

**Privileging “Race” at Centers and Institutes in Higher Education:  
A Study of the Landscape**

Jonathan Lightfoot, Ph.D.

Hofstra University

**Abstract**

After identifying a number of academic centers with "Race" in their names at American colleges and universities in the United States, we sought to explore the efficacy and impact these centers have on their respective campus communities and beyond. The goal of this qualitative exploratory research was to better understand the nature of these race-oriented academic centers and the relationship they have with their host institutions. From a combination of website review, oral interview and online survey data, the study found that these American race-based academic centers and institutes contribute to our overall knowledge in several ways, including how they provide opportunities to conduct research, impact curriculum and expand the programming platform in ways not easily afforded under the traditional departmental structures of the academy. However, because these centers are relatively new to the landscape of higher education, they appear to wrestle with identity formation. Perhaps academic institutions that do not currently have such centers and institutes will use this study to help them make the decision to establish one and the ones that already have them will better understand how to leverage the value they bring to their institutions.

**Key Words:** Race, Ethnicity, Diversity, Inclusion, Culture, Social Justice, Equality, and Equity

## Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, an increasing number of colleges and universities in the United States of America have established centers and institutes that frame “race” and racism as privileged categories of analysis and academic inquiry. The term ‘privileged’ here is used to convey a sense of priority, urgency and worthiness of attention that occurs when one removes vestiges of shame and devaluation that surrounds certain areas of study, particularly involving issues of “race” and racism. Institutional study of “race” is often coupled with or examined at the interdisciplinary intersections of conceptual notions of ethnicity, gender, equality/equity, democracy, culture and justice. Qualitative study data was collected and analyzed from institutional websites, survey responses and informal semi-structured interviews to draw conclusions about the efficacy of such centers as they seek to illuminate and critically connect their host institutions with the larger society around issues of racial injustice. Conventional wisdom posits the notion that the academy should be a welcoming place to deconstruct societal problems with racial discrimination and social, economic and political inequality. However, the fact that race-based centers and institutes are relatively new additions to the academic neighborhood seem to indicate residual reluctance and perhaps resistance to their formation and inclusion among a plethora of other types of social and natural science centers that dot the academic landscape.

Hopefully, this study will extend the knowledge advanced by prior research on think tanks, centers and institutes. Some of the earlier studies took historical looks at the origin, functions, structures, control, and characteristics of centers and institutes (Ikenberry and Friedman, 1972). An assessment of their defined roles in the academy determined that centers and institutes create institutional flexibility and provide enhanced opportunities for universities to pursue areas of research, innovation, pedagogy, and public service that goes beyond the scope, capacity and wherewithal of the traditional departmental structure of the organization. Melnick (1999) noted the appearance of American think tanks as far back as the early 1900s, which were created in response to timely social and economic issues. At that time, most of them were not associated with universities or government research bureaus, but instead were private operations where “public intellectuals” were given liberties to offer analysis and develop policy solutions that could effectively address and potentially resolve the various issues of the day. This scholarly approach to such problems was attractive to academics who could perform empirical analysis without concern of the demands of teaching and ostensibly remain independent of political influence.

Melnick (1999) identifies two additional eras of major growth and development of think tanks, the aftermath of World War II and the austerity that characterized the 1970s and 1980s. The former period was focused on the U.S. government’s effort to support the Air Force in its desire to obtain an independent and intelligent resource to advise military defense personnel on strategic issues. The RAND Corporation was the manifestation of national security and military technology coming together to fight the Cold War. This opened the door for universities to attract government funds to establish scientific research centers, state of the art laboratories and related institutes. The 1957 Russian launch of Sputnik escalated the competition for space travel and exploration, which prompted K-12 schools to strengthen their science, technology,

engineering and math curriculums (STEM) to meet the growing demands for STEM center creation and research and feed the higher education pipeline into stable STEM careers.

In contrast, the further growth and development of think tanks, centers and institutes brought on by the austerity of the 1970s and 1980s was in response to the culture wars and social revolution of the modern American Civil Rights Movement that immediately preceded this period during the 1950s and 1960s. A growing interest in social science research that sought to influence public policy was in vogue. Budget cuts created financial and economic exigencies, which prompted a proliferation of not-for-profit research organizations to compete for money and resources that had been previously dominated by STEM interests. Ikenberry and Friedman (1972) noted the national crises that erupted during the Black struggle for civil and human rights as an integral part of this surge of center development.

The research agenda for these new think tanks, centers and institutes was robust. Specifically, and not in any order, was the growing racial tension, urban decline and unrest, white flight to the suburbs, violent voter suppression, rising crime, environmental pollution, persistent poverty, school segregation, Southeast Asian wars and immigration. Additionally, scarce resources were exacerbated by rapidly changing domestic tax structures, differential international trade policies, and other manufactured global crises, such as the Arab oil embargo of 1973-74. These challenges further fueled expectations that our social, economic and political ills could be improved via social science research that could also instill hope by helping us to better understand what plagues us as a society.

Still, and interestingly enough, academic centers with racial and social justice orientations did not come to the fore in any noticeable numbers at many universities until thirty and forty years after this period. Thus, the role of these centers are often not as well defined, which leads many stakeholders to assume that the function of these centers and institutes is to adjudicate issues of racism and white supremacy on campus. While we acknowledge the natural connection between racial discrimination and the need to practically resolve the problems it creates, academic centers that are rooted in social justice lack the authority and power to adjudicate such violations and impose sanctions. These centers and institutes are designed and better suited to address issues of racism, white supremacy, racial discrimination and inequality in a broader theoretical sense through social scientific research, hosting symposia, convening conferences and influencing academic curricula.

