

## **START with Race: Designing Racially Conscious Principals**

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### **Abstract**

Racism is about institutional power to maintain racial hierarchy (Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002). School systems are hierarchies that were originally designed to educate white males. The majority of school districts and buildings are led by white people. The focus of this paper exposes the normalization of inherent racism and institutional power structures in existing principal preparation programs and one University's efforts to disrupt these practices by purposefully including racial equity in all aspects of its programming. Building upon the work of Furman (2012) and the work of Gooden and Dantely (2012), this article will present a theoretical framework for examining and assessing existing practices and then offer alternatives to disrupt any practice that fails to yield more racially conscious principals.

### **Key Words**

race, principal preparation, equity, achievement gap, social justice

## Introduction

Racism is about institutional power to maintain racial hierarchy (Solorzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002). School systems are hierarchies that were originally designed to educate white males.

The student demographics have broadened in terms of gender and then race, yet the way in which leadership has been trained has not kept pace with the diversity now seen in schools.

By 2025, enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools is projected to increase 18 percent for students who are Hispanic; 21 percent for students who are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 23 percent for students who are of two or more races (Hussar & Bailey, 2017).

The majority of school districts and school buildings are led by white people. Most principal preparation programs have not traditionally included issues of racial equity as an integral part of their curriculum and pedagogy. As a result, these aspiring principals are licensed without being required to examine their personal learning and beliefs about the intersectionality of race and education.

Historically, racial disparities in student achievement have been viewed as a deficit in students and families of color. Rather, the authors claim that many of the racially predictable disparities could be viewed as a deficit in the current systemic leadership model of schools.

The focus of this paper exposes the normalization of inherent racism and institutional power structures in existing principal preparation programs and one university's efforts to disrupt these practices by

purposefully including racial equity in all aspects of its programming. This article presents a theoretical framework for examining and assessing existing practices and then offers alternatives to disrupt any practice that fails to yield more racially conscious principals.

## The Urgency

### Race and student achievement

White children have consistently outperformed Black and Brown children on standardized academic tests since 1975. This reflects a 44-year trend, making the data predictable as well as consistent. Specifically in the last five years, in both math and reading, the data reveal a steady and unchanged racial discrepancy between the achievement levels of White and Black students, where White students show results that are between 26% to 30% higher than Black students (National Assessment for Educational Progress, 2017).

### Leadership and student achievement

The need for racially and ethically-conscious principal leadership remains fundamental to improving student achievement in the nation's schools. The research is clear and consistent that school principals are second only to teachers in impacting student achievement (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010).

The importance of racial equity and social justice leadership also exists in the literature. In fact, the literature described principal leadership with a focus on racial equity as a commitment to social justice, which "ensures equitable and optimal learning conditions for all children" (Merchant & Garza, 2015, p. 56) and included elements of diversity, race, gender, culture, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, power, and

privilege (Guerra, Nelson, Jacobs, & Yamamura, 2013).

Despite this knowledge, a continued pattern has remained of preparing, licensing, and hiring principals that view persistent gaps as a result of deficits in students of color, and are unable to recognize the systemic, racially dividing barriers to access and achievement. There is an urgent need for university preparation programs to change curriculum, pedagogy, and practices to develop racially and ethically conscious leaders.

### **Racial equity and university preparation programs**

University preparation programs remain generally traditional and non-responsive to the growing racial diversity in schools (Goddard, 2015); to the persistent racial achievement gaps (NAEP, 2012); to the racially predictable discipline disparities (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014); and to the lack of analysis of policies and programs that perpetuate the racial achievement gap (Martin & Miller, 2014).

In a study conducted by Hawley and James (2010) that surveyed University Council for Educational Administration programs, principal preparation programs appeared not to be equipping leaders with the skills needed to meet the needs of an increasingly racially diverse school population.

Hawley and James (2010) discovered that these programs addressed issues of diversity in a one-course approach focused on social and economic issues rather than race and failed to fully engage in race-based pedagogy.

