

# **Personal Action Plan**

Ben Helms

CSA 567: The Role of Diversity in SA Practice

Mark Figueroa, Ph.D.

April 2, 2009

The goal of my personal action plan was to not only learn more about the cultures of African Americans, but also learn about specific experience of African American students on predominantly White campuses, such as APU. I did this in a variety of ways such as conducting several interviews, attending multi-cultural events on college campuses, and taking part in research surrounding the topic of diversity. Overall, I would like to simply gain a broader understanding of what it is like being a part of a community made up mainly another ethnicity than myself. Besides the interviews, I went about attempting to accomplish this through a variety of ways, which I will outline below.

My first objective was to develop an overall awareness of the African American culture. I planned to do this through the reading of articles, book(s), and attending several lectures on the topic. I would follow my progress and gained knowledge through the diversity class journals and attempt to record my own personal development along the way throughout the quarter, being as honest as possible. I intended to attend a student-led event on campus that focused on Black student awareness, and try to watch a movie that attempted to describe aspects of either the African American culture or at least a specific experience of an African American.

Within my second overall objective, I planned to gain an increased knowledge of the African American culture. To accomplish this goal, I first planned to conduct more involved research through the reading of articles, books and/or sources that included specific histories, strengths, and experiences of African Americans. I wanted to meet with local African American leaders around campus and hear their personal stories of living in a predominantly White community. And finally, I planned to meet with and interview several African American APU students and listen to their personal experiences of living on campus as well.

My third objective for my personal action plan, was to develop some sort of assessment of my own knowledge and comfort in working with African American students. Next, I would attempt

to create a multicultural relationship with an older, wiser African American person. I planned to continue in my study of literature pertaining to the topic, as well as attend either a diversity training experience on campus, or a diversity-oriented conference. Next, I arranged to either conduct or simply attend a focus group of undergraduate students designed to discover different ways to make APU's campus more multiculturally welcoming and affirming. I planned to end the quarter by writing a final paper that involves all the previous research and personal experiences along the way in my progression in learning about the African American culture.

Going back to my first objective, I believe I was to develop an overall awareness of the African American culture. I did a lot of extra-curricular reading throughout the semester including Beverly Daniel Tatum's *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity*. The book was probably the biggest influence on me out of all of the literature I read, and gave me a lot of great insights. Probably the biggest insight I gained from this book was the idea of first realizing I have this White privilege and then after that being able to get beyond that, attempt to reject my privilege by actively and intentionally fighting the injustices that hold back others and myself. I can do this within higher education (specifically within college student affairs).

The research I conducted in doing this was incomplete in the sense that my findings lead me to some sort of conclusion. Each of my research projects and investigations led me to the belief that we need more multicultural research and focus on diversity in higher education. Not much of the data I used in my program evaluation class even included a diversity aspect at all. I definitely plan on conducting more research in the future and within that, I will definitely attempt to bring a more diverse perspective to it.

I kept careful track of my own progression and gaining of knowledge through the diversity journals I kept throughout the quarter. Each journal contains my latest ideas of what I was learned and what I was struggling with at the time. In each journal entry I tried to be as honest as possible in class and in my journal entries as to gain as much knowledge as possible while remaining humble and open to new ideas on the topic.

I also attended a student-led event on campus put on by APU Black Student Awareness club known as BSA Coffeehouse last month. Because I work in the Office of Communiiversity I was able to help plan some of the event and coordinate with BSA and Multi Ethnic Programs some of the logistics for the program. The event was full of great music, poetry, and art and was the best-attended coffeehouse of the year on APU's campus. I had a great time and learned a little about African American culture within the arts during a few poetry slams they held. The music was great and so was the rest of the evening. It's definitely a great program and tradition at APU.

I watched a few movies pertaining to the experiences of African Americans in the U.S. The first of which was Roots (recently released on DVD, by the way!), another was Paul Haggis' Crash, and a third was Remember the Titans. Each of them presents valuable themes and issues prevalent in African American culture in the U.S., but at the same time I was reminded of the fact that no movie (or any media) can predict or interpret the experience of all African Americans. While this seems obvious, I think it's easy for people to assume things about cultures they do not understand completely, especially when they are presented with a little information. For me, I knew this going in, but it is always nice to be reminded of this fact.

My second objective, after developing an awareness of the African American culture, was to gain an overall increase in knowledge of the culture. I began this by conducting more involved research into the culture. I did a book report on the Tatum's book, and identified underlying themes

and analyzed just how it affects my own thinking. I researched a little more about the African American culture, and how it has changed in the past 300 years, focusing on the past fifty years in the U.S. I discovered much in my research, but nothing was more valuable than

As part of an art project on the topic of African American leadership and civil rights in the U.S., I created a collage made up of a collection of different leaders throughout the history of America, focused on civil rights. From Abe Lincoln, Dred Scott, W.E.B. DeBois, and Frederick Douglass to Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez, Medgar Evers, MLKJ and ending with a focus on President Barack Obama, the poster is full of over thirty prominent and important figures in the civil rights movement over the past several hundred years. Through this process in creating this art, I was also able to accomplish some valuable research in better understanding the African American culture. I set out to include maybe 10-15 different well-known figures in recent history, but the more I uncovered about history, the more people I included in the portrait. Being that hindsight is 20/20, I definitely am glad I came across such amazing people in my research, and because of that the picture became much more poignant and well rounded. (The project can be seen in the Appendix.)