The results suggest that further research is needed to determine how race-oriented centers can best design organizational and operational structures that better ensure their credibility, sustainability and alignment with the research, teaching, and service missions of their host institutions. The expectation is that when these centers explicitly align themselves with the mission of their institution, they secure the necessary funding to remain viable and sustainable. Ultimately, this study fills in the gap of research on race-oriented academic centers and reveals the need to further explore the common bonds between them, and the importance of forming a national coalition of centers focused on race, racism, and social justice, which will increase credibility and value among stakeholders and skeptics alike.

## **Research Question**

This research study seeks to explore what race-oriented centers do, their common bonds and differences in function and role, the level of support they receive, and the impact they have on their campus communities, and beyond.

## **Methodology**

From an internet search of American colleges and universities, the author and research associates identified forty-five (45) centers and institutes with the word “race” as part of their name. Our search considered a number of characteristic identity markers such as size, geographic location, public or private status, Carnegie Classification and demographic profile, among others. From a review of many of the center’s websites, we developed a general understanding of the leadership structure, staff, history, types of research generated, amount of programming produced, and what services each provided; all of which spoke to the level of engagement with the hosting campus community and beyond. One of the goals of the website search was to gain enough familiarity with the written narrative provided and video and still images displayed to help us determine which centers we should contact to request an oral interview or to ask to complete an online survey.

Requests for oral interviews with select authorized center leaders went out via email towards the end of the fall semester 2020 with the expectation that they would be scheduled to occur during the January interim session prior to the beginning of the spring semester 2021. Part of the motivation for seeking oral interviews before sending out surveys was to use the interview data to help inform and create the survey questions. Our email requests and follow-up phone calls to secure either a zoom or telephone interview yielded only two (2) oral interviews.

Our email requests and follow-up phone calls to the centers’ leadership and authorized staff to complete our online survey yielded a slightly better response. We were able to secure eight (8) completed surveys, which contributed a fair amount of information with which to better understand the aspects of the centers regarding their efficacy and relationship to the college or university that would not necessarily be suitable to include on the center’s website.

The author and associates attributed the difficulties we encountered in getting the desired response rates to the extraordinary times we live in now. Crafting data collection methods that could possibly overcome these extraordinary times has proven elusive. The Covid-19 pandemic has upended a lot of customary operations across the board, which we will attempt to address in more speculative details in the limitations section. Our efforts to increase interview and online survey response rates included several follow-up attempts to contact the centers via social media accounts such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

## **Results/Discussion**

Each of the two (2) oral interviews produced nearly two (2) hours of data and did in fact help inform the survey questions. It is worth noting that the representative interviews were with two center directors from two top tier institutions, one on the east coast and the other on the west coast.

The top-tier east coast institution interview revealed a center that was committed to operating at a high level of integrity and demonstrating a strong sense of mission and core values that were built around increasing campus equity and inclusion. The director believed it was important to make an effort to include people from all backgrounds when working towards diversity and inclusion. The center was clearly committed to “building bridges within the community” and building coalitions in solidarity across multiple community borders. This goal required the center to implement various strategies such as conducting equity audits to assess the level of diversity and inclusion within and among the campus communities. Another method that was employed to promote diversity and inclusion was to develop strategic planning processes that included diversity training for faculty, which could serve as a model for other areas of the university to follow.

The Center noted that they were very fortunate to have strong support from the university and that the president publicly recognized and emphasized the importance of their work. Because diversity and inclusion work generally involves institutional change, which can be uncomfortable to the status quo, the center appreciates how support at the highest level can significantly help facilitate the center's mission, goals and objectives. The fact that the center receives significant funding from the federal government enables them to have greater impact and effect change at both the faculty and student levels. Such support increases the center's capacity to fund faculty research, recruitment, student scholarship, and programming. The center's staff includes approximately twenty (20) employees from a combination of full-time faculty and student fellows, all of which are responsible for different aspects of the center's operations. The center director recognized their comparatively large support staff structure, while also noting that the size was commensurate with its many obligations and commitment to doing the large scale work of diversity and inclusion at a complex top-tier institution. Despite the challenges we all face having to work through a devastating pandemic, this center director has persevered and the mission of the center has thus far continued to serve to the larger campus community.

The top-tier west coast institution interview also revealed a center that was committed to operating at a high level of integrity and demonstrating a strong sense of mission and core values. The center prides itself on being the ‘hub’ for students and faculty to learn about the historical and contemporary experience with racial injustice in America and around the globe. The center was created as a direct response to student protest and activism around demands for curricular equality and equitable faculty representation. The result was the creation of a center that embeds a number of scholastic opportunities and programs, including several undergraduate majors and minors, as well as graduate level degree programs. The center's undergraduate students are required to complete a summer internship by working for a social justice organization. This is a clear demonstration of the center's commitment to serving the community via service learning and striking a balance between practical and theoretical responses to social and racial justice issues.

Although the center believes the university is largely supportive of its mission, goals and objectives, they offered evidence of bias and unequal treatment in comparison to the other centers and institutes at the university. The center reports receiving financial support from both

internal and external sources, including grants from the government and various foundations. The director also acknowledged its relative position of privilege of being a race-oriented center located at a prestigious American university and the benefits it affords. Specifically, the director is recognizing the significance of having a platform from which to speak to issues of race, racism, and social justice.

