

Moving From Multiculturalism to Critical Race Theory Within a School of Social Work: Dismantling White Supremacy as an Organizing Strategy

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Abstract: *The continued presence of racism and white supremacy has risen to a crisis level as today's global pandemic, police abuse targeting Black, Indigenous and other people of color (BIPOC) communities, and mass urban uprisings rock the nation. This article presents a case study of a West Coast school of social work that has carried out a five-year systematic campaign to move all levels of the program beyond a multicultural orientation towards critical race theory. This study reveals the results of a self-organized cross-racial committee within a school of social work, motivated by an ambitious goal to implement a racial justice orientation throughout the school's personnel, practices, policies, and curricula. The committee has been further characterized by its commitment to engage across the power-laden divisions of field faculty, tenure track faculty, and administrative staff. The article offers documented stages of development, narratives from across differences of identity and professional role, and thick descriptions of strategies that led to the adoption and infusion of an intersectional critical race analysis throughout the school's curricula. The organic development of the campaign and the leveraging of opportunities throughout the campus and across campuses offer important lessons for other schools of social work undergoing transformational change.*

Keywords: *Critical race theory, racism, white supremacy, intersectionality, social work education*

We in the United States are undergoing a period of reckoning regarding the centrality of race and the enduring embeddedness of white supremacy across our institutions of governance and undergirding many U.S. cultural traditions. Academic institutions have not been immune to this reckoning as their role as the nation's educators and guardians of democratic values have continued to be subject to contentious debate and policy struggles. While academia has always served as a battlefield for the ideological tug-of-war between the political divides that shape and reshape this nation, the words *white supremacy* have emerged as signifiers of the "problem," on the one hand, and the framework of *critical race theory* (CRT) as a possible pathway to repair, on the other. In the dizzying context of mass awakenings and rapid-fire backlash, they have also become ideological and policy targets launched from the highest levels of governance.

The School of Social Work (SSW) at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), like many other academic programs, faced its own moment of reckoning during the summer of 2020. As cities across the country erupted in mass uprisings, the streets of

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Long Beach, with a long legacy of police violence concentrated in its Black, Latinx, Cambodian, and Samoan neighborhoods, were occupied with protestors outraged with the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others, but also local conditions in which 90% of the 33 police shootings from 2014 to 2019 targeted people of color (Rasmussen, 2020). Students at the CSULB SSW demanded a response from the school, leading to a series of three town halls addressing the state of white supremacy in the nation, Long Beach, and within the SSW. The results of the town hall aligned with the school's move towards a CRT framework already in progress and amplified the urgency for these transformations.

By summer 2020, the school's field seminar instituted an entirely revised curriculum, centering the creation of *brave space* (Arao & Clemens, 2013), a *just practice* model (Finn & Jacobson, 2003), the approach of *liberatory supervision* (Rivera et al., 2013), and storytelling exercises that encouraged each student to connect their lived experience to social work education. The first formal day of the fall semester 2020, the director of the SSW held a meeting that was mandatory for staff and full-time, part-time, and adjunct faculty. At that meeting, the director of SSW announced that CRT was to be centered across the SSW curricula. Core student organizers of the summer's town halls also requested their presence to read a letter outlining their recommendations for necessary changes in the school including transparency about the role of white supremacy within social work and the incorporation of CRT throughout all courses. Later that week, a group of 16 faculty and two student organizers met to share the specific ways CRT was already planned to be incorporated into the curriculum. By fall 2020, courses in field seminar, policy, human behavior in the social environment, advanced social work practice, and a new elective on Latinx issues in social work centered CRT in central readings and content, integrating race and intersectional perspectives throughout each section of the course.

What made this rapid incorporation of CRT possible, some paralleling the time frame of the summer uprisings and town halls? This paper chronicles the shift of this social work program from multiculturalism to CRT as a long-term *organizing* project, one that started in fall 2015 when an item prioritizing diversity in the school's strategic plan translated into an ad hoc voluntary Diversity Committee that first met in February 2016. By late January 2020, just a month before in-class instruction ground to a halt due to COVID-19 and four months before the uprisings in response to police violence, the CSULB SSW faculty had formally agreed to the exploration of CRT as a central feature of a curricular revision, one that could more effectively address not only race but other issues of intersectionality. By the time the summer town halls brought to attention what many students addressed as the woeful lack of preparation of some social work instructors to address issues of race within the classroom and the failure of its curricula to effectively address contemporary issues of racism and white supremacy, the SSW had already engaged in a process to bring about these changes. While COVID-19 stopped short a planned series of meetings set for spring 2020 to move these changes forward in what the school hoped to be a methodical and coordinated effort, initial efforts by faculty had already been underway and continued, albeit in a context of crisis, throughout the spring and summer of 2020.

In this case, this process was not the response to a set of demands nor a mandate for accreditation. Rather it has been a slow, determined, and strategic organizing effort

spearheaded by a tenacious group of field and tenure-line faculty. This cross-racial group, primarily made up of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC), had been motivated by personal and academic workplace concerns from such standpoints as race, sexuality, and immigration status, but united by a common vision, that is, to center racial justice through changes in curriculum, recruitment, and SSW-wide policies. The collective drive has been for a school of social work that can genuinely provide social work education that is relevant to the realities of the enduring inequities and injustices that plague our academic institutions and communities, and welcoming to students who represent those most impacted and who should be positioned as effective agents of social change. As the CSULB SSW continues its journey to this ambitious goal, this case study serves as a vehicle for self-reflection and an opportunity to share lessons learned.