Another aspect of this objective was met in meeting with prominent African American leaders in the APU community about the topic. Probably the biggest problem with this was access to prominent figures in our community. Fortunately I was able to attend several talks, chapels, and session in which African American leaders were able to talk on the subject of the African American experience. The most substantial of those was Kneeland Brown's talk in chapel in which he talk about what it was like to attend APU as an undergrad (in the 1990s), in a time when APU was far less diverse than it is now. He talked about how once police pulled him over and dragged him to the ground, put him on his stomach, and put their knee in the back of his neck, all because of his race. It was an eye-opening experience for me, because for some reason I continually forget just how

bigoted people are even in Azusa, California. When I think of the word “racism” or “racist” I immediately think Ku Klux Klan, or slavery, or even my own grandparents who are still quite prejudiced. It’s my own failing that I overlook the immediate presence of racism and pretend diversity is an understood, celebrated part of our community. Unfortunately, it takes harsh truths like professor Brown’s story to bring me back to the reality of our racist world.

A large portion of this objective was made up of my interviews with current undergraduate APU students. I interviewed several African American students about what it is like going to school on a majority White college campus. Their responses ranged as broadly as their experiences were unique. It was hard to find themes from just three interviews, but I’m realizing now that that might be the point. It is impossible to gleam a much better understanding from an entire culture by interviewing three members of it. I did not even think about that until now, but I will still attempt to outline and summarize the interviews in order gain as much knowledge and insight into a few separate African American students.

I began the interviews with the following four questions:

1. Why did you decided to apply to and attend APU?
2. How are the demographics at APU different from your high school (where you grew up)?
3. Is APU doing a good job of establishing a diverse campus/student body? How so?
4. How could APU make more progress in its current plans to provide?

Each interview went in different directions, even within the direct answers to those questions. Probably the most diverse answers were the first two. Each answer was unique to each person. The most extreme cases were students who came from majority White backgrounds and majority African American backgrounds. Obviously the former had a much easier time than the latter in attending APU, and was far less affected by the “culture shock” of a majority White college campus. However, each of the students believes that APU needs to be doing a better job with addressing diversity on campus.

One African American student I interviewed that overall, APU is doing a fine job of dealing with the diversity issue, in reference to both majority and minority students. But she maintained that APU needs to next begin to challenge students more. She claimed that APU administrators “sugarcoat” the issues far too often, which in turn clouds the issues, and for students—whether majority or not—who do not have a well developed understanding of what diversity looks like, can confuse even more. Another student said, “I think one of the biggest problems APU has with this issue is that they think it is a minority problem and yes, there is a need for more support of the minority students on campus but this needs to be an APU issue, not an MEP issue.” She has a great point, and it is something I have not given much thought to in the past. APU does a horrible job for the most part in addressing racially diverse issues as an entire community and far too often caters issues to serve only the office of Multi Ethnic Programs and the students connected with the office. The biggest thing I learned from the interviews was that APU needs to begin doing a much better job engaging the student body as a whole in diversity issues, and not just preaching to the choir—as the open forum town hall meeting did.

In the third section, my final objective was to develop multicultural skills in order to work more effectively with African American students. Like each of the previous sections, this objective is something I will hopefully spend the rest of my life trying to get better at all the time. Fortunately, this is a time in which I can intentionally keep careful track of my own development and understanding and hopefully make substantial progress during the process.

I think the most impactful goal I achieved in this last objective was in attending APU’s open forum city hall meeting event in UTCC two weeks ago. It was a great chance for students to be able to voice their opinions to some of the highest-ranking administrators at APU. After a lot of filler—

for almost an hour—the president finally sat down with about twenty students on the stage and began to dialogue about their concerns towards diversity on the campus.

The biggest discussion of the night between the students and administrators was the concept of APU's plan for racism. A student started out by asked president Wallace what were the exact ramifications and consequences for racist acts on campus. He then responded with saying that each incident is taken on a case-by-case basis, but students did not like that answer. They continued to ask the president to establish a clear set of guidelines and consequences for when students violate others with hate-speech, racist language and bigoted actions, but the president seemed to repeatedly maintain that it was not possible implement such a plan. Legal reasons aside, the students continued to ask why when a student violates alcohol regulations on campus, there are exact, step by step actions the university takes, but for the former actions, it becomes particular to the student and situation. While it might have been a legitimate excuse, president Wallace's reason for not being able to give specific university action seemed to almost aggravate the students on the stage. Either way, the end purpose of the event was accomplished, which was to connect students with the president of APU, and get clear answers from him. Whether they agreed with him or not, is a whole other discussion.

I learned a lot from this assignment, which unfortunately I was dreading throughout the quarter. Without a doubt, the most useful information I gained—as I see it now—was that gleamed from the interviews with students. I thought going into it that the interviews would provide me with examples of the African American experience. I realize now, that that idea is not only a bit narrow-minded and ignorant, but that these interviews just opened my eyes to a few, select African American experiences. No student, no matter what race/ethnicity can speak on behalf of their entire demographic—not that I ever would have said the opposite, but apparently I believe it. I digress.

The point is, the most important aspect of this information that I gained was a much better picture of how APU is currently addressing diversity issues. It gives me a much better idea of my own worldview and how I want to address these issues both now in my own life and in the future in my college students affairs profession.

Another aspect I will value highly is that of getting to know students outside my White, male, Christian, higher education (etc.) demographic. Every once in a long while I step out of my bubble and get to know others outside of my clique and it is almost always an extremely enlightening experience. I will definitely try to maintain an aspect of this idea in my life from now on. Whether it is based on race, socio-economic class, or whatever else it might be, I definitely hold a higher respect and appreciation for being able to step outside of my own comfort zone, get to know someone better on a deeper level, and impact each other in ways that normal, everyday life does not let us get to. Hopefully, from now on, I will be able to be more comfortable with letting go of some of my own prejudices and biases, and become more loving and accepting of those around me.

## APPENDIX