However, they discovered that their level of financial support from the university paled in comparison to other centers that do not have a race-based orientation. These other university centers do not employ people of color, have never employed people of color and no one seems to challenge them on their lack of diversity and inclusion. While acknowledging the funding disparity and level of commitment from their university, the director reported “it’s just little things such as when you hit the donate button on the university’s website, and the list of centers to donate to pops up, we’re not listed for donation. Things like that”. The author finds it ironic to find an academic center that actively conducts and encourages research on race and social justice issues appears to be a victim of racial injustice and is undervalued for their role at their university. This speaks to the common thread of marginalization reflected throughout the data.

As previously stated, the interviews led to the creation of focused survey questions in the following areas: Chief Diversity Officers, Overall Impact, Support and Challenges, Mission and Objectives. The responses to the survey questions are presented according to the themes above. Participants were able to respond to a variety of questions types including Likert, yes/no, multiple choice and open narrative.

#### Chief Diversity Officers and Race-based Centers

A relatively recent move towards advancing racial and ethnic diversity and equity in higher education was the founding of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE) in 2003. The American Council on Education’s (ACE) Center for Advancement of Racial and Ethnic Equity assembled a number of Chief Diversity Officers (CDO) from higher education and business sectors to meet at the Ohio State University to address diversity and inclusion issues and to issue a call for a national association of these institutional leaders. The association has since evolved into an elaborate network of support and guidance for chief diversity and inclusion officers in higher education from which many business and industry leaders look to for modeling and best practices.

Seven (7) of the eight (8) respondents to our survey indicate the presence of a chief diversity and inclusion officer at their host institutions. The fact that academic CDOs have formed a national organization that clearly articulates a broad mission, a set of standards and other informational guidelines bodes well for the possibility of race-based centers and institutes following their lead to form similar broad missions, standards and guidelines to help strengthen their institutional impact and enrich the quality of their work. Of the sixteen standards that are listed on the NADOHE website, two appear relevant to the research agenda of the centers included in this study, standards six and seven:

Standard Six: Chief diversity officers work within a community of scholars to advocate for inclusive excellence in research, creativity, and scholarship in all fields as fundamental to the mission-driven work of the institution.

Standard Seven: Chief diversity officers are committed to drawing from existing scholarship and using evidence-based practices to provide intellectual leadership in advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion (NADOHE, 2021).

These standards illustrate the correlation between the goals and objectives of race-based centers and CDOs, which makes exploring the working relationship between the two imperative. Study participants seem to regard the relationship between CDOs and centers for race to be symbiotic, which can prove mutually beneficial in advancing the respective goals and objectives of each.

However, the next survey question sought to build on the connection between the CDO and the race-based centers. It asked study participants to rate the degree of satisfaction with the overall diversity and inclusion profile of their host institutions. Interestingly, only one (1) out of eight (8) centers expressed satisfaction with their degree of diversity and inclusion and that was the one institution that did not have a CDO. Three (3) of the eight (8) centers indicated that they were somewhat satisfied with their diversity and inclusion profile and three indicated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Only one (1) center respondent expressed clear dissatisfaction with their institution’s diversity and inclusion profile. The results suggest there may be missed opportunities to build a stronger partnership and relationship between race-based centers and CDOs.

Conversely, as a director one of our initial objectives as a newly established center in 2017 was to propose the hiring of a Chief Diversity Inclusion Officer (CDIO), which was approved. After a national search that yielded nearly two hundred applications, an inaugural CDIO was hired in 2019. Nevertheless, the working relationship with the CDIO and the center is arguably non-existent. CDOs have a clear purpose and a visible leadership role, which can be leveraged, using their capital to work alongside centers to help secure funding and support research efforts. Research and curriculum endeavors can be partly informed by the CDO’s administrative role and insight into campus culture. Generally, both CDOs and centers with racial and ethnic justice orientations would benefit from a neatly defined bond.

### Overall Impact

The next set of questions deal with the overall impact respondents believe their centers have had on their campus community.

Two (2) of the eight (8) respondents report that their centers have had a slight impact on improving the student racial diversity profile at their host institution, while another two (2) reported that they have had a great impact on their student racial diversity profile. One half (4) of the centers believe that the center has had a moderate impact on the student racial diversity profile.

Two (2) of the eight (8) respondents report that their centers have had a moderate impact on improving the staff and administrator racial diversity profile at their host institution, while

another two (2) reported that they have had a no impact on improving their staff and administrator racial diversity profile. One half (4) of the centers believe that the center has had a slight impact on the staff and administrator racial diversity profile.

Three (3) of the eight (8) respondents report that their centers have had a moderate impact on improving the faculty racial diversity profile at their host institution, while another two (2) reported that they have had a lot of impact on improving their faculty racial diversity profile. Another three (3) of the centers believe that the center has had a slight impact on the staff and administrator racial diversity profile.

Below are a few selective responses to our request to share the impact they believe their centers have had on improving the climate and culture on campus with regards to diversity and inclusion:

*“On campus our students and faculty are talking more about racial and social justice issues. We are not running away from the uncomfortable conversations. We are constantly looking for ways to grow in not just diversity, but solidarity.”*

*“It has been an important space for faculty and students to converge on ideas related to race and racism.”*

*“(Center) is a scholarly hub and a support network for scholars of color who conduct research on race and ethnicity. We help to recruit and retain grad students, postdocs, and faculty of color, and provide a community of support.”*

*“We have specific programs aimed at improving the sense of belonging on campus.”*

*“Significant impact. Creating space for scholarly exchange of ideas across disciplines, mentorship of younger faculty, student curricular enrichment via relevant and timely programming.”*

*“The campus intercultural center was born from it which has greatly impacted campus life.”*

Results indicate students have been inspired to approach their academic pursuits with an entrepreneurial spirit. Their response to the Center has been one that demonstrates a sense of ownership, agency and initiative to connect their contemporary reality with forward looking vision and application.

