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To See Without Judging

Story by TIM OBERMILLER

Kira Hudson Banks remembers that, as a young teenager, she wrote an essay answering the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“I said I wanted to be a cross-cultural psychologist,” says Banks, laughing. “Even if I didn’t know quite what that meant.”



In her Gateway course “Understanding Race,” Banks (center) starts with the premise “that we all come to the table with different identities. When we talk about race and racism, we often make it a ‘people of color’ issue. And it’s not.” (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Banks suspects her answer had something to do with her experiences growing up in the small, mostly white town of Edwardsville in southern Illinois. “Most of the black families at that time were of lower socio-economic status. But my experience being the daughter of a physician was not that. And so that set me apart from the black kids. And while I was more accepted by the white kids, I was never asked to a dance or very many dates — it was just an unspoken barrier you didn’t cross. So I began to notice all the different boundaries we create based on things like race and class, and all the other ways people define us and we define

ourselves. It was something I wanted to learn more about.”

Banks was given that chance on her very first day as a student at Mount Holyoke College. The professor of her psychology class was Beverly Daniel Tatum, who happened to be one of the nation’s foremost thinkers on racial identity. “She talked about her research, about black families in white communities, and I thought, ‘Oh, my gosh — that’s my life!’ I remember going up to her after class and saying how I thought her research was interesting. She offered to discuss it more with me during her office hours. I ended up doing that — and from there really following in her footsteps.”

Banks started her graduate studies in clinical psychology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, with the intent of becoming “a professor at a school like Mount Holyoke. Because I liked the feel of a small liberal arts college and wanted to try to influence young lives the way that I had been influenced and mentored.” Joining Illinois Wesleyan’s faculty in 2004, Banks says she

was attracted to the balance it offered professors to focus “both on teaching and on being active scholars.”

Much of Banks’ teaching philosophy and approach to her research builds on the results of her doctoral dissertation, which provided evidence “that talking about and understanding the dynamics of race in society can actually buffer negative effects of discrimination on mental health.”

Simply put, Banks believes that having open discussions with people about race is healthy for everyone — though it can, she admits, also be uncomfortable.

“When we talk about race in the classroom, sometimes defenses go up and white students will say, ‘I’m not a racist. I didn’t ask for this and it’s not what I’ve bought into,’” says Banks. “And I explain that just because a person may have certain privileges and advantages based on his or her race doesn’t mean their life is perfect and everything is easy. None of us opted into this system — we’re born into it. My role is to help them see that system for what it really is, because you need to see it first before you can move beyond it.”

Race can be a challenge to discuss because many people are unsure how to even define it, says Banks. “We throw around the term ‘race’ in the media and pop culture, and we really don’t know what it means.”

One of the most enduring myths about race, she says, is that it has a biological basis. “Scientists have really debunked the idea that there are genetic boundaries based on race. So moving beyond that assumption is an important first step.”

Instead, Banks says, race is a “social construct,” an invention based upon myths and stereotypes that were created by one group to hold advantage over another. “One obvious example is slavery,” says Banks. “To justify enslavement, it was popular in white culture to portray Africans as less than human and therefore incapable of being free. And even after slavery was abolished, those negative stereotypes persisted.”

While most white Americans have personally rejected such stereotypes, Banks says it is important to understand the ways that racism persists as a social construct. “If we look at our society in terms of entitlements such as educational and health care, we can clearly see a disparity that’s based on how we define race. There are systematic advantages in our society given to some groups and not to others.

“Institutional racism is more than the sum of individual actions within a system,” Banks continues. “It encompasses the norms, values and rules of an organization which have shaped inequities of resources, power and opportunity.”

While Banks believes that racism continues to be a factor in American society, its effects on individuals can vary widely. “There are many factors that we use to define our self-identity — race, gender, religion, our family role, whether we like sports or theater — all those different things.



Students in her class find common ground through open discussion.
(Photo by Marc Featherly)

“That’s why I disagree with the idea that the cure for racism is to become colorblind. Because for many people, race is an important part of their self-identity. The goal is to be able to see people’s race without judging them based on their race.”

In her research, Banks has looked at how African Americans’ concepts of self-identity can be negatively affected by racial discrimination. Subjects of those studies have included African American college students. She found that black students who are more hopeful are also more likely to report experiencing symptoms of depression when confronted with racism.

“We define ‘hopeful’ as the sense of believing you possess multiple pathways and abilities to achieve your goals,” Banks explains. “And the more hopeful a student is by that definition, the more likely they will experience depressive symptoms when confronted by discrimination.

“We can speculate as to the reasons. But one thought is that the impact of discrimination on hopeful students is greater because they see it as a barrier standing in front of their goals that they can’t get around.”

One way to help students deal with discrimination is to “provide a strong support system. It’s good to have someone to talk to, because you don’t want to internalize negative experiences and keep that emotion bottled up inside. Discrimination is a stressor for people of color. But, just like with any form of stress, you can learn to manage it. And, of course, I’m of the mindset that we also need to be learning how to decrease the sources of that stress.”

Banks is a firm believer that colleges and universities can set good examples for how society can productively deal with issues of race and discrimination. But to make diversity a reachable goal requires that both white students and students of color clearly understand the benefits of being part of a more diverse community.

“It’s our job to help students see that racism is not simply an issue for people of color,” says Banks. “It’s something we are all accountable for addressing. Just like sexism can’t be eradicated solely by women putting pressure on the glass ceiling, fighting racism will require effort from each and every one of us.”

Among her current research projects, Banks is examining how white students perceive diversity goals on their campuses. “In many cases, white students aren’t clear about the purpose of diversity or why it should matter to them,” she says. “Many believe it’s simply an effort to increase numbers of students of color or that it has to do with a quota system, even though quotas have been illegal since the 1970s.” Banks remains optimistic that society can overcome the social barriers that cause racism to persist, but only if it provides sanctioned spaces “where we can really actively engage in conversations that we might otherwise shy away from.”

Such engagements, Banks says, are the real key to overcoming the age-old problem of racism. “People often say, ‘We fear what we don’t know.’ But I think that’s false: I think we fear what we think we know. And if we would open our hearts and our minds and be willing to truly experience relationships with people who are different from us, I think that’s what it will take.”