Critical Race Theory and Social Work

Although some academic disciplines have centered white supremacy and the concept of CRT for decades, social work as an academic discipline has been a late comer to these discussions. The expansive literature on CRT includes many interpretations and applications across disciplines. Core tenets of CRT include: (1) race as a social construction, (2) racism as an everyday occurrence, (3) critique of liberalism, (4) importance of counternarratives, and (5) intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Razack & Jeffery, 2002), all described below.

Critical race theory's tenets provide a framework for understanding the white supremacist structure in the United States and can be used as the foundation for racially just social work practice. The first tenet of CRT is race as a social construct, invented and used to reinforce and maintain white supremacy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Second, due to the embeddedness of white supremacy throughout the structures of U.S. society, racism is an everyday, not aberrant, experience for BIPOC (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). BIPOC experience this racism at both individual and systemic levels. CRT further challenges liberalism's myth of meritocracy, the notion of an equal playing field that places the praise or blame on the individual for their successes or failures in life, rather than rooting inequities in systems and institutions (Razack & Jeffery, 2002). Another key tenet of critical race theory that is integral to anti-racist social work is the importance of counternarratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), which focus on stories directly narrated by those most impacted by social inequities or systems of domination. Kimberlé Crenshaw's landmark 1991 article introduced the concept of intersectionality, in which she asserts that people from historically marginalized groups do not all share the same experiences of interpersonal and systemic oppression – nor is there a single pathway to liberation. Intersections of multiple identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability are subject to differing dynamics of power and privilege, and must be taken into account in the analysis of individual and systemic oppression. Crenshaw (1998) also insists that the ultimate aim of CRT is social transformation.

Although social work is not entirely new to this dialogue (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Kim, 2019; Constance-Huggins, 2012; Kolivoski et al., 2018; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Razack & Jeffery, 2002), the field's handling of issues of race has been grounded in a looser

framework of *multiculturalism*, the name, itself, suggesting the prioritization of the term, *culture*, as opposed to *race* (Nadan & Ben-Ari, 2012; Park, 2005). Multiculturalism, while offering an initial opening to discuss categories of race and ethnicity as early as the 1980s when it first became popularized within social work, fosters a pluralistic *diversity* approach rather than one firmly rooted in the notion of power (Aldana & Vazquez, 2020; Gollan & O’Leary, 2009; Gorski, 2006). The endurance of this limited framework within the social work field has stifled the explicit naming of white supremacy and the primacy of patriarchy, propertied class domination, heterosexism, cisgender privilege, ableism, and nativism not only as bedrocks of U.S. society but also as dynamics underlying social work as an academic field and as a profession (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; KIM, 2019).

The CSULB SSW, similar to many schools and departments of social work across the United States, is guided by a loose definition of *social justice* as a tenet of the National Association of Social Work’s (NASW; 2017) *Code of Ethics* and a commitment to *vulnerable people*. Similarly, the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE; 2015) *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS), which guides accreditation for all schools of social work, employs the language of diversity without specifically addressing race or racism – until the just announced 2022 proposed revisions (CSWE, 2021).

The multicultural frame embedded within the two primary organizations of the social work field promotes the acknowledgement of differences, disparities, and the prioritization of vulnerable populations and until recently has fallen short of identifying racism, white supremacy, and their intersections with other categories of identity as systems of ongoing oppression (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Jeyasingham, 2012). This stance of inclusion often reduces to an occasional mention of specifically named marginalized *others*, leaving unstated the centrality of race-neutral, implicitly meaning white-centered, perspectives on social work and its sub-disciplines (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Nadan & Ben-Ari, 2012).

Because of the endurance of the multicultural framework and the relative newness of CRT into the social work lexicon, schools of social work have remained largely murky regarding the centrality of race and intersectionality within their curricula and overarching practices and policies (Abrams & Moio, 2009). In fact, a review of the literature reveals a paucity of examples in which schools of social work have concretely integrated racial justice into their programs, with an exception highlighting the sibling school featured in this paper (Nakaoka et al., 2019). Given the exploratory nature of the inquiry into transformational change in schools of social work, we use this case study to: (1) highlight the centrality of CRT as a guiding framework for our social change work, centered on internal transformations within our SSW; (2) employ the use of counternarratives as an example of a CRT tenet that informs this paper’s methods, and (3) draw out lessons learned from our on-the-ground experience that echo Crenshaw’s insistence that CRT not remain an intellectual exercise but, rather, serves the greater goal of social change.

Method

This case study (Yin, 2018) presents a five-year evolution of one social work program, CSULB SSW, from a multicultural frame to its initial adoption of a CRT and broader

critical pedagogical framework. While the narrative centers a chronological timeline from fall 2015 to fall 2020, the case study is also embedded within a time period in which U.S. political shifts form an important context in which change takes place. The focus on the trajectory of an intentional strategic or organizing process intersects with key political events which also influence the perceived relevance of and receptiveness to greater emphasis on issues of race and white supremacy which underlie the move towards a CRT lens.

The paper also incorporates an explicit reflexive perspective (Arday, 2018; Maxey, 1999). In alignment with the CRT tenet of counternarratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), that is, the need for BIPOC to tell their stories, often in contrast to the dominant narrative perpetuated against oppressed groups, this case study is authored by actors critical to the events described. Three of the study's authors are among the key participants in the CSULB SSW Diversity Committee, which was a key driver in the activities leading up to and including the implementation of CRT, still in its early stages as of the time of this paper. One author is the former field director and chair designee of a sibling Master of Social Work program at California State University, Dominguez Hills, known for being the only school of social work founded on CRT. All of the authors are cisgender women who identify as field, former field, or tenured faculty of color, with the latter having started participation before achieving tenure. The data are derived largely through their personal notes, meeting minutes, informal surveys and evaluations of events, interviews with key participants, and their reflections on the meaning derived from their participation in the development of the adoption of CRT as a critical lens through which the CSULB SSW curriculum would be organized.