Six (6) of the eight (8) centers report a connection to and positive impact on the academic curriculum of their institutions, while two (2) report no relationship or impact on the academic curriculum. Whereas traditional academic departments may be limited to offering approved courses that adhere to established accreditation standards, centers and institutes appear at liberty to negotiate creative options and innovative courses across curriculum borders to achieve interdisciplinary programming that can cater to the unique needs and demands of students.

### Support and Challenges

Both financial and non-financial support is very important to the sustainability of these centers if they are to have a measurable impact on the institution. Non-financial supports include office

space, volunteer advisory board, student assistance, promotional event advertising and collaborative co-sponsorships. The vast majority seven (7) of the eight (8) centers indicate strong support from the university and the interdisciplinary departments connected to their centers. Specifically, the centers note a variety of financial supports coming from multiple sources, including university funding, grant funding and private donations. One (1) of the eight (8) centers boasts an annual average operating budget that ranges between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000. Two (2) of the centers claim an annual operating budget ranging between \$100,000 and \$500,000. Three (3) operate on an annual budget of less than \$50,000 per year. Two (2) centers preferred not to answer the question. More funding usually speaks to the institution’s commitment level to the center’s mission and goals, which in the long run has direct consequences on the impact and sustainability of the center.

Final considerations of this study include the length of time the “race” Centers under review have been established and the amount and sources of funding that support the operations and work of these centers. Center participants were asked to identify their top five (5) budget priorities. The responses included compensation for directors and staff, research development, events programming, conference travel, and support for post docs and visiting fellows. The overall degree of satisfaction with which the centers regard the amount of financial support they receive is revealing. Three (3) of the eight (8) centers indicated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their financial support. Two (2) were satisfied and another two (2) were dissatisfied. Only one (1) center respondent expressed great dissatisfaction with the amount of financial support they receive to carry out their center’s mission, goals and objectives.

It is further helpful to note how their funding and its sources compare to other academic centers that don’t prioritize “race” and its intersectional components among its mission, goals and objectives. As with the case of the top-tier west coast institution, race-based centers often do not have the same opportunities for funding, which may be partly due to low visibility and recognition.

When asked to share some of the challenges they have faced in doing center related work the study participants said the following:

*“While doing events virtually has been tremendous, our strength lies in community. We are looking forward to engaging in community outreach once the pandemic is over.”*

*“Money. It has been directed by two faculty members for years (most of which were uncompensated). We have at last raised enough money to hire a director which will enable the Center to have a person dedicated to its growth.”*

*“(We are) understaffed and under-resourced. We current do not have enough resources or capacity to engage in research activity. We spend a considerable amount of time simply advocating for more resources, when we could be producing research with impacts on the community. It is also a challenge to retain scholars of color at a predominantly white institution.”*

*“One of the major hurdles we face is trying to be innovative within the existing structures and policies of the university.”*

*“Disrespect of the research agenda (reducing to diversity goals alone); some administrators in the past being hostile and resistant to supporting the center and starving the unit with shoestring budgets.”*

Each center survey respondent was asked to envision an improved diversity and inclusion profile they would like to see at their host institutions to which they replied:

*“More substantive resources invested in the individuals, programs, and centers/institutes that have been doing diversity work and research on race/ethnicity for decades.”*

*“A continued centering of the need to develop an equity focus, particularly in lieu of today’s political environment.”*

*“A greater sense of coordination among the DEI staff working across the university and a more focused plan to improve the campus climate and curriculum would be extremely beneficial”*

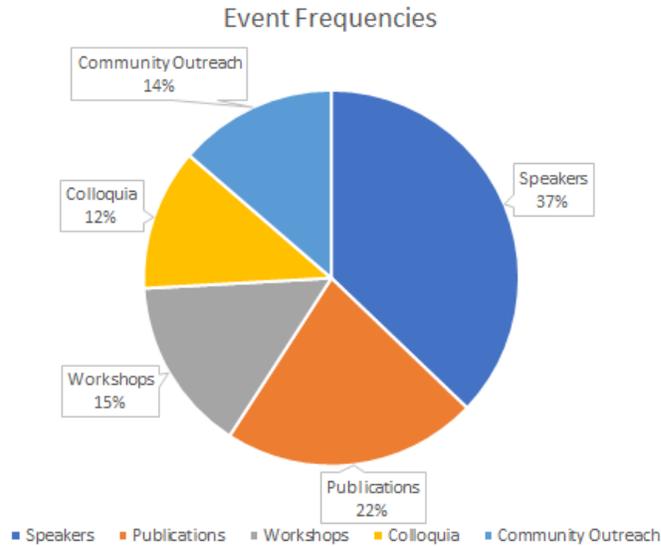
*“Retention of staff and faculty of color.”*

*“More faculty of color”*

The challenges demonstrate issues of funding, devaluing of the work and research, and recruitment and retention of faculty of color. Several colleges and universities face challenges when it comes to the recruitment and retention of faculty of color, particularly Black faculty. Many Black academics cite similar issues of research and funding bias for leaving their positions or academia entirely. Race-based centers and institutes are well aware of the connection between the racial marginalization of people and the type of work that challenges white supremacy. The decision to contribute to how the institutions should address this problem must be one that considers both the practical applications and theoretical ideas needed to reach viable solutions.

