If we go back to 1980, and fast-forward to 2019, in that 39-year period, one of the things that has changed is the population. If we were to go back to UC Santa Barbara today, we probably would still see a considerable underrepresentation of African American students, but in general it is a more diverse campus than it was in 1980. The U.S. population is more diverse today than it was 40 years ago. But colleges and universities don't completely reflect that population shift; Black and Latinx students are still underrepresented in most places. That said, institutions are more diverse than they were before.

As a consequence I think students of color are more empowered to speak up about the concerns they have on campuses. That is one of the things that happens when an institution is just beginning to become more diverse. The people that are joining the community often feel like they are welcomed into the community as long as they don't rock the boat: "Be one of us and all will be well." But when you get to a critical mass there is a sense of empowerment that comes for those underrepresented groups where they feel like they can speak up and they have a posse, so to speak, to help carry the message. It gives people both the freedom and courage to ask for what they need in a way that may be more forceful than they did previously. I think some institutions are struggling with that.

Q- Does it seem like more students, including White students, are not tolerant of the hate?

It is sort of a mixed bag, in a way. In my book [I cite] a 2014 MTV survey of young people between the ages of 14 and 24, so if you were 14 in 2014, now you are 19 and perhaps a college student. It was a diverse group of respondents, and most of them indicated that they had witnessed incidents of bias, defined by the survey as treating someone differ-

ently—and often unfairly—because of some dimension of their identity. Almost all of them said, "Yes I have witnessed this, I have seen it as a problem." And then they were asked how comfortable did they feel speaking up about it? Most of them said they did not feel comfortable speaking up about it because they felt like, "If I intervene or if I spoke up I might make the situation worse or cause conflict." So on the one hand there was an awareness that this is a problem. On the other hand, there was still a lot of silence. Only 20 percent said they felt comfortable talking about issues related to bias themselves, or in particular talking about issues related to race.

I think, in that sense, that is one of the things that is similar to the past. There are a lot of older people who find these tough conversations to be difficult, and I think there are still a lot of young people who also find that conversation challenging. Statistics tell us this is the most diverse generation, and I think in that sense they are more open to connecting across lines of difference. But because of segregation, they still have limited practice in doing so.

Q- Do students have greater connectivity today with technology, or are they still just in their bubbles?

Again, it's a double-edged sword. On the one hand social media does allow you to connect with people all around the world. Technology breaks down walls and barriers. At the same time one of the studies I cite in my book is that for some adolescents who are playing [role-playing video] games, sometimes they are seeing racism as a consequence. That hate speech can enter into that activity. Certainly we see that in terms of how people use Twitter and other forms of social media. It can be weaponized in ways that might not be expected or desired. So I think that's a challenge. Something that I have seen growing is interest in intergroup dialogue. People from all over the country are talking about dialogue programs on their campuses and how they are using intergroup dialogue. I think we can leverage the increased diver-

sity on college campuses in ways that do lead to the kind of positive outcomes we might hope for when we think about the role of higher education and breaking down barriers.

Q- What are the most immediate challenges and/or opportunities for presidents around cultivating an inclusive campus?

Leadership matters. The tone we see in daily life is being set at the top of any organization. It can be a positive tone or a negative tone. It can be an inclusive tone or an exclusionary one. Just think about how often presidents are on the stage introducing someone or giving a speech about the state of the institution or welcoming parents or sending out emails. How you define the community and who belongs in it and how that is communicated can really make people feel like they are a part of that community in a very all-inclusive way, or it can be exclusionary. Sometimes people are exclusionary not even intending to be so, but simply because of the way they are using their language.

I will give an example of something that seems like a small thing but it was important. When I first came to Spelman as president, one of the things I noticed was a culture that really emphasizes class membership: “Welcome to the class of 2006. Welcome to the class of 2010.” And that is great if you’re in the

class of 2006 or the class of 2010, but if you are a transfer student, that class year does not apply to you. You are going to be in a class year, but maybe not the one that the first-year students are entering. So every time someone says, “We want to welcome the class of ‘fill in the blank,’” you left out the transfer students. So one of the things that I helped people think about was, is there a way that we can welcome all of our new students without being exclusionary? There’s nothing wrong with welcoming the class of 2006, but we can also say, “And we want to welcome our transfer students and we want to welcome our Pauline Drake Scholars,” who are the non-traditionally aged students often attending part time, who might not be transferring, but probably aren’t going to graduate in four years either.

Just thinking about who is missing from the picture is an important habit of mind I think that every leader needs to develop in order to make people feel included. Because sometimes you feel [excluded] just being left out of the language. For example, imagine if we are thanking faculty at a campus gathering, but we never say faculty, staff, and administration. Whoever the group is that is being left out knows they are being left out and if you can anticipate that and include them before they feel left out, that’s really the best.



ACE® American
Council on
Education®

BILL & MELINDA
GATES *foundation*