Miller and Martin (2014) further reported that preparation programs that do not require students to examine their personal and professional beliefs, engage in cultural immersion projects, or build skills for

identifying inequitable policies and practices limit principals' ability to improve equity in demographically changing and urban schools.

### **Race Matters: A Strategic Approach to Changing Principal Preparation** **The practices**

There is an indisputable urgency to change leadership preparation, yet university preparation programs remain generally traditional and non-responsive to the growing racial diversity in schools (Goddard, 2015), and this traditional approach to leadership development included the Department of Educational Leadership at Minnesota State University, Mankato (MNSU). The Department offers training toward the following administrative licenses: K-12 Principal, Superintendent, Director of Special Education, and Director of Community Education.

While the department offers a wide range of educational leadership preparation degrees and programs, the question remained: Did this preparation genuinely support the development of leaders who are equipped to use a racial lens to lead for all students? This was an urgent question the department started to examine in 2012.

### **The work**

Race work does not occur without difficult conversations. These difficult conversations needed to focus on practices, data, and the examination of personal beliefs and behaviors in relationship to race, leadership, and student achievement.

By studying the systemic nature of race and student achievement and the impact of "White unconsciousness" in the practices and preparation of school principals, the urgency to change personal and department practices

became more evident. This change started with genuine reflection and long, difficult, and frustrating discussions about current department practices, personal biases, and how they perpetuated the status quo. These reflective conversations acted as a mirror to reflect the following truths about students, faculty, programs, degrees, and work:

- Neither space nor time had been created to engage in personal work around racial equity.
- Faculty members' vocabulary, pedagogy, and course content did not reflect culturally responsive practices.
- The faculty was exclusively White, which did not allow members to gain the multiple perspectives needed to ensure that the pedagogy, curriculum, entrance requirements, and grading practices provided access and success for all learners.
- The department lacked an authentic relationship with people of color. Students enrolled in the department's classes and programs were predominately White and did not reflect the current demographics of students in Minnesota's K-12 schools.
- Department practices and policies resulted in students of color being rejected from programs based on undergraduate GPAs which were often representative of undergraduate programs designed on the tenets of White culture, which poorly served Black and Brown students.

- As a department, the research agendas did not reflect the study of race and marginalized populations.
- Faculty members were not talking about race and did not demonstrate the ability to engage in authentic conversations with race at the center.

As an exclusively White faculty, the department had the privilege of being able to step into and out of the racial equity work as feelings and circumstances dictated. The department's shift in focus from teaching technical, traditional leadership skills and practices, to equipping students with adaptive racially conscious leadership development began in 2012 and continues today.

This is a never-ending journey, especially for White faculty. Redefining the department's mission provided direction for this new work.

### **The words**

In 2012 the department's mission statement read as follows:

*The mission of the Department of Educational Leadership is to prepare and renew professionals for engaged leadership in a broad spectrum of educational settings. The department is committed to providing relevant, personalized, learner-centered programs for attaining Master of Science, Specialist, and Doctorate graduate degrees.*

In reviewing the mission statement it was evident that the words did not reflect the type of leaders the department was now committed to developing. Crafting a new

mission statement, which was both technical and adaptive work, provided a place to ground and align the future work of the department.

The current mission now reads:

*The Department of Educational Leadership is dedicated to the study of the intersectionality between race, cultural responsiveness and social justice. We prepare racially/ethically conscious leaders who are resolute in serving ALL learners in a broad spectrum of educational settings. The department is committed to developing educators with strong skills in racial equity leadership, instructional leadership, and experiential learning. We seek to advance the capacity of leaders who will eliminate predictable racial disparities through project-based learning and learner-centered programming in a Master of Science, Specialist, and Doctorate graduate degree program.*

This shift in mission provided a shared focus that guided the faculty's work. Realizing that the mission shift was, in effect, social justice work, the department realized that it was obliged to provide embedded race equity value to each course, lesson, and assignment.

The purpose was to convey the urgency of addressing racial equity head-on as a method by which to prepare aspiring school principals. Understanding that if the issue of racially predictable outcomes, in both achievement and discipline in schools were to ever change, it would require preparation of racially conscious and courageous principals.