### Programming and Research

The following pie chart depicts the collective survey responses to a series of questions regarding the amount of programming events and publications sponsored by the centers:



Seven (7) out of the eight (8) center survey respondents maintained an active event programming schedule. Only one (1) center noted that their event and programming schedule had been dormant for the last three (3) years and was in the process of re-establishing its program agenda. Event and program attendance is an important indicator of community engagement, which careful planning and attention to detail. During pre-pandemic times the distribution of labor can include choosing a proper venue, catering food and drink, booking travel and hotel accommodations for speakers, securing audio-visual technology and still photography assistance, and more. It can be exciting and rewarding work that helps to build the center’s legacy for many years to come.

Maintaining an active event and programming schedule has, to say the least, been challenging during the pandemic. However, from our review of the various center’s websites and according to the survey participant responses, each continues to invite enlightening speakers to campus and engage the larger campus community with workshops, colloquia and other outreach activities, albeit virtually. Depending on the particular event, attendance can range from as low as ten (10) to well over a 100 guests. Turnout for guest speakers is often greater, especially for those who boast celebrity status, than for events like colloquia, which tend to feature more intimate and personal formats.

The volume of event and programming activity appears to be greater than the volume of scholarship and research activity among the centers and institutes we studied, which is not necessarily a laurel to rest on or a problem in search of a remedy. Centers and institutes with race and ethnicity-based orientations are not and should not be monolithic in their design and their approach to addressing racism, promoting diversity or remedying injustice.

As is fitting, centers and institutes with race and ethnicity orientations that are housed in law schools publish legal research and produce newsletters on racial justice issues for public consumption. A few centers have committed to publishing a certain number of scholarly research articles per year. Some centers do not generate any scholarship and research directly but do offer

departmental faculty the support they need to carry out scholarly research related to the center’s mission.

Similarly, another center describes its connection to scholarship and research as more student-centered, which encourages them to direct their resources towards curriculum development and to supporting graduate students in their thesis work. As one would expect, there is no one-size-fits-all formula to how centers and institutes with race and ethnicity orientations operate as to scholarship and research production. Any number of factors, such as source and amount of funding, support staff and the general characteristics and demographic profile of the host institutions all can influence scholarship and research activity.

#### Mission and Objectives

Study participants were given a list of goals and objectives from which they were asked to choose all that they believe applied to their center’s mission. Most exhausted the list choosing:

*“Equality, Equity, Social Justice, Antiracism, Democracy, Cultural Appreciation, Research and Scholarship, Diversity, Inclusion, Reconciliation, Gender, Intersectionality, Public Education on Race, and Racial Justice”*

From an overall review of the Center websites, it appears that many they have adopted similar missions and objectives, with most focused on racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion. For example, one prominent university in the Midwest boasts commitment to, “contributing intellectually challenging and innovative scholarship that can help people transform their thinking and their lives.” An institution on the west coast claims to be, “one of a very few organizations in the (U.S.) that offers citizens access to scholarly research, interdisciplinary study, discourse and debate and advocacy on cutting-edge issues related to race and democracy.” Another reputable institution in the South hosts “symposia and workshops, engages in research, produces scholarship, offers course development grants, and administers fellowships.”

Race-based center and institutes throughout the United States of America could benefit from coalescing around a few common themes, goals and missions. There are limitless historical and contemporary examples of how once loosely connected organizations have benefited from coming together in solidarity. During the early 1900s the American Medical Association came together to standardize medicine and medical education and root out superstition in the healing sciences. Sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and every other natural and social scientific field imaginable came together for many reasons, not the least of which was to become the definitive authority and voice for their respective areas of expertise. After once including homosexuality among a long list of other mental illnesses, psychiatrists came together in 1973 to remove it from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Drescher, 2015). Anthropologists came together in 1998 to declare “race” a social construct and not a concept that adheres to any scientific, biological or genetic basis or construct (AAA, 1998). Perhaps centers and institutes that highlight race and racism can come together to achieve a similar level of recognition and authority to declare Critical Race Theory (CRT) and other race-based theories worthy of study in schools and not allow them to become curricular areas used by conservative politicians to stoke fear and legislate policies that promote and preserve white supremacy.

When asked to identify their center’s greatest achievement, they offered the following:

*“Changing the culture of the law school such that we have attracted a critical mass of students interested in racial justice and other social justice issues.”*

*“Our (Center) postdoc program-- a nationally-competitive program, which has trained and supported over 20 postdocs of color who have gone on to tenure-track positions or positions within their fields of study.”*

*“Creating a robust intellectual community for students and faculty working on questions of race, indigeneity, and transnational migration.”*

*“Foundation award of 1 million; expanded and respected programming and research vision.”*

*“Sustaining over the past 30 years. It's unapologetic research focus.”*

*“Serving as a community hub during difficult times.”*

Broadly speaking, we asked, “Do you think your center has created a measurable impact on your campus community?” Six (6) of the eight (8) respondents gave a resounding “definitely yes,” while one (1) indicated a “negligible” impact and one (1) replied “probably yes.” It is clear that these centers and institutes have achieved a lot in their relatively short tenure in the academy and are poised to accomplish even more given the right support and organizational structures that enable them to build on their previous success.

