
CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

PEABODY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH RACE

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE JANUARY 30TH CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS EVENT

Over the course of the spring semester, a coalition of graduate students, both independent and from various graduate organizations (Peabody Coalition of Black Graduates, Peabody Graduate Student Association, and Common Ground), came together to address shared concerns about the way that issues of race were being addressed (or rather, not addressed) on Peabody's campus. Together, we adopted the mission of shaping Peabody as a safe space for open dialogue about race and personal experiences with race.

On January 30th, 2014, this group hosted an event aimed at bringing these personal experiences to light. Both students and faculty were invited to share their stories and experiences as well as to learn from others. Over 60 students were in attendance, plus a dozen faculty members. In roundtables, participants were asked to share experiences and draw out common themes. At the end of the event, the whole group came back together to participate in a solution-oriented debriefing session. Surveys were distributed and collected at the end of the event, and this same survey was distributed to the general student body afterwards.

This document summarizes the lessons learned from this event. Our group will use this information and more to inform our efforts moving forward. We understand that this is a difficult issue, but we have faith that the Peabody community can be a place where people of all races and cultures feel safe and accepted and where all people feel comfortable in approaching issues related to race. The enthusiasm we saw from event participants has reaffirmed this faith, and we look forward to working with you all.

The Issues

The first step in solving any problem is acknowledging it. The primary objective of this event was to gather, from the minds of students and faculty themselves, a deeper understanding of the problems that exist on campus concerning how race is addressed.

Positive responses to the Crucial Conversations event and participation in the follow up survey indicate that Peabody students and faculty have concerns about the way race is addressed on our campus. Once acknowledged, the second step is to define the problem. Indeed this was the primary objective of the event and follow up survey. Results from the survey are discussed in this section.

To begin 71% of respondents think there is a problem regarding how race is discussed and handled within the classroom. These percentages are shown broken down by subgroups in the table below.

Group	N	Percent "Yes"
Did not attend	56	48.21
Attended event	50	96
Not persons of color	73	64.38
Persons of color	33	84.85
Female	79	70.89
Male	27	70.37
Masters student	69	75.36
PhD student	37	62.16

In addition, 76% believe that there is a problem outside of the classroom, as broken down below.

Group	N	Percent "Yes"
Did not attend	56	62.5
Attended event	49	91.84
Not persons of color	72	69.44
Persons of color	33	90.91
Female	78	78.21
Male	27	70.37
Masters student	68	80.88
PhD student	37	67.57

There was an overwhelming sense that quite simply, race *was not* being talked about on campus. While there might be smaller discussions here and there in informal pockets, students and faculty both noted that while many would like to be having more intentional conversations, the current state of affairs is one of silence. When issues of race were brought up within classrooms, students noted that they were often very academic, avoiding the more difficult conversations that people may need in order to gain true understanding. In addition, when those conversations did happen, they were confined to their own departments, and lessons were not being shared across departments.

It is also apparent that if race does come up, it does not always come up in a constructive way. The survey also asked respondents if they personally have witnessed or participated in any uncomfortable situations with race. 62% responses said "yes." This is broken down by subgroup below.

Group	N	Percent "Yes"
Did not attend	56	51.79
Attended event	50	74
Not persons of color	72	56.94
Persons of color	34	73.53
Female	80	58.75
Male	26	73.08
Masters student	69	57.97
PhD student	37	70.27

Upon reviewing survey responses, several people also noted that while they were unclear as to what the full extent of the problem is, they were aware that others may be experiencing issues. When asked directly, 66% of survey respondents affirmed that a colleague had shared with them perceived problems related to race.

Group	N	Percent "Yes"
Did not attend	56	58.93
Attended event	50	74
Not persons of color	72	66.67
Persons of color	34	64.71
Female	80	62.5
Male	26	76.92
Masters student	69	65.22
PhD student	37	67.57

While there are likely many reasons why these things may (or may not) be happening, there were common issues that participants thought contribute to the problem. Many felt like beyond its use as a covariate in statistical analysis, a critical understanding of race is not valued in academic conversation. Even in cases where people might agree on its importance, however, people may feel uncomfortable contributing to discussion. This could be for several reasons. Some participants, both persons of color and not, voiced discomfort in bringing up their thoughts on race for fear of having their opinions and ideas rebuffed by a larger group. Others, especially among white students, expressed that many may feel that they do not have a legitimate place in the conversation.

In terms of diversity, faculty discussed the consequences of having a fairly privileged undergraduate population, and both faculty and students noted problems in the ways that people are recruited and admitted to Peabody.

Potential Solutions

In order to make sure that we came away with concrete next steps and a sense of direction, we ended

the evening with a discussion of potential solutions. These solutions were broken into two categories: those that were directed towards students, and those that were directed towards faculty.

For student-focused solutions, generally, participants mentioned the need for more explicit conversations, fostering a sense of openness regarding how different experiences shape our experiences. All students should be more conscious of the way race is a part of the things they say and experience. This includes recognizing racial microaggressions and the distinctions between racist comments and racial statements. This work will require deliberate exploration on the part of students to understand one another and what race means. Students of all races should recognize that they are a part of this issue, and avoiding the difficult conversation cannot be accepted. This should be integrated everywhere as a part of Peabody life.

In terms of faculty, participants noted a need for some sort of faculty education for how to facilitate conversations on race in the classroom. Ideally, we would like to have more diverse faculty and more faculty who are equipped to have these conversations, but we also feel that our current faculty could grow to have greater levels of sensitivity to these issues. From faculty, we would like to be getting a culture that teaches us to conduct ourselves professionally and academically, but also in a way that does not ignore these other types of issues that are often left out of formal conversation.

Next Steps

As we move forward, the lessons gained from this experience will help us to figure out what can be done to address these issues. This is an iterative process, and we are all learning as we move along. Current streams of work include facilitating continued peer-to-peer conversations, strengthening faculty initiatives, and exploring structural changes that could promote this kind of culture. If you are interested in participating or have any questions, comments, or concerns, please feel free to contact us at peabodycrucialconversations@gmail.com.

We are a community of scholars and professionals. Learning how to address and not simply tolerate, but rather embrace these understandings is critical to our development and the development of the world we hope to shape. It is important to us that this effort becomes ingrained into the spirit of Peabody as it moves into the future, and we are excited to see what comes next.