The Diversity Committee: An Organizing Strategy Unfolds

Centrality of Organizing

By the fall of 2015, a conjuncture of seemingly insignificant factors came together to fuel the beginning of the ad hoc Diversity Committee in February 2016. Individuals driven by diverse motivations stepped up when eyeing an opportunity and chose to turn to each other for solidarity. The construction of this case study reveals how the dynamics of collective action, in this case, built upon a disparate group of people with a vision of racial justice, joined to create a critical mass that gathered in strength, waned to near exhaustion, and gradually gained energy and traction. This is ultimately a story of organizing—identifying problems, recruiting like-minded people, taking advantage of opportunities while creating new ones, and deploying a variety of tactics to reach a goal that, as it turns out, many more now hold as their own. Key elements of community organizing such as identifying common goals, building trust across differences, and working within and pushing against cultural and structural constraints, were used both consciously and instinctively.

Foundational Building Blocks: The Strategic Plan

In the case of the CSULB SSW, the principles of social justice, commitment to vulnerable populations, and framework of multicultural diversity offered some scaffolding upon which to build. In recognition of the need for ongoing institutional commitment, the SSW's Strategic Planning Committee crafted within its Strategic Plan 2012-2015 the creation of a "comprehensive diversity plan" and the goal to build a more "inclusive environment among faculty, staff and students" (California State University, Long Beach, School of Social Work [CSULB SSW], 2015, p. 12). Within that plan was the stated hiring of diverse faculty and staff and recruitment of diverse students in addition to curriculum development, internal trainings, cultural exchanges, and the exploration of a standing diversity committee among its activities, using language firmly within a multicultural framework.

The Strategic Plan 2015-2018 (CSULB SSW, 2018) repeated the comprehensive diversity objective verbatim (p. 12). By fall 2015, the new ad hoc Diversity Committee was created to carry out the strategic plan's diversity efforts. The initial committee consisted of a cross-racial group of faculty. Of the eight initial committee members, four were field faculty, and four were tenure-line faculty with two still pre-tenure. Yolanda Green, an African American tenure track professor, now tenured and co-author of this paper, took the helm as the chairperson of the newly formed ad hoc Diversity Committee. The director of field, a white woman who was well respected as an anti-racist ally and strong proponent of field, also played an important role in the early formation of the committee. This study reveals varied motivations; for some, this represented a long-awaited opportunity to address a history of shortcomings particularly with regard to race. While the language of the Strategic Plan and the written charge of the Diversity Committee, including its name, reflected the multicultural framework, the majority if not all of the committee members understood the activities through the lens of racial justice.

Leveraging University-Wide Resources

Established in the 1970s, the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) had long served as the CSULB's hub for trainings, professional development, and other types of support to address diversity among the campus's student, staff, and faculty bodies. While the very name of the center connotes the multicultural era in which the OMA was born, the content and spirit address race and racism as well as homophobia and heterosexism. Diversity Committee members who had a longer history on campus were familiar with the personnel at OMA and urged the committee to reach out to connect to the resources that the OMA might offer.

This collaboration was auspicious. OMA staff provided an "outside" yet familiar set of actors who could deliver educational trainings while also touching upon personal issues that could expose tensions and vulnerabilities. The SSW director and assistant to the director also accommodated the trainings which needed to be voluntary by attaching them more conveniently to faculty meetings and offered refreshments, not easily procured in a resource-poor environment, as an enticement.

By late fall 2016, the school's director stepped down from the committee to allow for its autonomy. OMA staff worked closely and collaboratively with the Diversity Committee to customize workshops, the first in what was called the "Diversity Series" entitled "Unpacking Diversity: Creating a Common Language." This provided a beginning, one where the staff and faculty could start to be vulnerable with one another and consider the varying identities that they, as well as their students, bring.

Part of the success of the OMA-led workshops was due to careful advance collaborative preparation and close attention to the specific needs and characteristics of the SSW. During the workshop, the OMA also elicited feedback on the perceived barriers to diversity trainings, and yielded responses that revealed negative connotations associated with such trainings based on the fear of exposure and discomfort, and a presumption that these trainings would offer only surface level engagement, making little difference in the status quo. In fact, the combination of didactic and personal activities provided opportunities for self-reflection and collective sharing that the SSW found informative and energizing. A list of future topics elicited interest across intersectional categories, offering the Diversity Committee ideas for future trainings and, as important, an iterative process that would ensure relevance and foster ownership across stakeholders. The precedent for data collection and evaluation set by the OMA is something that would be repeated throughout the activities of the Diversity Committee.

Perseverance through Difficult Times

The direction of the next workshop came after the review of the first workshop's data and the discussion of student feedback regarding their experiences in the classroom. The annual evaluation of student, alumni, staff, and faculty experiences revealed high levels of satisfaction with the program overall. But feedback on classroom experiences where instructors were unable to respond to challenging questions or situations regarding race and other intersectionalities remained troubling. As a result, the Diversity Committee felt it important to discuss the topic of microaggressions and again partnered with OMA to broach this topic. This workshop began to unveil an emerging theme where faculty wanted practical ways to engage their students in the classroom around what they perceived to be challenging or sensitive topics. They wanted to know how to create spaces for this type of discourse and then how to navigate these conversations should they arise. This was fueled even more so as our nation grappled with the leadership change and the climate brought with it. With the surge in white supremacist ideologies and fear being purported against people of color, particularly those of Latinx descent, the SSW overall had an even greater responsibility to address issues around race and action in the classroom. In February 2017, the Diversity Committee reached out to the campus Dream Center, a resource for undocumented students, to provide rapid response information on the California Dream Act and its impact on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. One month later, the SSW held the training on microaggressions.