## **Conclusion**

Universities and faculty are primarily evaluated according to the quality of their research, teaching and service within the framework of an academic disciplinary departmental structure. The inherent tension between administration and faculty has been documented and found to be characterized by a mutual lack of trust and a sense that the freedom and autonomy once enjoyed by the academic profession is threatened and under assault. Such were the results of the Carnegie International Survey of the Academic Profession (Lewis & Altbach, 1996). Even with the dearth of literature on centers and institutes, one finds a similar relationship of distrust has emerged between traditional academic departments and the more innovative centers and institutes in higher education.

The research suggests that centers and institutes that focus attention on race, racism and other forms of intersectional injustices may face an even higher level of distrust and scrutiny as they make their way towards acceptance in the academy. Melnick’s (1999) survey research found center directors and staff often having to “justify, within their own institutions, what they do” and having to respond to “university personnel questioning the legitimacy of their organization or degree to which their work qualifies as scholarly” (pp 17-18). As the director of a newly formed center for “race”, the author pursued this study because of the potential for greater local, national, and international growth and impact. The author witnessed another colleague disparage the newly formed Center for “Race” as being “window dressing” for a university still committed to maintaining the status quo and further warned us not to expect any transformational change from our antiracism agenda and work towards diversity and inclusion.

The resistance to centers and institutes from traditional departments that are limited by disciplinary structures, may come from a place of envy in that these newer units “offer distinct advantages for (research) collaboration, (talent) recruitment, and other areas” that can enable “institutional leaders (to) tap the best strengths of the centers without the worst liabilities” (Mallon, p. 511). Larson (2001) notes that “centers tend to be more task-focused and interdisciplinary than academic departments” and more easily cross boundaries and “connect academic interests with external stakeholders” (p. 1).

However, the price centers pay for all of this “thinking outside of the box” approach is having to deal with threats to its institutional stability and questions about its academic credibility. These threats include doubts and questions about legitimacy, ability to meet budgetary needs and vulnerability to being compromised and rendered ineffective by being subsumed into other multicultural and diversity programs. Similar threats to stability and questions about credibility were directed towards area studies (Black Studies, Women’s Studies, Ethnic Studies, Multicultural Studies and other Interdisciplinary Studies) during their emergence following Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s and 1970s.

This exploratory study of the landscape of centers with names that invoke issues of racism, sexism, social justice, cultural appropriation, white supremacy, democracy and other politically charged concerns found entrepreneurial directors and support staff who appear well-prepared to navigate the rough terrain of a higher education landscape that does not always embrace change. However, many of the centers and institutes are plagued by marginalization. Perhaps the biggest takeaway from this study is that we need to know more about the operational structure and best practices, and race-based centers need to communicate with each other and form a coalition much like the NADOHE. A mechanism and space to share ideas, challenges, funding opportunities, research, and initiatives will help solidify the importance and value of these centers, thus increasing their credibility and sustainability in the landscape of higher education.

### **Study Limitations**

Skepticism and the pandemic significantly impacted the data collection process. One of the study participants noted that their initial response to our request for an interview was one of skepticism. Organizations that exist to challenge the status quo and champion social justice causes tend to operate with a measured dose of paranoia based on past experiences with marginalization and oppression. In this age of social media, cancel culture, gas lighting and alternative facts, one has to prove authenticity and gain trust in the interest of establishing healthy relationships. Conversely, the pandemic has forced most of us to work virtually and thus limits our ability to commune and interact in real physical spaces. Both progressive and conservative faculty have been captured on tape by students who later post the commentary on social media. The result has been suspensions, job loss and cancellation by a culture that has grown more intolerant of opposing points of view. Proliferation of zoom bombers have interrupted classrooms and meetings when the topic threatens their worldview. All of this tension and distrust prompts us all to be a bit more cautious and our decision whether or not to speak truth to power. Although a greater response to our requests for interviews and surveys were expected, we believe that our results are still valuable and that with our greater understanding of

the landscape of racial justice-oriented centers and institutes further research can be conducted leading to a stronger coalition among these centers.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future studies of centers and institutes with intersectional racial and ethnic justice orientations should expand their scope to include centers and institutes that do not have such orientations to better control for indications of bias, discrimination, and possible differential levels of supports, impact and efficacy. Utilizing a select group of institutions that have not yet established formal centers that frame “race” as a privileged category of analysis and inquiry to act as a dependent variable could possibly establish a corollary or cause and effect relationship by isolating the effect of the independent variable, the institutions with formally established “race” Centers and Institutes. Higher education as an American institution can stand to benefit from larger and more frequent studies of the overall landscape of centers and institutes. As seen throughout history, government has relied on centers and institutes as sources of knowledge, research and intellectual expertise when faced with political, social and economic challenges. Future research could help prepare race-based centers to respond to calls for policy suggestions and research-based solutions for the public good. Ideally, a mixed method research design could demonstrate the systematic integration of both quantitative and qualitative data, which may permit a more holistic and synergistic treatment of the data and its subsequent analysis. Implications for future research should explore the many creative options for methodologies that values both qualitative exploration and quantitative measurement.

### **References**

- American Anthropological Association (1998).  
<https://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2583>
- Boardman, P., & Corley, E. University research centers and the composition of research collaborations. *Research Policy*, v37 n 5, p900-913 June 2008
- Drescher, J. Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality, *Behav Sci (Basel)*. 2015 Dec; 5(4): 565–575. Published online 2015 Dec 4. doi: 10.3390/bs5040565
- Friedman, R., & Friedman R. Managing the Organized Research Unit. *Educational Record*, v65 n1 p27-30 Win 1984

Ikenberry, S., & Friedman, R. (1972). *Beyond academic departments; [the story of institutes and centers / by] Stanley O. Ikenberry [and] Renee C. Friedman.* ([1st ed.]). Jossey-Bass.

