

I'm not racist, I have black friends!

By *Natasha Williams and Derick Jones*

Through our work to bring awareness to the issues of diversity and inclusion into the profession, we often find ourselves on the receiving end of the comment, "I'm not racist, I have black friends." But having black friends is not the same as working actively to dismantle systems of oppression. Just because you are not overtly biased does not mean you do not live and operate in cultural conditioning and systemic racism.

We recognize that this is an uncomfortable conversation to have because it requires someone in the majority to examine the ways in which they live, breathe, and exist in a world that is designed specifically to cater to them. This involves examination of what it means to be privileged based solely on ethnic identity. This is especially difficult work due to the nature or our inability, as a society, to have open dialogue regarding race and marginalization and other discriminatory factors that permeate our society. Sadly, many are not accustomed to hearing themselves identified by their race (i.e., white) despite identifying everyone else by their race. Nor are white Americans prepared to see themselves as privileged since they tend to equate privilege with having money, and because they often experience the same financial struggles as other minority groups, they do not believe themselves to be privileged. The combination of these two dynamics often leads to an automatic defensiveness that derails the conversation before it can ever take place.

In our case, it disrupts our efforts at bringing awareness to issues of diversity and inclusion both within NCURA and the research administration profession as a whole.

If we are to have a meaningful and transformative diversity and inclusion program within NCURA it is vitally important that we each commit to engaging in a process of self-discovery and a willingness to be aware of how we have benefited from systems that have marginalized others. This awakening moment will allow us

to transcend our unconscious biases and move in unison towards building a profession that more accurately reflects society as a whole. This means being willing to allow ourselves to become challenged in what we believe and how we behave, and sitting with uncomfortable thoughts and feelings during the process of discovery. In the words of Iyanla Vanzant, "let's be willing to do the work." It is this work of self-awareness that can be used as the building blocks for meaningful discussions and focused change.

Change starts with a willingness to lower our defenses and have an open and honest communication to understand the powerful impact cultural conditioning and systemic racism has on every fiber of our society. This is not a discussion people of color and other marginalized groups can have with our peers but we can be allies in fostering the truth and unraveling the social-economic effects the current system has on marginalized groups in society. To hear from those who benefit from the current system of exclusion who resemble themselves to fully grasp the concept is needed. It is the honest internal dialogue and awakening that needs to be grassroots from those who are

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earnestly advocating for diversity and inclusion along with us. We can be your allies and support you but cannot lead the effort in this regard. Open communication with an ear to hear and a willingness to grow and go in a direction that promotes inclusion and equity can become the lasting bi-product derived from self-awareness and moving in a direction to be intentionally diverse and inclusive. It all starts with you having that internal dialogue and challenging the process of your reality as it relates to your adherence to a system that automatically discriminates against marginalized groups. Let the change begin with you. ■



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