

# How well are we doing on race? A realistic assessment rooted in research

BY DEBORAH H. C. GIN

As the ATS Committee on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) infuses new energy into its programming (see Mary Young, “Reflection, research, and response: re-energizing ATS work on race and ethnicity”), it is worth reviewing the research findings that are driving the initiative. The research—conducted in 2014–2015—included focus groups, an online survey, and face-to-face consultations, collectively gathering the input of more than 175 past CORE participants. This summary of the research offers clear indicators as to how effective the first 14 years of CORE work proved to be, what has worked, and what has not.<sup>1</sup>

## Phase 1 (2000–2005) Individual participation does not guarantee institutional change.

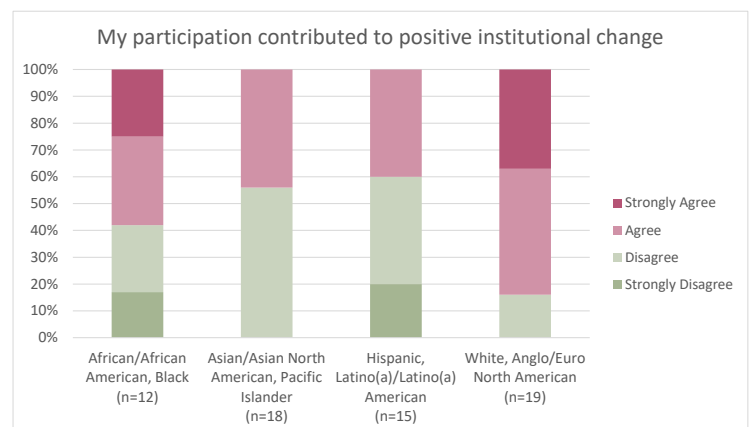
The goals of the first phase of CORE work were to provide racial/ethnic faculty and administrators a venue to discuss challenges experienced in their contexts and to connect with senior racial/ethnic faculty and administrators at predominantly white institutions for support.

1 The full research report was published in the ATS journal in 2017: Daniel O. Aleshire, Deborah H. C. Gin, and Willie James Jennings, “The Committee on Race and Ethnicity: A Retrospective of 14 years of Work,” *Theological Education* 50, no. 2 (2017): 21–46.



Indeed, respondents felt that they had meaningfully connected, that their race/ethnicity was valued, and that they had been encouraged to attend to race/ethnicity in their roles.

It appears, however, that participation in programming during this cycle did not necessarily translate to lasting institutional change. Survey participants’ responses differed by race and by size of institution. What is unclear, however, is what combination of institutional capacity for change, racial group social construction, and individual sense of agency is at play in the response patterns. Literature is abundant in its claim that institutional realities present double, triple, multiple binds for constituents of



color and women constituents: there are almost always too few individuals committed to institutional change around diversity, and the limited positions constituents of color and women constituents hold in decision-making positions further accentuate power asymmetries. Focus group comments highlighted this structural inequity:

Whose voice makes change? How is a new voice welcomed/valued/honored in the context of the host tradition? Do participants have significant voice coming back from CORE events? We need to consider how to help schools evaluate and reformulate structures of power and leadership, how to get new faces and new voices at your tables.

Might there also be differences, by race or other individual and institutional characteristics, in what constitutes “change” and how “lasting” is defined? What does it mean, for example, that among those who reported their institutions experiencing major, lasting change, half were white respondents and none were of Latin descent? What may be understood as lasting change by one may not be experienced as lasting change by another. And who determines the definition of change at a given institution? How do institutions determine what is success; who gets to speak into those definitions?

## **Phase 2 (2006–2008)**

### ***Institutional capacity does not guarantee individual success.***

Building informational capacity requires both cultivating *individual* understanding and building *institutional* capacity. Individuals can learn all they have access to, but members of non-dominant communities in theological education tell us that is often not enough. The *institution* must also build informational capacity in order that individuals, groups, and the institution can benefit from that learning.

Goals for the second phase of CORE work included providing individual racial/ethnic constituents with

knowledge about systemic realities related to race/ethnicity and strategies to cope with those realities **and** providing institutions with diversity-related resources. The work in this phase appears to have met this goal for building informational capacity, particularly for individual constituent members. However, the data suggest some disconnect between institutional learning and its impact on the constituencies such learning is meant to support.

A gap appears to exist between increased informational capacity by an institution and the impact of that capacity, particularly the benefits to racial/ethnic constituents—and their consequent satisfaction. Individual satisfaction is most closely related to a sense of personal learning about dynamics of race and a sense of benefiting from the institution’s use of diversity best practices. But participants didn’t feel they benefited in this way.

In addition, an institution is seen as increasing in its capacity to meet the needs of its racial/ethnic constituents when it appears to be using best practices for professionally developing its faculty

*... are more systemic and comprehensive strategies needed in order that constituents of non-dominant groups sense some benefit?*

of color and when constituents of color use diversity resources that are available to the institution. But participants indicated that they didn’t use such resources.

What remains unclear for both individual learning and institutional capacity is why: Why did participants feel they had not benefitted from the institution’s use of diversity best practices? Is an institution’s use of diversity best practices enough, or are more systemic and comprehensive strategies needed in order that constituents of non-dominant groups sense some benefit? And why did participants not use the resources on race/ethnicity at their institutions? Were they the right resources? Are “best practices” resources what is needed, or are more scholarly resources needed in this context of theological education, resources that address theologies of diversity or theoretical treatments of race?

## Phase 3 (2010–2014)

### ***Institutional change needs to be intentional.***

The main program of Phase 3 was *Preparing for 2040*. The goal of this program was to assist schools in constructing and implementing strategic diversity plans toward enhancing institutional capacity to educate students for ministry in a multiracial world. Plan foci included faculty culture, reframing teaching and learning, understanding race and ethnicity, and conflict resolution. The program involved 65 schools in eight cohorts, working with diversity coaches identified from among ATS schools. According to participants, both the goal and the strategies used were appropriate in this cycle.

Though causality cannot be claimed, there seems to be good indication that participation in the *Preparing for 2040* program corresponds to institutional change. Those who participated in the program witnessed institutional change; those who did not participate did not see change. The types of change witnessed fall into four categories: hiring practices, faculty/administration formation or training, curricular changes, and structural changes.

Perception of impact, however, was mixed among those who had participated. On average, according to white respondents and respondents of Asian descent, there was institutional change related to the *Preparing for 2040* programming. For respondents of African and Latin descent, however, institutional change was not as apparent. Reasons for the difference in perception remain unclear, although focus groups suggested some ways forward:

Change for what racial/ethnic group? We need to collaborate with change management consultants/leaders inside and beyond higher education to build the capacities of institutional leaders to lead change within already stressed institutions and overextended leaders, with regard to mission, values, policies, and practices; board structures; and faculty and staff.

I strongly recommend that we shift our program approach from a focus on (a) acquiring knowledge or (b) analyzing situations (both of which are essential) to a focus on (c) reconstructing our communities.

As we saw in the findings from the first cycle of work, perspectives vary by race. It appears that different racial/ethnic groups benefit in different ways from institutional change around diversity issues. Why is this the case? And how might future work attend to appropriate focuses for *each* racial/ethnic group? In what ways could ATS learn from organizations that are already effectively addressing the needs of various racial/ethnic groups? And what might be learned from change management leaders in order to cultivate lasting missional change to the benefit of students and employees of color, as well as to the schools?

As the CORE initiative is re-energized, we will collectively be working to answer these questions.



*Deborah H. C. Gin is Director of Research and Faculty Development at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*