Ladi, S. (2015, January 13). *Think tank.* *Encyclopedia Britannica.*  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/think-tank>

Larson, R., & Long, R. Academic Centers: Moving Beyond the Periphery. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, v5, n2, 10-08-2010

Larson, R. & Barnes-Moorhead, S. (2001). *How Centers Work: Building and Sustaining Academic Nonprofit Centers*, W. K. Kellogg Foundation/CenterPoint Institute

Lewis, L., Altbach, P. Faculty versus administration: a universal problem. *High Educ Policy* 9, 255–258 (1996). [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0952-8733\(96\)00016-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0952-8733(96)00016-5)

Mallon, W.T. (2006). The Benefits and Challenges of Research Centers and Institutes in Academic Medicine: Findings from Six Universities and Their Medical Schools. *Academic Medicine*, 81, 502-512.

Melnick, R. (1999). University policy centers and institutes: The think tank as public service functions. *Metropolitan Universities*, 10(1), 9-19.

National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education <https://www.nadohe.org/>

Sa, C. University-Based Research Centers: Characteristics, Organization, and Administrative Implications. *Journal of Research Administration*, v39 n1, p32-40 Spr 2008

Sabharwal, M. & Hu, Q. Participation in university-based research centers: Is it helping or hurting researchers? *Research Policy*, v42, n6–7, p1301-131 July–August 2013

**Submitted by: Jonathan Lightfoot, PhD, with support from:**

**Center for "Race," Culture and Social Justice**

Hofstra University - Roosevelt 203 Hall

Hempstead, New York 11549

<http://www.hofstra.edu/academics/race-culture-social-justice/about.html>

Dr. Jonathan Lightfoot, *Director*

Dr. Veronica Lippencott, *Associate Director*

Tony Cao, *Doctoral Research Assistant*

Jack Miller, *Doctoral Research Assistant*

### **Appendix A – Online Survey**

Thank you and welcome to our survey. Since the mid-1990s, an increasing number of academic institutions have established Centers and Institutes that frame “race” as a privileged category of analysis and academic inquiry. Their study of “race” is often coupled with or examined at the intersections of conceptual notions of ethnicity, gender, equality/equity, democracy, culture and justice. We have identified a significant number of centers with "Race" in their names and are

now exploring their efficacy and what these Centers do to impact their communities. The goal of this research is to better understand the nature of the impact on the learning community and beyond. We are eager to share our findings with the survey participants in hopes that we contribute to the overall knowledge of race-based Centers housed in American colleges and universities. Perhaps academic institutions that do not currently have such Centers will use our study to help them make the decision to establish one and the ones that already have them will better understand and appreciate the value they bring to the institution. We will start with a few questions identifying your center:

Q2 Please choose your university and the name of your center below: (Dropdown list)

Q4 What is your position/title at your center?

Director (1) / Associate Director (2) / Staff (3) / Other (Please specify) (4)

Q5 What year was your center founded? (Open ended)

Q6 Does your institution have a chief diversity and inclusion officer?

Yes (1) / No (2) / Not Sure (3)

Q7 Are you generally satisfied with the overall diversity and inclusion profile of your institution?

Satisfied (1) ~ Dissatisfied (5)

Q8 What improvements, if any, would you like to see regarding the diversity and inclusion profile of your university? (Open ended)

Q9 Which goals and objectives below are important to your center's mission? (Please check all that apply)

Equality (1) / Equity (2) / Social Justice (3) / Racial Justice (4) / Anti-Racism (5) / Democracy (6) / Cultural Appreciation (7) / Research/Scholarship (8) / Diversity and Inclusion (9) / Reconciliation (10) / Other (Please specify) (11)

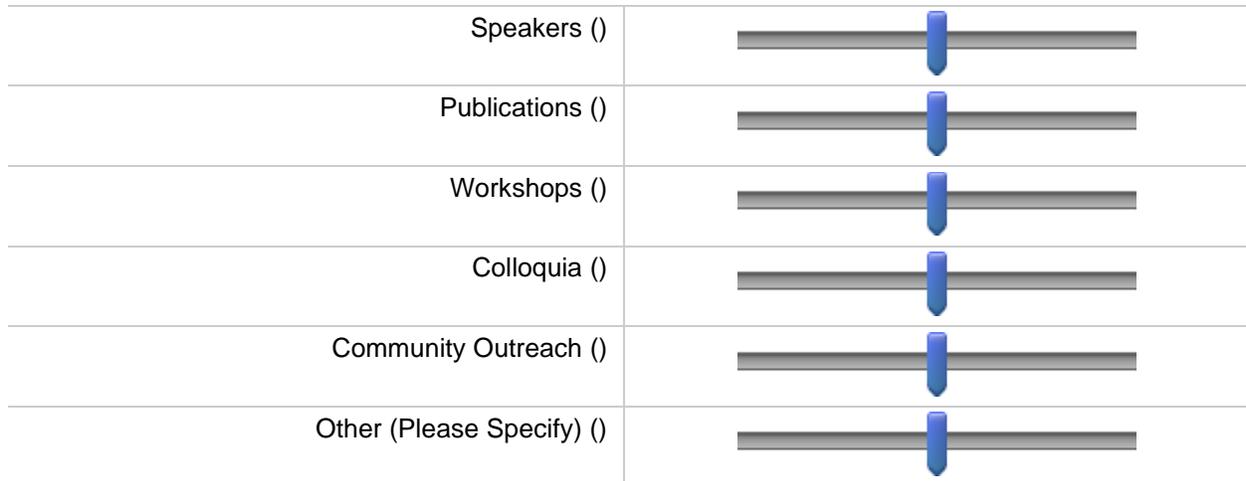
Q10 What would you say is your center's greatest achievement? (Open ended)