Throughout this period, a beleaguered but determined team continued to meet, no longer on a regular monthly basis but with enough frequency to maintain once-a-semester staff and faculty workshops. The director of SSW and the steadfast assistant to the director

continued to accommodate and encourage the trainings, creating space by continuing extended time of 60 to 90 minutes at the beginning or end of at least one faculty meeting per semester.

In the next training on intersectionality during the spring 2018, faculty again wanted to know how they could operationalize what they were learning. Considering the context of the climate, the feedback from students and the request from faculty, it became clearer that now would be the time to introduce the concept of CRT. The desire for practical techniques was partially spurred by the need for a framework that moved from diversity and multiculturalism to a spirit of critique and reflection.

From Multiculturalism to Critical Race Theory: Reaching Out to a Sibling Program

At this point the committee dwindled to two members, both initial participants of the ad hoc Diversity Committee, Saanà Polk and Mimi Kim, two of the co-authors of this paper. Saanà Polk, who had been field faculty at CSULB SSW since 2013 and was a former assistant director of field at California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH), began to reach out to her former colleague, Nicole Vazquez, who at that time was the director of field education at CSUDH. Vazquez, an expert in CRT and its application within a social work context, had already let Polk know, informally, that she would be willing to share her knowledge with CSULB.

At the invitation of the Diversity Committee and with the support of the SSW director, Nicole Vazquez provided what was meant to be a one-off CRT training in spring 2019. Given that CRT has characterized the core of CSUDH since the inception of the program, the training provided an effective balance of information while also modeling how its content could be shared in an instructional classroom setting. The faculty erupted into engaged discussion as she introduced the concept of *brave space*, inviting openness into the workshop, and shared a brief history of CRT along with its fundamental tenets. The previous workshops prepared staff and faculty for vulnerability and self-reflection, also offering some preliminary language on race but often cushioned under a more understated language of diversity, microaggressions, and intersectionality. In a school of social work long embedded within multiculturalism, these initial dialogues prepared staff and faculty for the notion of brave space and the more radical language of white supremacy. Evaluations revealed a high degree of excitement over the CRT training and the desire for more hands-on application.

While opportunities for extensive in-depth training by Nicole Vazquez were limited, the team considered how capacity could be built internally. How could the shift be made from a model of skills building that relied upon outside consultation to one that could be sustainable, that is, offered from within the internal resources of the SSW? Looking to the Diversity Committee's original goals and turning to the foundations of community organizing, the remaining committee members consulted with Vazquez to formulate the idea for a year-long intensive training for SSW volunteers interested in gaining more expertise in CRT. The team of two also hoped that what they envisioned to be a handful of participants might take on the role of renewed Diversity Committee members. With the

support of the SSW director, a contract was negotiated with Vazquez for what was planned as a year-long series of in-person and remote consultations.

As a team of two, Saanà Polk and Mimi Kim had also been struggling to identify a way to re-energize the committee. At the same time, the high degree of participation and enthusiasm during what had been over three years of consistent trainings indicated considerable interest within the broader body of staff and faculty. What Vazquez was able to contribute was an anti-racist framework that appealed to the growing desire for an alternative to an outmoded multiculturalism and concrete examples of its application to a school of social work setting. Evaluation results revealed a demand for more detailed content, vignettes of classroom situations, and examples of exercises, indicating a readiness among much of the faculty for the potentials for implementation within the CSULB SSW.

In the fall of 2019, Vazquez returned with a practice-based CRT workshop where the staff and faculty could practice critical conversations with students. Vignettes featuring challenging and realistic classroom situations revealed an unevenness of comfort and the need for more opportunities for practice and skills sharing. In the faculty meeting following the second CRT workshop, the team of two were ready with sign-up sheets for a proposed year-long study with Vazquez. Surprisingly, over 21 people signed up, and 17 people attended an in-person meeting in December 2019 in which initial plans were drawn up. Remarkably, the volunteers also represented each of the curriculum sequence areas. The level of enthusiasm and urgency was palpable. Participants generated a long list of ideas, strategies, and internal resources that could be mobilized towards not only an improved climate for diversity and equity but a more radical transformation of the SSW. Because of the already existing ad hoc Diversity Committee, the name, Diversity Task Force, was adopted to distinguish it from what appeared to be a more coordinating and logistical body and to prevent any bureaucratic constraints that might squelch the energy of a flexible, voluntary formation. A request for new members for the Diversity Committee elicited an enthusiastic response from three of the newer field faculty members, all women of color. In fact, the composition of field faculty which had been at two out of eight members in 2012 shifted to all eight field faculty identifying as BIPOC by January 2020.

A follow up meeting facilitated by Vazquez in January 2020 resulted in a consensus among Diversity Task Force members to incorporate CRT content into the coursework, provided that the overall faculty would accept the recommendation. On January 28, 2020, a Diversity Task Force member, in fact, the chairperson of the Curriculum Committee, presented the proposal at the faculty meeting. Based upon the reasoning that the CRT was aligned with a long-term trajectory already set in motion and that they met the anticipated 2022 changes in the CSWE's EPAS for more responsiveness to race and equity, the SSW approved the shift to CRT content throughout the curriculum.

