

Bree Robinson  
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Final Project

## University of Iowa Racism Podcast

Transcript:

Hey, hi, hello everyone! This is Bree Robinson from the Auburn University Graduate School, specifically the Master of Public Administration Program. Thank you for listening to today's podcast for POLI 7630 – which is Dr. King's Diversity in Public Life class. Today we'll be discussing a specific event pertaining to diversity and racism in public administration – which is an incident that occurred at the University of Iowa, which is a public university in the United States. I'd like to explain the issue along with its relevance, discuss the University's response, discuss why they reacted this way, and finally discuss why this issue is relevant to the field of public administration. Thank you for listening and let's jump right in.

First, I want to kick this off by discussing some backstory of the University of Iowa. If you are not super familiar with the university of Iowa, then I feel you there; I had to do some fact checking on the University myself. What I found is that it was founded in 1847, and it is the state's oldest institution of higher education. It is located alongside Iowa River in Iowa City, so it is a river city. If you head on over to the University of Iowa's website, you can click on the diversity tab and it'll tell you that they believe in excellence to diversity and it will redirect you to another website where they focus on showcasing their diversity. On this website you'll be directed to the University of Iowa's division of diversity, equity, and inclusion non-discrimination statement; now their statement is very long and it says that they “prohibit discrimination in employment, educational programs, and activities on the basis of race, creed, color, religion, national origin, age, sex, pregnancy, disability, genetic information, status as a US veteran, service in the US military, sexual orientation, gender identity, association preferences, or any other classification that deprives the person of consideration as an individual”(Iowa Diveristy). Now this statement was a bit of a catchall and it makes them seem like a very inclusive university and if they stick to their mission statement, then why would you not want to go to school there? The issues only really arise when you dig into some of the current events that have happened in the past year.

The specific event that we're going to be talking about today comes from an article that was published by the Gazette, titled Racial Tensions Rise on Iowa's Public University Campuses. This article focuses on several different public universities, but we'll be focused on the University of Iowa specifically. At the University of Iowa, there have been reports of racist propaganda and slurs being written across campus. While this is unsettling enough there has been little to no recognition of this issue by administration. This might be due to the fact that the University of Iowa's diversity and equity and inclusion office is struggling to maintain a head administrator. The most recent one lasted 6 weeks and quit. The campus has reported several incidents this past fall it deemed racist, but the administration is not handling it well.

“The UI likewise has been navigating racial tensions for years, with a “Build the Wall” banner erected on a campus walkway last spring inciting a #doesUIowaLoveMe social media campaign revealing stories of discrimination and marginalization” (Miller, 2019). Let’s discuss several of these incidents.

In one, a member of the UI Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority posted a picture on Instagram of girls dressed all in white with the comment, “Join the KKK,” followed by the comment, “I mean join the KKG” (Miller, 2019). When asked specifically about this incident, the university did not have much to say as they said that the sorority panhellenic organization was going to be handling this. So basically, the University of Iowa did nothing about a blatantly racist comment posted on a public platform about one of their student organizations. While this is an incident worth noting, it is not alone.

If you go and search the hashtag #doesUIowaLoveMe social campaign, it is not hard to find dozens of incidents of white supremacist writing on classroom boards, walls, and other areas on campus. These are physical examples of racist phrasings that I would not repeat.

While this next story is not one based in racism, it is based in discrimination. And this is a story that received significant attention online was one student’s insinuation that institution officials wanted him to conceal his queer identity when he was representing the university. The student wrote on Twitter how he took part in a university photo shoot for marketing materials the previous summer. When the students were asked to pose like they were studying, he was singled out and instructed to stow away his laptop that had a rainbow sticker on it that read “pride” – which we all know was in support of LGBTQ people which he was a part of. (Miller, 2019). He was told “it was too controversial.” This blew up on twitter and received a lot of attention! This does not seem to fall in line with that original discrimination statement, does it?

Of this fall’s first-year UI undergraduates, nearly 20 percent identify as a racial or ethnic minority, and 22 percent are first-generation students, according to a new regent enrollment report. (Miller, 2019) So, this is clearly affecting a large portion of students on this campus. That’s 1/5. This is a burning issue on the University of Iowa campus, and I believe administration is the root of the problem.