As a result, classrooms, online forums, and assignments were used as spaces and opportunities to foster deep reflection, to promote racial awareness, and to actively engage in the work of social justice. Social

justice, in this case, is defined as interrupting racially predictable outcomes for students. The bedrock of the work was to educate aspiring principals to recognize inequitable beliefs, policies, and practices in classrooms and then equip them to take an active role in dismantling them. Former U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan is quoted as saying:

*"I believe that education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And if you care about promoting opportunity and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start. Great teaching is about so much more than education; it is a daily fight for social justice."*

*~ Arne Duncan  
October 9, 2009*

Duncan's quote embodies the department's commitment to education as a civil right stance. As we engaged in the work of naming and bringing to a halt persistent practices, policies, and curriculum which marginalized Black and Brown students, the newly focused mission became a springboard for the development of a framework. To fully realize its mission for justice and equity in schools, we examined all aspects of its work and compared them with those of existing frameworks, most notably those with a focus on social justice and race.

### **The foundation**

Department of Educational Leadership researchers have criticized principal preparatory programs for failing to adequately address issues of diversity and race (Dantley, 2002; Lopez, 2003; Tillman, 2004).

Beyond the progress in recruitment efforts to hire more diverse faculty members,

Carpenter and Diem (2013) stated that the lack of intentional efforts on the part of educational leadership departments to incorporate a discourse surrounding issues of equity and diversity throughout their preparation programs' curricula stems from two main factors: (a) faculty members' limited understanding of the ways in which to prepare educational leaders to work within diverse communities (as cited in Herrity & Glasman, 1999; Rusch, 2004), and (b) faculty members' general lack of interest or commitment (as cited in Delpit, 1995; Parker & Hood, 1995, Riehl, 2009; Rusch, 2004).

Garces and Gordon da Cruz (2017) outlined the principles of a Strategic Racial Equity Framework. These three principles include the following:

- Attend to the dynamic relationship among race, power, and identities;
- Actively name and address hidden contributors to inequity; and
- Generate power among marginalized communities toward transformative policies.

These broad principles were further codified and useful as the department sought to undergird its application of a specifically racially equitable framework upon which to anchor its leadership preparation program.

While Garces and Gordon da Cruz's (2017) principles were in agreement with the overall direction of the desired work, the department saw that its mission and the strengths of its programs were best represented by the more detailed Furman's Social Justice Framework (2012) and Gooden and Dantley's (2012) Race-Centered Framework.

## **Furman's Social Justice Framework**

Praxis is defined as a customary action, practice, or acceptable conduct in the exercise or practice of an art, science, or skill. Furman (2012) created a five-part framework of social justice leadership praxis to address both the reflective and active components recommended for a social justice leadership program including specific methods for training in each area.

The framework consists of the following components:

### **Personal**

Deep, critical, and honest self-reflection in which aspiring school leaders explore their values, assumptions, and biases in regard to race, class, language, sexual orientation, religion, and disability.

### **Interpersonal**

Proactive formation of trusting relationships with colleagues, parents, and students in their schools and across cultural groups.

### **Communal**

Engaged in work to build community across cultural groups through inclusive, democratic practices.

### **Systemic**

Assess, critique, and work to transform the system at the school and district levels in the interest of social justice and learning for all children.

### **Ecological**

Act with the knowledge that school-related social justice issues are situated within broader socio-political, economic, and environmental contexts and are interdependent with broader issues of oppression and sustainability.

Furman's (2012) recommendations for developing aspiring principals' capacities for action at the systemic level include requiring students to create "activist action plans" (p. 211) for their schools that incorporate opportunities to engage staff in courageous conversations about race. Taking this social justice framework further to truly isolate race and promote equity to a framework, required faculty members to strategically refine the application.

### **Gooden & Dantley Framework**

Gooden and Dantley (2012) state that a leadership preparation framework centered on race must consist of the following five essential ingredients.

#### **1. A prophetic voice**

Hawley and James (2010) found that the common program structure of most principal preparation programs relegated issues of race and diversity to a special topic or a single, stand-alone course. Lopez (2003) called attention to this type of minimization of equity training, claiming that educational leadership programs commonly emphasize the traditional and more "technical" core offerings, such as school finance or school law.

