

## White Privilege Conference-15 – A Journey of Transformation

From March 26-29, 2014, a seven-person Notre Dame delegation experienced the White Privilege Conference -15 (WPC-15) in Madison, WI. It was a challenging and emotionally-draining experience for everyone; however, the conference allowed us all to investigate the breadth of our humanity. As was written in the syllabus for the preparatory class titled *Introduction to the Intersections of Privilege*, “The goal for each participant is personal transformation: to leave the class and conference more aware of injustices and be better equipped with tools to disrupt personal, institutional and worldwide systems of oppression.”

In Blessed Basil Moreau’s charism for Holy Cross education, he calls the art of education “helping young people to completeness.” As we strive to live by and uphold this at Notre Dame, you will see in excerpts of the students’ journals how their experiences at the White Privilege Conference have helped them toward completeness—through personal transformation, intellectual stimulation, professional networking and commitment to Notre Dame Community improvement.

### WPC-15: Day 1

- **The first day was exciting and exhausting all at once.**

#### Keynotes:

- [...] the opening keynote, Jacqueline Battalora, was done very well. In her speech, she unpacked the notion of "white" as a construction that was invented through legislation in 1681 through a Virginia anti-miscegenation law enacted in response to Bacon's Rebellion in the Jamestown colony. Since the Rebellion had united poor people (white and blacks alike), those in power clearly view that force as a threat, and so created the first law that distinguished specifically the classification of "white". This law served as the foundation for further discrimination by color and eventually toward slavery and the attribution of privilege to those who were now classified as white.

#### Sessions:

- **Wow. Heavy morning already. I'm feeling overwhelmed.** But I went to an Advanced-level talk and it was good because people were thinking outside of what the presenter said and constantly challenging things, which is unbelievably refreshing to hear and witness.
- Like the idea of the New Jim Crow, the New Dred Scott subsists within a framework where people of color are indoctrinated to hate themselves. We quickly note how black people are criminalized in society [...] via mass incarceration, inner-city poverty, and low education, but we rarely talk about the psychological impact of these aspects on the individual. **I could relate to the cognitive dissonance that comes from being a black person receiving higher education** because I am consciously aware that this is opportunity makes me “white” and distances me from other black people (who are widely uneducated). Actively choosing to learn about this

phenomenon within sociology has healed my discomfort, but there are still many layers to uncover, both within myself and in society.

- The next workshop featured strategies for combatting racial conflict. I appreciated this presentation because it was directly relevant to my experiences as a young black woman who was used to being the only person of color in each class. It's one thing to feel like you stand out, but it's another for others to vocalize this distinction. Unfortunately, I've been victim to a lot of ignorant comments and jokes about my race that have implied that I am not black enough, or sometimes the reverse. I grew up being afraid of being construed as a typical black person and I actively did whatever I could to deviate from the stereotype. I was also socialized to avoid racial conflict, so I would laugh when I was insulted and not realize that I was being taught to hate myself. An important part of this presentation for me was the declaration that you can't initiate a dialogue if you're afraid of yourself. It's true that I can't resolve any stressful racial encounters without first making peace with my racial reality. **I admit that I am still learning** how to do that, as well as how to tactfully take advantage of teaching moments when faced with racial conflict.
- Just got out of a really great workshop on multicultural organizations and met really nice, awesome people. I wish I had gone to WPC sooner so I could have done more for ND.

#### Caucuses:

- The caucus at the end of the day was a new experience for me, and one of the places I actually learned the most from. Hearing people's stories, their struggles, their hopes, their anger--all of it was cathartic. I could feel people's hurt through their words, but also their strength. Throughout all the anger, we keep pressing on.
- I didn't know what to expect but it was amazing. Wow. **I've never felt so immediately comfortable in a space before.** It was amazing. It's the first time I've ever talked to someone who is also half white and half Pacific Islander!! (Which is also really pathetic, actually...) But this is the first time I've ever felt this way AND it's the next two days too!!!!

