

Racial Autobiography Generalizations

Often student groups have found the following generalizations reasonably well fit their collective experience. It is important to note that each group usually has exceptions. For instance, a few white undergraduates have had a great deal of interracial experience; some nonwhite undergraduates have had very little.

1. Most students come from white families, including white extended families. Most white students come from white neighborhoods and grade schools.
2. Considerable numbers of our nonwhite students come from families with some racial groups other than their own, lived in interracial neighborhoods, and attended interracial grade schools.
3. Students find it difficult to recall when they first knew there were different races or first heard "nigger," which leads to the point that racism is insidious in our culture. It sneaks up on you; you "learn" it; you forget where.
4. Students fall into two main groups regarding their parents and race relations. Some report liberal unprejudiced parents (at least in terms of what they tell their children); others report parents who curtailed interracial dating, told racist jokes, or otherwise displayed overt prejudice. It can be hard for students to talk about this. But it shouldn't be. Ask a student who is embarrassed: "Did you choose your parents?" Ask the group, "If ___ reports a problematic family, are you put off by ___ or impressed by his honesty?"
It is harder to get students to see ways their parents (and they) have taken advantage of institutional racism -- suburban zoning, schooling, SATs, etc. Generally I ignore this in this exercise.
Regardless of the type of parents, students have rarely talked about race much with them.
5. Nonwhite "heroes" have increased to include not only BTW and Geo. Wash. Carver but also Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth, MLK, Malcolm X. MLK Day is generally ignored in some communities, however, leading to interesting comparisons.
6. Many Jewish students have received exclusion or slurs. They will speak of this in heartfelt ways that may shock other students. Use this positively -- imagine how much worse it might be to get this all the time. Similar re gays, lesbians, and other minorities that are not always visible.
7. Elicit "scared" responses, including justifiedly scared. How many have ever been a racial minority of one? What did you feel like? (NYC subway car) Then project to people of color in overwhelmingly white institutions. Black woman student reported being more ill at ease in Burlington than Newark ghetto.
8. Note our "white" culture once more: whites don't think of selves as white, but nonwhites do think of themselves racially. WASPs don't think of selves as ethnic. That's for others! Cf. God, band-aids, etc.
9. Everyone is expert on their family. Hence, when reflective, on what they bring to race relations, cultural diversity. No one is responsible for what happened before now. We all are responsible from here on out.