The Diversity Task Force was slated to meet in March of 2020 to engage around strategies of support for faculty and to continue the year-long study, but due to COVID-19 plans were halted and the focus quickly shifted to supporting student's current learning needs. By early June, the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black people rocked the nation and the world as protests ensued across the globe. The country had reached its tipping point, and the issue of race exploded yet again.

As many struggled to manage their own pain, the school began to hear an outcry from students for a response and a call to action. As staff and faculty began to connect with students, it became clear that although the Diversity Committee had been working on efforts to strengthen the curriculum and instruction, these efforts had not been communicated to the students. A cadre of students emerged and expressed their disappointment. An uneasy and unprecedented level of partnership between students and faculty moved towards the organization of three critical town hall meetings and ways to impact structural change within the SSW. The students were explicitly clear about including more required readings by authors of color and the need for unapologetic conversation about white supremacy woven throughout society as well as in the field of social work. They spoke volumes about the need for transparency, more student involvement, and accountability at the level of faculty and the administration. In response to their call, a compilation of themes and action items from the summer's town hall meetings were put together and posted on the school's website. The students' statement read at the fall semester's first staff and faculty meeting set the tone for a new responsive and radical direction in the CSULB SSW – signaling a reckoning with social work's legacy in upholding white supremacy and its commitment to racial justice.

The narrative outlining the shift from multiculturalism to CRT reveals the long-term, uneven, and ever-persistent course underlying what can be described as an organizing campaign to transform SSW's orientation towards race and other categories of intersectionality. However, it is the police terror of the summer of 2020, the global uprising that reached every street and campus across the country, and the organizing power of the SSW's student body that brought the SSW to the level of mobilization that is now bringing sweeping changes at long last.

The Story Told through Intersectional Positionalities

In the spirit of the counternarrative tenet, three authors share their personal narratives below.

Saanà Polk

My involvement in our Diversity Committee was birthed out of a place of reflection. The journey began long before I entered the ranks of CSULB faculty. It began with my experience as a Black student in the social work program at CSULB, years before. I have always been proud to say that I received my MSW from CSULB; however, I do remember as early as my first day of graduate school being confronted with the image of seeing very few students like myself sharing the space around me. As I began to become more keenly aware of my intersections (primarily because they were not addressed), it fueled a sincere desire to create an environment where other Black students could find a place to connect, belong, and have impact on the very program that helped to shape us.

When an opportunity became available for me to join the ranks of the very faculty who helped create my foundation as a social worker, I was beyond grateful. I entered the field faculty in the summer of 2013, with so many emotions. I recall a profound sense of

anticipation of what was before me. How would I yet again find my place to connect or belong? There was genuine pride and gratitude as well as trepidation about the journey I was getting ready to embark upon. These were the people I respected and admired as a student, and I was honored to join them. As I entered the space, I was quickly confronted with the familiar image of my days as a student where I looked for myself in those around me. But who would I share these feelings with? My intersections continued to be places of discovery for me in this new, yet familiar environment. I was moving into a well-established team that was very familiar with one another, with the exception of the newly established Field Director. As we both sought footing in this environment, it was clear that she was committed to bringing everyone's voices in the room, and mine was no exception.

As I began to read more and more admissions files and witness the installation of classes each fall, it appeared that time was repeating itself (or so it seemed). Now that I was here, I thought I would be a source or a familiar place to land for students who looked like me, yet those opportunities were infrequent at best. One of the few Black faculty members encouraged my involvement in the student organization, called Tessie Cleveland, dedicated to issues in the Black community. Throughout my involvement, what became even more apparent was the need for other Black students to have a place where they could connect and process their experiences and decide how to take their collective gifts and share them with their community.

I was so excited when the racially diverse ad hoc Diversity Committee was born. It was clear by the list generated that there was a need for growth, development, and change. This became the place where we explored gaps in our program and missed opportunities for student engagement. This was the place where we could discuss my desire to increase the recruitment and retention of Black students and faculty. This became the place where we could talk about student concerns around curriculum and the need for more engagement around race, gender, and immigration status in the classroom. This was the place where we could explore microaggressions experienced both by faculty and students. The decision became clear that we wanted to start with us as a faculty. However, this internal call to action would be one of strategic efforts. We would have to consider the fluidity of perspectives across our faculty. How many of us already believed we had arrived; how many of us were waiting for this very moment to occur where we could turn our very foundation on its head. After all, we had very recently gone through a curriculum shift, and now we were slowly, yet consistently being confronted with the need for more.

Over the next few years in the midst of strategic planning and reaffirmation we would confront our biases, explore our shortcomings and embrace one of the hallmark tenets of social work, "engaging in life-long learning." Our delicate dance between confrontation and realization led us to the deconstruction of our multicultural framework and the search for a more reflexive critical lens. As faculty recognized their need to create a space for such practice, the decision to reach out to my former colleague, Nicole Vazquez, from CSUDH became evident. Nicole would join us for our first installment of trainings on a framework that some were familiar with and others newly introduced to – critical race theory. Although I was quite familiar with CRT, I believed that seeking external support via the Diversity Committee would allow for greater absorption among faculty. Nicole's trainings allowed for the reaping of fertile soil thus creating an unexpected momentum.

Faculty were called upon to begin the incorporation of CRT in the fall of 2020. I could not believe we were just five years out from a curriculum change, and the School of Social Work was acknowledging that it needed to adjust its framework to fit the context of our students and our environment. As I consider the path before us, I think it will be critically important to offer support to faculty as they find their way throughout the implementation of this curriculum. Providing spaces where they can process their ideas, concerns, successes, failures, and strategies will be essential. I think it will be equally important to engage students throughout the process as well to identify what is working and what may not be working as we consider our new lens. It is important to note that there are years of history and ways of knowing that are being challenged, and it will take a side-by-side approach to effectively rebuild it.