Lopez stated issues of race and diversity are too often simply the "theoretical footnote within the larger discourse of educational leadership" (p. 70). While professors can certainly address issues of race and diversity within their "technical" classes, the master narrative that is inherent in current educational leadership curriculum suggests that a true representation of equity is unlikely. Dantley (2002) observed that the content of educational leadership courses has been historically shaped by narratives of control, standardization, and empiricism, thus limiting the critical exploration of race and diversity.

Gooden and Dantley (2012) define a prophetic voice as "... challenging because it requires stark changes in sedimented rituals, practices, and institutional behaviors" (p. 241).

One of the most obvious ways in which the department claims its prophetic voice happens through purposely embedding the examination of issues of race and racism in all coursework. The topic of race intentionally and explicitly is the underlying focus of all curriculum. This fact lives directly in all course syllabi. Although race and class often intersect, the courses do not conflate issues of race with socio-economics. Rather, this practice is used to isolate race and scrutinize existing educational policies and practices for disparities and possible solutions.

#### **2. Self-reflection serving as the motivation for transformative action**

Much has been written on the importance and benefits of personal and professional reflection. Reflection itself, however, must not be a culminating activity.

Galea (2012) warns of the dangers of reflection in that it often loses its power and becomes the final product instead of the motivation for action. Rather, critical reflection demands examination and reform that addresses long-standing and often unquestioned educational policies and practices that result in predictable racial outcomes for students. Students are taken through several reflective processes that encourage the questions "So What?" and "Now What?" actively seeking pathways for change, improvement, and racial parity.

#### **3. Grounding in a critical theoretical construction**

Each session or lesson begins with a "Grounding" exercise in which students engage

in conversation around a topic after viewing a video clip, reading an article, or responding to a prompt that portrays a racial issue in society or in current events. The purpose of this embedded practice is to illustrate that critical theory, which denudes issues of social justice, power, and race to establish that they are ever-present, ver-pressing, and deeply ingrained in the fabric of American society; and to build students' capacity to not only see the effects of systemic racism, but to also offer praxis—the application of knowledge or skills—to interrupt it (Friere, 1993).

#### **4. A pragmatic edge that supports praxis**

During these grounding exercises and subsequent assignments, students are given the opportunity to wrestle with racial issues, consider their historical origins, and make connections between the “technical” curriculum of the course, and the application of this knowledge to view existing issues through the lens of race. Class discussions and assignments also afford students the opportunity to contemplate and inculcate their new knowledge and proffer strategies and tactics to mitigate racial inequities in education.

#### **5. The inclusion of race language**

Pollock (2010) acknowledges that although working through purposeful and direct

conversations about race can often be difficult for all those involved, this discomfort must not prevent educational programs from enacting a curriculum that will prepare leaders to participate in meaningful and ongoing discussions about race. Rusch (2004) also found faculty members "afraid" of talking about issues of race and racism, as they fear that the conversation "may get out of hand, hurting rather than helping" (p. 31).

Furthermore, the power structure of the field of educational administration can also serve as a barrier to engaging in a discourse about complex issues, as "those in privileged positions—no matter how well intended—are not likely to willingly make changes that result in the loss of privilege" (p. 32).

#### **START with Race Framework**

Recognizing that there was a need to advance racial consciousness, racial literacy, and racial equity through intentional and purposeful practices within the PreK-21 principal licensure program, the research by Furman (2012) and Gooden and Dantely (2012) became the prerequisite for the approach. It became obviously necessary to start first with faculty and examine practices. This led to creating a strategic framework: START with Race. (See Figure 1.)