Q11 What impact has your center had on improving the culture and climate on campus as to diversity and inclusion? (Open ended)

Q12 What are some of the challenges that your center has faced? (Open ended)

Q13 Please estimate how many **times** your center hosts the activities listed below per academic year:

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50



Q14 Please estimate how many **attendees** participated in the activities listed below per academic year:

- Speakers (1)
- Workshops (2)
- Colloquia (3)
- Community Outreach (4)
- Other (Please Specify) (5)

Q15 Please estimate the volume and type of **research/scholarship** produced:

0 2 3 5 6 8 9 11 12 14 15



Q16 To what extent does your university/department support the center?

Very strongly supported (1) ~ Very weakly supported (5)

Q17 What kind of **non-financial** support do you receive? (Please check all that apply)

Student volunteers (1) / Volunteer advisory board (2) / Office space (3) / Promotional advertising (4) / Other (5)

Q18 What kind of **financial** support do you receive? (Please check all that apply)

University funding (1) / Federal funding (2) / Grant funding (6) / Private contracts (3)  
Other (5)

Q19 What is your average operating budget per academic year?

Less than \$50,000 (1) / \$50,000 - \$100,000 (2) / \$100,000 - \$500,000 (3) / \$500,000 - \$1,000,000 (4) / More than \$1,000,000 (5) / Prefer not to say (6)

Q20 What are your top five budget priorities? (Open ended)

Q21 Are you satisfied with the amount of financial support that you receive?

Very satisfied (1) ~ Very dissatisfied (5)

Q22 Broadly speaking, do you think your center has created a measurable impact on your community?

Definitely yes (1) ~ Definitely not (5)

Q23 Does your center have any relationship to/impact on academic curriculum?

Yes (1) / No (2)

Q24 How much of an impact has your center had on the institution's **student** racial diversity profile?

A great deal (1) ~ None at all (5)

Q25 How much of an impact has your center had on the institution's **staff/administrative** racial diversity profile?

A great deal (1) ~ None at all (5)

Q26 How much of an impact has your center had on the institution's **faculty** racial diversity profile?

A great deal (1) ~ None at all (5)

## Appendix B - Center List

Brown University (1986)

Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America

Indiana University Bloomington (2012)

Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society (CRRES)

Columbia University (1999)

Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race (CSER)

University of Southern California

Race and Equity Center

University of Chicago (1996)  
Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture

Fordham University School of Law (2016)  
Center on Race, Law and Justice

Washington University St. Louis  
Center for Race, Ethnicity and Equity

University of Pittsburgh (2002)  
Center on Race and Social Problems

Stanford University (1996)  
Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity;  
Center for Racial Justice (Law School)

University of Virginia  
Center on Race and Public Education in the South  
Center for the Study of Race and Law (Law School) (2003)

American University  
Antiracist Research and Policy Center  
New York University Law  
Center on Race,  
Inequality, and the Law

University of California Berkeley  
Center for Race and Gender

Northeastern University  
Institute on Race and Justice  
College of William and Mary  
Center for Racial and Social Justice

Tufts University  
Center for the Study of Race and Democracy

The Ohio State University  
Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity

Colorado State University  
Race and Intersectional Studies for Educational Equity Center

University of New Mexico  
Institute for the Study of "Race" and Social Justice

Connecticut College  
Center for the Critical Study of Race and Ethnicity (CCSRE)

University of Texas at Austin

Center for the Study of Race and Democracy

University of Florida Law  
The Center for the Study of Race and Race Relations (CSRRR)

University of California Los Angeles  
Center for the Study of Racism, Social Justice and Health

Bucknell University  
Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity and Gender

Middlebury College (2009)  
Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity

Elon University  
The Center for Race, Ethnicity, & Diversity Education

Texas A&M University (1989)  
Race and Ethnic Studies Institute

Bank Street College of Education  
Center on Culture, Race & Equity

University of Illinois at Chicago  
Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy

Boston University  
Center for Antiracist Research

Santa Monica College  
Racial Justice Center

Nyack College (2020)  
Center for Racial Reconciliation

University of Cincinnati (2010)  
The Nathan R. Jones Center Race, Gender and Social Justice

University of California Santa Cruz  
Center for Racial Justice

University of California Irvine School of Law  
Center on Law, Equality and Race (CLEAR)

Ithaca College  
The Center for the Study of Culture, Race and Ethnicity (CSCRE)

Union University  
Center for Racial Reconciliation

University of Michigan School of Kinesiology

Center for Race and Ethnicity in Sport

Azusa Pacific University  
Student Center for Reconciliation and Diversity (SCRD)

Arizona State University  
Center for the Study of Race and Democracy

Rutgers University  
Division of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement (formally Center for Race & Ethnicity)

Clark University  
Center for Gender, Race and Area Studies

Yale University (2016)  
Yale Center for the Study of Race, Indigeneity, and Transnational Migration

The purpose of this paper is to better understand academic centers and institutes that focus on race, ethnicity, social justice and related intersectional issues. Whereas there have been previous studies done on the missions and operational structures of think tanks, centers and institutes in general, the author is not aware of any exploratory study of such academic units with racial justice orientations. This paper hopes to spark an interest in this area of scholarship and research and contribute to the stability and credibility of race-based centers and institutes.