Mimi Kim

When I first started teaching at the CSULB School of Social Work in the fall of 2014, just upon graduation from my Ph.D. program, I had come from many years of cross-racial organizing in the arena of gender-based violence. I had been a co-founder of the social justice organization, INCITE!, a radical feminist of color organization that was established in 2000 and has over the past two decades confronted the intersections of gender-based violence and police violence. INCITE! has been instrumental in the development of transformative justice and (prison) abolition feminism.

I began my study within social work as an MSW student and later as a Ph.D. student, learning that my feminist of color work that formed the center of my political activism did not fit easily within the field of social work with its clinical focus and emphasis on evidence-based research. However, I was drawn to social work's embrace of practice and the idea that interventions could make a change in the lives of individuals, families, communities, and society, at large. I had also been exposed to academic social work and knew that an emphasis on professionalization and close and uncritical ties with law enforcement and other "systems," that were so often oppressive to communities of color, queer communities, immigrants, poor communities, people with disabilities, and other historically marginalized people, had long been core features of social work.

I felt in many ways that I was living a double life, one not of my own making, but one imposed by the adherence of academic social work to the rules and regulations of the status quo, the marginalization and devaluing of viewpoints of BIPOC which I had long considered central to my understanding of the world, and a framework for race and intersectionality barely evolving from variations on the "melting pot" or "salad" metaphors of multiculturalism. When I started as a full-time tenure track professor at CSULB School of Social Work, I was heartened by the embrace of the traditions of community organizing which I knew from the job search barely held legitimacy in academic social work. The elevating of a community organizing lens demonstrated promise; it was a solid foundation from which I felt I could build.

Had I not had the camaraderie of Saanà in the committee and what I knew was the solid commitment of the field faculty at CSULB, I doubt that this work would have continued. If we had not had such full engagement with the staff, the field faculty and full-

time tenure track faculty in the trainings that we offered throughout the years, I would also have lost hope. Despite the ever-thinning constitution of the Diversity Committee, dipping for so long to two people, the level of engagement of the staff and faculty in their participation in ongoing trainings and the commitment of our Director to support our work kept us going through seemingly bleak times. Finally, Saanà's relationship with Nicole Vazquez with her deep knowledge of CRT and her experience with its application within a sister social work program really gave us the push we needed.

What none of us guessed at the time of the school's decision to integrate a CRT lens to the curriculum in January 2020 was the BLM uprisings of the summer of 2020. The powerful mobilization of School of Social Work students, who had inspired our Diversity Committee work but who had not been participants, led to a set of town hall conversations that frankly raised honest and searing evaluations not only of our nation but of our school. This student mobilization transformed years-long strategies into demands. Their disappointment with our response to the uprising, their insistence that social work squarely address these issues of racial inequality in society, in governance and within our own school of social work, added fuel to the slower build-up that we had been developing over the previous five years.

As we are writing this paper, the slower, deliberate forces of change and the uprisings of the summer of 2020 have come together to push us into a promising and already visible integration of CRT into the SSW. As a professor of a policy course that sets a foundation for incoming MSW students, I have just begun with the tenets of CRT and the class agreements of brave space. I have already witnessed the change in the students as the tenets resonate with their lived experiences and their expectations for social work to be a catalyst for social change. I have also witnessed my own change, my own confidence to meld two discordant worlds of political activism, on one hand, and the more staid constraints of academic life, on the other. The potential to challenge the white supremacist and neoliberal legacy of social work with a much more radical, vibrant and relevant future is vast. Arundhati Roy (2020) has referred to the present moment as a portal, one through which we could drag our outdated and, in many ways, harmful past – or one through which we can carry that which is necessary for a life-affirming future. I feel hopeful that we can work together collectively towards the latter.

Nicole Vazquez

I was introduced to CRT in the final term of my first year of my MSW program in a student-initiated, student-led course on the theory within a school of public affairs. It is by no means an understatement to say that the course changed my life. It flipped on its head the way I experience everything: from movies to TV and commercials, billboards, anything I read, and daily interactions with friends, family members, and acquaintances.

CRT has impacted me on a deeply personal level, has made me a better, more compassionate social worker, and laid the foundation for helping me understand so many aspects of my life and our U.S. society. I felt, much like my own students would feel years later, liberated once I learned that race is socially constructed, why it was created, how it has been used to maintain a global white supremacist society and how that structure has

played out in the United States, what that meant for me as an Afro-Latinx, queer, cisgender woman in this country, and what it meant for my current and future clients who also most often come from historically oppressed groups. I was also emboldened to take up the activist component of CRT and pursue justice with my new-found knowledge.

I felt so fortunate therefore to have landed as part-time faculty in CSUDH's MSW program that is rooted in CRT just a few years out of graduating, and a few years later as the field director. The student population in CSUDH's MSW program is 90% students of color, with the majority hailing from the geographic region surrounding campus which include some of the most underserved populations in the area. Our students and alumni have shared that the program gives them a vocabulary to articulate their lived experiences and validates the feeling of being gaslit for their entire lives. In turn, when the veil created by the dominant narrative is lifted, and they learn that the conditions in which they grew up (crowded classrooms, more liquor stores than grocery stores in their neighborhoods, limited green spaces to name a few examples), were created that way and not "just the way things are," they are understandably upset and the weight of being cheated in life falls with a thud on their already oppressed bodies. It's a revelatory and liberating, yet, painful experience with which the program continues to grapple in how to best support students through this process. It's an ongoing and necessary challenge worthy of taking on, as it's also a beautiful experience to witness students reacting to it, making connections, and engaging clients and approaching their social work practice through a critical race lens.