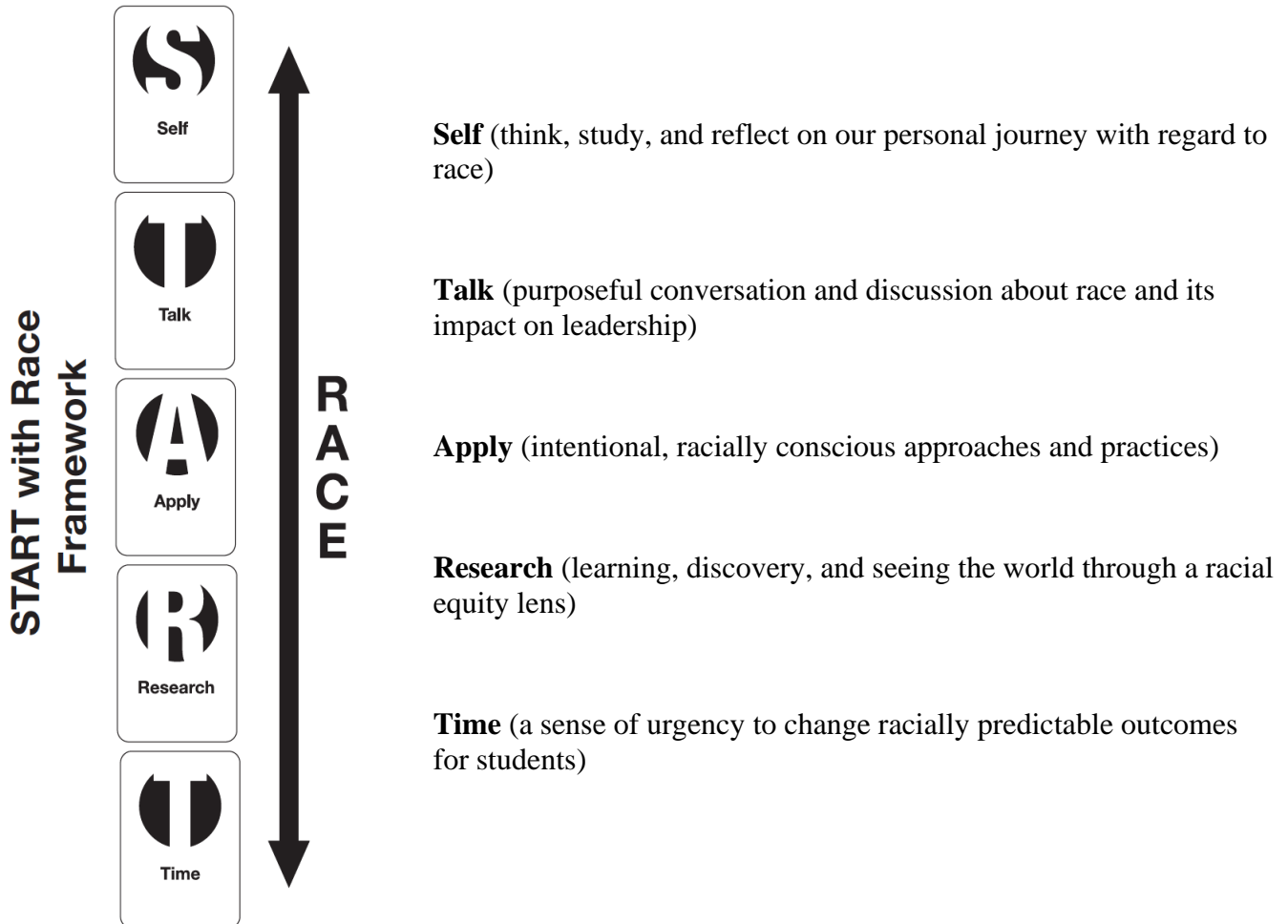


Figure 1. START with Race Framework

Utilizing the framework, START with Race, drove the courageous charge for improvement, cultural transformation, and changes in behavior from a “faculty first” methodology.

**Self**

Gooden and Dantley (2012) suggested that self-reflection serves as motivation for transformative action. Furman (2012) categorized the nature of leadership for social justice into nine themes.

One of those themes involved leaders engaging in critical self-reflection. Galea (2012) warned of the dangers of reflection in that it often loses its power and becomes the final product instead of the motivation for action.

However, according to the research regarding Theory to Action, Krull and Raskin (2013) found that knowing self was the initial step in resulting in high student achievement for all (Figure 2).