## WPC-15: Day 2

#### Keynotes:

- Then there was another Keynote speaker and he was also awesome, talking about the role of social science (woot woot!) and the white racial frame. I got to meet [the Speaker and] after that and he signed my program. I mentioned how I want to go to [...] [Law school at Cal] and he texted his assistant who is a 3L there. So then his assistant talked to me for like an hour and a half about what I can do to prepare for getting into law school at Cal and he gave me really good suggestions as well as insight into law school there, which is awesome. **My networking goal was accomplished!**

## Sessions:

- [The speaker] also talked about **privilege in the context of intersectionality**, which I thought was striking. **We don't like to see privilege in our own lives, but it is very easy to point out where we are marginalized.** It is also difficult for us to come to terms with the idea that we can be privileged in some ways and marginalized in others. For those who are under the influence of multiple systems of oppression, sometimes we turn it into the "Oppression Olympics", which does only harm and draws us into a trap of stagnancy and "wallowing in marginalization".
- [...] Ideas I got were to encourage Father Jenkins to make a statement about racist costumes and themed parties, join committees, and take advantage of daily interactions. I'm not going to lie, when I think about doing a few of these things, I experience apprehension from the dread of racial conflict. I sometimes think, "Why would anyone want to hear what I have to say or take my suggestions seriously?" However, I am quickly learning that my discomfort is real and exists because of systematic oppression that occurs outside myself. **I should learn to feel confident in my perspective**, but also transmit my ideas within dominant to dominant working relationships. I can make "white allies" out of friends and show people that diversity (or lack thereof) affects everyone regardless of race, gender, or sexuality.

## Caucuses:

- The sucky part is that [...] I was only there for 20 minutes. But it was crazy because there are over 2,000 people here and **I walked into that room and saw so many familiar faces and I immediately felt at home.** I've met the greatest people through the biracial groups. I'm so excited about that.
- [...] **I hadn't really felt deeply, viscerally touched by any of the comments until** a middle-aged Asian man spoke up passionately about not giving up hope in the face of discrimination. I think what really got to me was that with his accent he sounded very much like my Dad, except that I am almost certain my Dad would not have said anything the man said. **I teared up when he spoke**, not because of the content of what the man was saying, but because I couldn't explain to my parents why I was here at this conference, or why I am studying English, or why I am passionate about social change, or why I am not interested in doing scientific research like they do. It's funny how it can be easier to talk to strangers about these things than family.

## WPC-15: Day 3

### Sessions:

- **By the third day of conference, I had a resolve for what knowledge I wanted to bring back to campus** and I took the day to go to workshops that could give me ideas for future senior thesis projects. I am a sociology and economics double major and at first, I intended to write about the literal intersection of the two within socioeconomic status. I am realizing that that SES is just an indicator of disparities and there are so many other interesting topics I could write about.

- **Ha, I thought I was over the conference the second day**, I had completely washed my hands of this experience the last day. Did I attend presentations? Yep, one along with a keynote speech. **The rest of my day was spent, again, having meaningful and stimulating conversations** with vendors, presenters, and other minority guests.

## Overall:

- [...] **the conference gave me an enormous wealth of information and emotion to process and unpack. I am grateful for the opportunity to have attended, and hope to be able to apply what I've learned to improve life on campus here at ND.**
- This is one entry point into how I have found myself as a biracial woman due to the conference. Before, I would have identified first as Tongan, for a lot of reasons. Now, I can say proudly and confidently that I am a biracial woman, and I love it. **It feels like my skin fits me better.**
- In spite of my animosity toward the conference, for the first time, I realized how many young people of color enrolled in colleges/universities are socially, psychologically, and spiritually hurting across our nation. Their feelings speak alienation, exclusion, marginalization, discrimination, and inferiority—this is a SOCIAL problem! It is their voices that will always stick with me as I navigate [...] and achieve a position to represent all hurting young adults that expect and aspire toward a better life.
- **Going to WPC 15 was an experience that provided comfort and revitalized my resolve to make an impact beyond Notre Dame and on the world.**

Attending WPC-15 was definitely a very moving experience for the delegation. As a result, we can now aid the Notre Dame community by promoting a conversation past individual faults to a conversation truly addressing oppression as systematic. By the very nature of our Holy Cross charism, members of the Notre Dame community are not only called to but are destined to engage each other about privilege and declare it our duty to actively seek to dismantle systems of oppression and seek social justice. These tasks can only be achieved in the roots of helping our students to completeness; which therefore is helping them become more like Christ, as stated by Basil Moreau. These tasks also cannot rely on certain members of the community, but all members from all racial and cultural backgrounds. It is through these tasks and commitment to completeness can we, collectively; embody the significance of Catholic education to the world.

And with that being said, we will see you again next year at WPC-16.