When Saanà Polk, my former colleague at CSUDH, reached out to me to explore workshop opportunities with CSULB's SSW faculty around applying CRT to social work pedagogy, I was more than happy to take on this work pro bono in addition to my duties at CSUDH because I believe in the transformational power of CRT. I jumped at the opportunity to share my knowledge and show fellow faculty members how a CRT framework can be applied to social work pedagogy.

During my first training I found CSULB's faculty to be open, engaging, and willing to dive in to do the work. I must note here that though I agreed to conduct the training pro bono, I was truly touched to find cash in my thank-you note as I walked back to my car. I think they literally opened their wallets and put together a small honorarium for my time that day. It is so affirming to be recognized beyond a thank-you note to demonstrate the worth others feel for you, even when organizational budgets prevent adequate compensation.

Mimi Kim conducted a training post-survey that yielded positive data regarding the training and requested more. CSULB's SSW director found funding for me to continue engaging faculty in critical race pedagogy over the period of a year, and I conducted my second training with the goal of an even more explicit classroom-focused experience. Again, I found the vast majority of the faculty to be fully engaged and ready to go all in with the role-plays, and to openly share and reflect during the all-group debrief. I felt a shift towards the end of the training in which it seemed that faculty were moving towards really latching on to CRT as a frame they could see themselves using in the SSW. During my last and what was to be final (due to COVID-19) meeting with faculty, I contained my

excitement upon hearing that they were committed to formally moving to integrate CRT in the SSW. I wanted to be clear that their decision was not wholly influenced by me.

It may seem like I came in and facilitated three trainings and poof! CSULB SSW was adopting critical race theory as a theoretical framework. That most certainly is not the case. As this story shows, this ultimate decision was five years in the making. It was the Diversity Committee that did all the important and intense pre-work. The main part of the success of the Diversity Committee and the SSW's formal adoption of CRT is due to the relentlessness and unwavering drive to move forward in spite of dips in commitment and resources over time. I just had to come in and put the bow on the gift they handed me: a faculty primed and ready to take the deep dive.

Lessons Learned: Implications for Social Work Education

The strategies employed by the SSW Diversity Committee and key elements of success employed by the SSW outlined below can serve as a model and learning opportunity for social work educators and administrators wishing to infuse an anti-racist framework in all aspects of their programs, from climate and culture to pedagogy and curriculum. The discussion sections below provide lessons learned and implications for best practice (see Figure 1 for a summary of CSULB SSW's key factors to success).

Organizing at the Speed of Trust

In the spirit of CRT's counternarrative, this study became a vehicle for reflection and storytelling – a way to recall our personal and collective journeys to where the SSW is today and a marker on the course towards tomorrow. While schools across the country are scrambling to address the long unacknowledged legacies of white supremacy underlying institutions of academia, schools of social work, and the profession of social work, the CSULB SSW has been undergoing its own journey. As organizers of color and the wisdom of the disability rights movement now document, deep change and transformation happens when we move at “the speed of trust” (brown, 2017, p. 42).

Academia is not known as a trust building institution. Bureaucratic struggles, competition, and professional distancing are common attributes of academia. For some of us, our trusted communities lie outside of academia, not inside. However, all of those who have participated in the Diversity Committee and the Diversity Task Force have been driven by the knowledge that moving from multiculturalism to CRT takes a willingness to be vulnerable, to expose how one is privileged and how one is devalued. Each end of that continuum can be associated with shame. Partnership with the OMA provided some level of buffering; exercises were built with attendance to tenderness around personal exposure; and knowledge was scaffolded in recognition of uneven familiarity with race-related content. These all contributed to spaces that moved slowly from *unsafe* to *safe* and even to *brave*. Voluntary participation at all levels also meant that members were not there because they were assigned; workshop participants did not gain points; nor did being a committee member afford any level of status.

Figure 1. *Key Factors to Success for Transformational Change in a School of Social Work*



So too did a cross-racial mix of organizers, bridging across traditionally separated expanses of field faculty and tenure-line faculty, take time to build trust. The frame of multiculturalism encourages us to look across race, ethnicity, and culture, acknowledge differences, and build tolerance. But it does not give us the tools to build solidarity. For some of us, our work built over years, not always under the slow conditions of trust building, but under the rapid conditions of making something happen. Even so, the bonds of trust – even if it was the knowledge that someone would be there to get the necessary work done – played a strong role in the persistence and longevity of the Diversity Committee under conditions of precarity.

Organizing From the Inside

What distinguishes this work has been organizing not as outsiders in the Alysian tradition or even in the tradition of Jane Addams, but as insiders inspired by Ida B. Wells, Grace Lee Boggs, and, more recently, adrienne maree brown (2017). As people of color, we have been driven by the change that we want to see for ourselves, for our communities, for our futures. We recall our trials as MSW students or as Ph.D. students. These are experiences that we will never forget. We are driven to make things different for our students and for the field of social work. This has been an organizing campaign to make the CSULB SSW one that could represent the realities of enduring inequities, center those most impacted by oppression, and lead social work not only towards reforms within an unjust system but changes to those systems themselves.