**CONFIDENCE → COURAGE → RESULTS  
HIGH STUDENT SUCCESS FOR ALL**

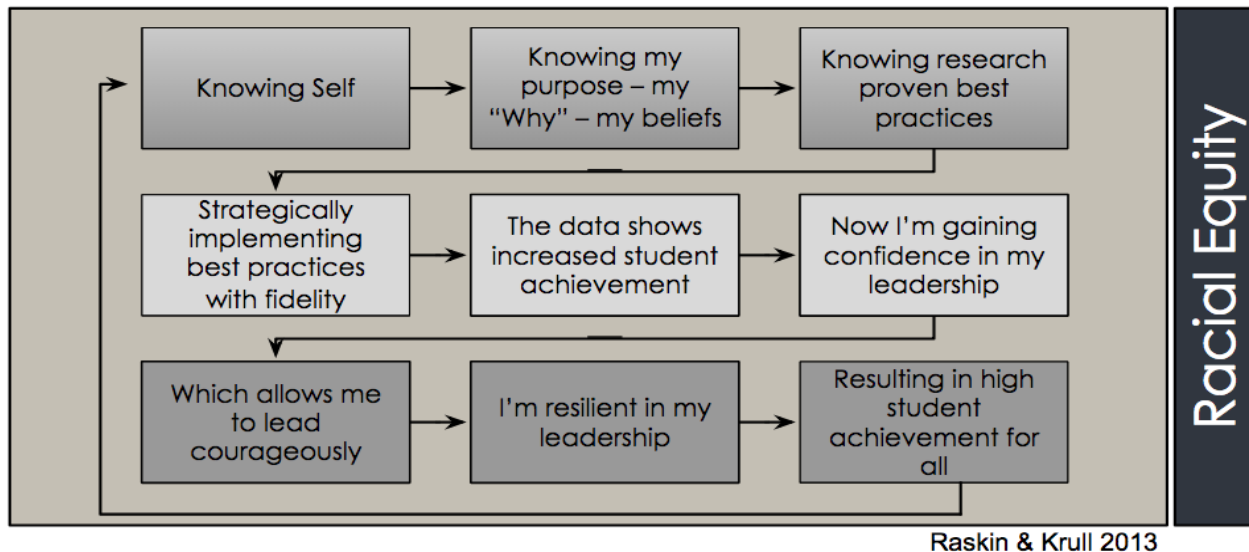


Figure 2. Theory to action

Self, in the START with Race Framework, engaged us in critical self-reflection which promoted intentional openings to think, study, and manage individuals' journeys about race. The department, specifically at the bi-monthly department meetings, employed Glenn Singleton's (2014) *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* as a template.

This tool, and especially the Four Agreements: (a) stay engaged (b) experience discomfort, (c) speak your truth, and (d) expect and accept non-closure, has helped to engage and enable faculty to have racial equity conversations and has provided an avenue for personal reflection.

### Talk

Being proactive in developing interpersonal relationships (Furman, 2012) and embedding the practice of "Groundings" (Gooden and Dantley, 2012) provided a basis for the faculty to lead and participate in purposeful conversations, discussions, and relating to others. Groundings have been used to start the bi-monthly department meetings.

The faculty have anchored their groundings through a common book read. The books, over the years, have been chosen by individual faculty members and are brought forward to the department for consideration.

Once a book is chosen, each faculty member volunteers to lead a racially grounded exercise based on a topic covered in the reading. These exercises are traditionally done as the first portion of the department meeting to ground the meeting's subsequent agenda items in racial awareness. The groundings have provided mini-sessions of professional development for the faculty. However, two larger outcomes of the groundings have been

the increased level of trust and vulnerability shared surrounding racial consciousness, racial literacy, and racial equity.

### Apply

Gooden and Dantley (2012) suggested that an intentional and explicit focus on isolating race should be evident throughout all curriculum. Knowing that by intentionally addressing broader issues through a socially just pedagogy (Furman, 2012), the department faculty focused on the delivery of deliberate program design as the tactical initiative to isolate and encourage conversations about race. The areas of program design included a common syllabi template and the development of rigorous curriculum and course content in which race was the roadmap.