To sum this incident up, there were students involved, no one really benefitted from what was happening, other than the egos of this people writing these slurs, but there were many minority students harmed, even the ones who did not come out and say anything are under this category because having to see racial slurs written across your campus that you attend classes in every day is obviously an issue and harmful, and many have said they don’t feel safe on their own campus. The University of Iowa themselves also played a role in harming the students by not acting sooner and directly. The president of the university did issue an apology statement but as it stands there is still not much that has been done. The University did conduct a campus wide survey and craft a diversity and equity and inclusion action plan, but the administration is still struggling to find someone to lead his operations and they are without an administrative head for this department, so nothing has taken place yet. Also, I do believe some action should be taken against the students directly involved in this issue to set an example.

With this public organization being a university there are different challenges that come along with that; every four or 5 years your student body is completely changing; however, administration stays the same. The administration should serve as a constant, but there has been high turnover in the University of Iowa's Diversity and Inclusion Department. It's my belief that the root of the problem is in administration and their example or leniency on this issue.

Next, I'd like to evaluate the cultural competency of these circumstances that led to the incident and the organizations response using the Bennett Model.

If you are unfamiliar with the Bennett Model, it has six steps or levels to cultural competence which fall under ethnocentric and then ethnorelative.

The first step is denial, which is when someone might feel that their cultural difference is the only one that is real and valid. They typically have little thoughts of others.

The second step is defense, which is when this person might acknowledge the existence of cultural differences threatening to his or her own reality or sense of self and then they construct defenses against those differences.

The next step is minimization, which is when an individual acknowledges cultural differences but then trivialize them. They typically deny these differences and only point out similarities.

Finally, we move into acceptance, which is when they may not agree with the other culture, but they are generally curious and respectful of it.

When a person or an organization moves into the adaptation step, they see the world through different eyes, and they make intentional changes in their own behavior and values.

Lastly is the integration step which is when a person or organization can easily move in and out of different cultural world views and they are culturally competent. (Global Perspectives Consulting, 2018)

It's important for me to point these out specifically, because I believe that the University of Iowa believes that they are in the adaptation and integration stage but in reality, I feel that they are in the minimization stage. They seem to think that they are very culturally competent and that they are doing all that they can but in reality they are kind of turning a blind eye to some of these things that are happening and I would almost put them in the defense category, but I'm not sure that they belong there just yet. I do think they are in the minimization category and they are trivializing differences between students.

And then specifically talking about the students, I believe that the bulk of the students committing these acts of racism and discrimination; I really believe they are in the defense category. I believe this because the defense category is kind of symbolized by people thinking that they are superior, and the others are inferior and then them feeling threatened by that and their actions to me really ring this true that they feel minorities are less than them. I mean you

cannot write build that wall without insinuating that, so I definitely feel that the students fall into the defense category on the ethnocentric side and that the University likes to think that they are on the ethnorelative side with acceptance adaptation and integration, but I still think they are very lacking and they are in the minimization category due to the little amount of action on their end.

I think it's so important to talk about issues such as this when you're discussing public administration because this is a prime example of how things can snowball. As we discussed it appears that the administration is the root of this problem and I think that that can ring true for many organizations especially public organizations. Its organizations like these people are always looking up to their superiors and who's above them in the hierarchy for examples.

If the person above them is not handling an issue or even acknowledging it then that gives them little reason to worry about it themselves. And then issues like this get swept under the rug and it seems almost encouraging, to the students in this case, to keep acting out and the issues of racism and discrimination just get worse and worse because it was never handled in the first place.

We can always learn by example, and I think the example that we're learning from here is to deal with issues head-on and not let them snowball and get worse. I think people have a responsibility to take cultural competence seriously and especially universities as they are housing so many students and so many future public and private administrators. Ultimately, I think the University should really invest in their diversity department and really focus on strengthening their administration offering more trainings getting everybody on the same page and really honing in on making this department of campus as strong as can be so they can combat these issues. It's not just the current students that are suffering due to this; it's all future students and that will affect the student body and that will affect who chooses to go to this university as well. so, in the end the university is hurting themselves and their student body.

I think there is no room in the world of public administration for blatant racism and then inaction on the administrators part, so it is my hope that the University of Iowa takes this seriously and make some changes and distributes some punishments so that other public administrations can learn from their example and remedy this before something like this happens again.

Thanks for listening!

### **References:**

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