Importance of Institutional Support

While organizing can happen and often does happen without institutional support, organizing to move from multiculturalism to CRT could not have happened without some level of support. The SSW's Strategic Plan prioritized a diversity plan from 2012 to this day. Even if adherence to the plan may have been shallow at times, having that stated goal served at the minimum as a placeholder. More significantly, it documented the school's commitment to such things as diverse hiring of staff and faculty, contributing to a significant change in the racial make-up of tenure-line faculty and an even more dramatic change among field faculty. This change cannot be underestimated. Although the Diversity Committee itself fell to numbers as low as two, workshop attendees and the eventual members of the Diversity Task Force consisted of ever higher numbers of BIPOC. This is not to discount the considerable work of white staff members and faculty in advancing the work to integrate CRT into the agenda. However, using a CRT lens, a mapping of power within the SSW demonstrates a growing base of people more representative of the student body and more attuned to the lived experience of BIPOC.

The support of the director of SSW, her encouragement, accommodation in scheduling, and commitment to find resources in a resource poor school were enormously helpful in keeping up momentum. The availability of the OMA and the many years of experience they had in providing education on the sensitive topics of race and intersectionality were absolutely critical to the success of our efforts. The fact that our sibling school, CSUDH, fostered the development of a social work program so deeply rooted in CRT and the

willingness of one of its faculty to lend her assistance to CSULB provided a model and evidence that the incorporation of CRT is not only possible but serves as a gold standard.

Data Collection and Evidence

The data collection and evaluation strategies of the OMA set a standard for the Diversity Committee work. Their creative use of data collection, for example, allowing people to write down their quick evaluation responses and crumple them into indistinguishable balls on the floor (they were later collected and documented) allowed for a disarming and visibly anonymous way to share opinions. The OMA also followed their trainings with a written report which they shared with us as their stakeholders and used them to inform future work.

Once reliance upon the OMA was loosened, the Diversity Committee continued to use quick surveys to engage staff and faculty both before trainings, to gain information on preferences, and to provide quick and convenient ways to evaluate trainings right after they were given. Data were carefully used to determine future workshops. Data collection also demonstrated accountability to our colleagues as we shared back at faculty meetings a summary of the responses and illustrated how these results also informed the course of the Diversity Series.

Bridging the Hierarchy of Field and Tenure-Line Faculty

Throughout schools of social work, field faculty and tenure-line faculty are notoriously divided. The CSULB SSW has not been immune from the privileged position of tenure-line faculty. Over the years, the SSW has been increasingly committed to its field faculty, eventually voting to eliminate barriers to voting within the faculty meeting, a long-time feature of the school. This also contributed to an ease in which field faculty and tenure-line faculty have worked together collaboratively to establish and then to drive the Diversity Committee. Perhaps it is not surprising that a committee committed to equity would exercise more collaboration across these divides.

It has been clear that the camaraderie among field faculty, their culture of collaboration, their commitment to brave space, and their dedication to student well-being have established the vital core of the Diversity Committee. While ongoing work has continued among tenure-line faculty throughout the history of the committee, it has been the field faculty who have always stepped forward to energize the work. And as the ratio of field faculty of color has moved from an isolated minority to become now the majority, the capacity to integrate CRT into the overall curriculum has increased. The fact that 50% of the eight field faculty are African American has further strengthened the capacity to integrate CRT and, in particular, to emphasize what has remained a goal unachieved, that is, an increase in the recruitment of African American students.

The Importance of Long-Term Struggle

Finally, a central tenet of organizing is the importance of a long-term vision and organizing for the long haul (Horton, 1998). While this study chronicles five years of organizing, it also finds that the conditions for success pre-dated the start of the Diversity Committee. The study demonstrates that the seemingly overnight incorporation of the CRT was made possible because of the slow and methodical work dating back to at least 2015.

Knowing that white supremacy dates back to the beginnings of this country also tells us that this struggle will not be over. Incorporation that has started now has already been uneven. Some may simply have had fewer opportunities to learn about and fully integrate CRT into one's own consciousness, much less syllabus. Understanding the persistence of white supremacy and the embeddedness into the very fabric of our culture also tells us that resistance and even backlash will be dynamics we will always encounter.

Conclusion

During the early years of our work at SSW to move from multiculturalism to CRT, we scanned social work programs for models of anti-racist curriculum development and challenges to white supremacy and racism within the overall institution. We found very few. Since summer 2020, we know that examples have and will continue to multiply. We also know that our work may stand as unique in its long-term nature, its leadership by a BIPOC dominant collective with strong white solidarity, and a school-wide agreement to incorporate CRT that predates the uprisings of the summer of 2020.

While we are still at the early stages of implementation, early anecdotal evidence shows that those courses that have more fully integrated CRT have resulted in engagement by students, high levels of interest in course materials, and the rapid development of critical thinking. The work, however, has only just begun. While it seems difficult to imagine a significant backwards movement in progress made thus far, it is easier to imagine a slowdown and satisfaction with partial changes made. It is also easy to see how certain goals of the Diversity Committee such as recruitment of Black students may run into bureaucratic barriers or an inability or unwillingness to institutionalize what may be the labor intensive and trust-building work necessary to make these changes effective.

As of the writing of this study, we are also facing the results of our success. The new Strategic Plan 2020-2023 recommended that the Diversity Committee become a standing committee, moving from its ad hoc status. Approved as a standing committee in November 2020 and now subject to by-laws and administrative controls, fears of bureaucratic death overshadow hopes for greater legitimacy. The lessons of community organizing and legacies of incorporation into the rigid systems that we have also challenged stand to institutionalize initial progress while dampening the kinds of autonomy needed to push for radical change. The new committee's adoption of less conventional, more open membership rules and its culture of collaboration have already modeled more equitable and participatory practices that push against neoliberal and white supremacist traditions. However, the passion among students may tell us that it will be the spirit not only of us as staff and faculty but of the truth tellers in the CRT-inspired readings, videos, and among

social justice speakers and collaborators who will fuel the change that our own organizing up until now has made more possible.

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