### Research

Furman (2012) found that acting on the knowledge that school-related social justice issues are situated within broader socio-political, economic, and environmental contexts and by allowing faculty to wrestle with racial issues, consider their historical origins, and make connections between the "technical" curriculum (Gooden & Dantley, 2012) emphasized the learning, discovery and a view of the world through the lens of race for the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership.

Faculty utilized qualitative and quantitative data as the avenues to create a uniform focus for capturing student voice through surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one conversations. These opportunities have given the faculty that "true" student perspective. Also, meetings were conducted with practitioners (i.e., licensed administrators) in the field that allowed faculty to stay in touch with the reality of the day-to-day work of a school administrator. The department faculty have also dedicated individual and

collaborative research regarding race and have presented and participated at conferences on local, regional, and national levels.

### Time

The concept of time, within the START with Race Framework, has been defined as present, future, and sense of urgency. In the present day, the department faculty has understood the difficulties and levels of discomfort in conversations about race. Yet, the faculty has continued to utilize a practice that holds them accountable for their own future learnings towards becoming racially/ethically conscious leaders in a preparation program.

The results of this work are highlighted within individual faculty Professional Development and Evaluation Plans (PDEP) and Professional Development Reports (PDR). The faculty PDEPs and PDRs have become “activist action plans” (Furman, 2012) that have centered on work around the development of racially conscious and racially literate faculty which has transferred into racial equity work with students and their coursework toward administrative licensure.

### Results of the Work

The new mission statement placed the focus on students and emphasized that the faculty’s responsibility was to advance the skills and capacity of the students we serve in order for them to become racially conscious leaders. So, what has this looked like in terms of approach, strategy, and practice for a principal preparation program? Here are some examples:

- Position postings and interviews (i.e., explicit about preferred qualifications and interviews have included a demonstration of racially conscious leadership);

- Instead of one course dedicated to multicultural issues in education, all students now experience racially conscious curriculum and instruction throughout almost all of their specialist courses;
- Personal beliefs around race are defined by students;
- Culturally relevant instructional practices are used in almost all courses;
- Focus on learning versus focus on teaching (i.e., assessments not based on time or first attempts but rather learning);
- Entrance requirements changed for all degree programs (still in alignment with university requirements); and
- Data reviewed through the lens of race by the department.

These approaches, strategies, and practices have resulted in an increase in program diversity from 6.51% in 2011 to 21.69% in 2017 as well as an increase in students of color degree awards from 2.56% in 2013 to 19.20% in 2017. The department has increased program enrollment from 68 students in 2011 to 102 students in 2016. In 2016, the department awarded 65 administrative licenses which were a 34% increase from 2011.

There was an increase in program degree awards as well. During the 2012 - 2013 school year, the department awarded 39 degrees. The department awarded 66 degrees in 2016 - 2017. Regarding employment, 93.5% of program graduates are employed full-time in the profession (CDC, 2015).

## The Future

The department is no longer comprised of an all-White faculty. Since 2012, the department has actively recruited leaders of color. Because of this increase to 40% faculty of color, we embrace not only diversity of race but also the diversity of thought and experience.

Addressing the predictable discipline and achievement gaps for students of color and understanding the complex systemic racial issues continues to be the challenge and commitment.

Historically, racial disparities in student achievement have been viewed as a deficit in students and families of color. The department's work is now devoted to developing racially conscious, courageous principals equipped to recognize that it is not students of color but rather the systems, practices, and beliefs of the adults that determine the educational outcome for Black and Brown students.

## Author Biographies

With over two decades in PreK-21 education, Jinger Gustafson has served in a variety of roles: teacher, coach, teacher on special assignment, dean of students, athletic director, assistant principal, principal, and associate superintendent. She now serves as an assistant professor and chair of the department of educational leadership at Minnesota State University in Mankato, MN. E-mail: [Jinger.Gustafson@mnsu.edu](mailto:Jinger.Gustafson@mnsu.edu)

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