A Racial-Equity Scholar Describes His ‘Painful Gratitude’ for Donald Trump

By Sarah Brown | JANUARY 09, 2017

ask Shaun Harper to describe how he felt when Donald J. Trump was elected president, and he’ll shake his head and laugh. "No, don’t take me back to election night — don’t do it," says Mr. Harper, director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. "I’ve moved on from that trauma."

But two weeks out from Mr. Trump’s inauguration, Mr. Harper sees a silver lining for campus race relations — "the gift of Trump," as he describes it.

Barack Obama’s 2008 victory led many Americans, including those on college campuses, to believe that the nation had moved past its fraught racial history by electing a black president, Mr. Harper says. Mr. Trump’s campaign and subsequent triumph, however, inspired many people with racist and offensive views to emerge from anonymous, obscure corners of the internet and embrace what they saw as their newfound political clout. The election also emboldened others to stop being subtle and covert about their racism, Mr. Harper says.

No longer can college officials doubt that racism still exists and can appear on their campuses, Mr. Harper says. And the polarizing nature of the 2016 campaign, he says, makes improving the racial climate a more urgent matter for higher-education leaders.

Mr. Harper hopes to help them do so in a new role. In July, he’ll become a professor at the University of Southern California’s Rossier School of Education and director of the new Race and Equity Center. One of his first plans is to create a National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates, a quantitative survey tool that he says will allow colleges to better gauge students’ feelings of inclusion and get a sense of the settings in which students meaningfully interact with other groups.

Mr. Harper’s latest book, Race Matters in College, is coming out later this year. He spoke with The Chronicle about the state of campus race relations at the beginning of the Trump administration and how colleges can take advantage of "the gift of Trump." The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

For the past eight years we’ve had the nation’s first black president, Barack Obama, who inspired a lot of college students of color to become politically active for the first time. Now the nation has elected someone who has made a number of offensive remarks about minority groups. What’s the significance of that shift for campus race relations?

I think that for better or worse, Donald Trump has actually given us a gift — in that the racial ugliness of our nation has been exposed. Many people interpreted the election of Barack Obama in 2008 as, OK, we’re finally done with America’s racist history because we’ve elected a black man.
Donald Trump has helped us realize that many of the racial problems had been sort of swept under the rug, or they had evolved to be more covert than overt. Not only has now President-elect Trump helped us realize that there are these covert manifestations of racism, but he’s also brought back out the plain old racists — the KKK members, the people who absolutely believe and say very racist and offensive things about people of color and immigrants.

The center I direct here at Penn — and we will continue to do this at USC — we do these campus climate studies. Students of color have been telling us for a decade, both before and after the election of Barack Obama, that there are significant race problems on their campuses. In some ways, these issues that are now very much in the American consciousness because of Trump have been part of the everyday realities of students of color on predominantly white campuses that we’ve studied. But fortunately now more college and university leaders recognize that these are real issues, and they also recognize that they need help.

So in your view, Mr. Trump’s victory exposed that American society is not postracial, and neither are campuses.

Yes. I have to be honest, the postracial discourse after the 2008 election was extremely annoying to me and to other scholars who study racial equity and to people of color around the country. Many of us were like, No, we’re not postracial. Just because we’ve elected this black man and put his family in the White House doesn’t mean that racism suddenly went away.

In that way, I am at least grateful — even though that gratitude is a painful gratitude — to Donald Trump and his supporters that they have helped us all to realize that we have a ton of work to do to correct the ongoing problems that our nation and its postsecondary institutions have.

After the election there was a spike in racist and hate-motivated incidents on campuses. What do you think those events say about the state of campus race relations?

During the campaign season, Donald Trump gave license to white students on predominantly white campuses to do out loud the racist things that they had long done in covert ways.

We are going to have to deal with racism in a very different way now, because it is so much more apparent and so much harder to deny its existence on campuses. I think we are going to see more Trump supporters and more white students who have been inspired by the racist rhetoric of Trump supporters outside of higher education continue to do things that we saw them do immediately after the election. That’s why college and university leaders are going to need our help. Because the reality is that too few of those college and university leaders even know what to do.

Furthermore, if we are not careful, we will see a very serious clash of the races on college campuses. We shouldn’t wait for that to happen. It would be foolish of college presidents and others to think that the things we’re seeing in the broader society, that their campuses are somehow exempt from that racial tension.

What role do you think higher-education institutions can play in these difficult debates about race and racism, in the context of a Trump presidency?

Despite the increasing diversity of college and university campuses in terms of composition, whites still remain overwhelmingly the single largest racial group that institutions graduate and send into the world each year. If we continue to send millions of college-educated white people into the world without a proper course of study on race and racism, it makes colleges and universities complicit in the perpetuation of racial inequity in the country.

For a really long time, white college graduates will continue to occupy the highest levels of leadership and decision-making in just about every sector of our economy. Look at the Congress, for example. Look at college presidents and governors — still overwhelmingly white college graduates. The role for higher education here is to ensure that students are leaving not just with consciousness but also that they’re leaving with high levels of skill in promoting racial equity. Because otherwise, they will go off into the work force and just reproduce the same racial inequities that have long plagued our nation. It’s our fault, until it isn’t anymore.

How might that work in practice?
One of the signature activities of the USC Race and Equity Center will be this inventory of students’ pre-college experiences with diversity. Essentially, colleges and universities across the country will have this tool that they send to students once they’re admitted but before they enroll. The inventory will allow them to get a sense of the racial diversity of their high schools and their neighborhoods — the extent to which they’ve interacted with people of racial and cultural groups that are different from their own.

It will allow institutions to then share the inventory with RAs in their residence halls, with others who work closely with students — their career advisers and so on. So just imagine when a first-year student meets with an academic adviser. That adviser will have more intel about the kinds of experiences that the student may or may not have had and then can recommend to that student, Here are the kinds of courses you might take that would help fill that gap. Without that, we will continue to have students just perhaps slip and fall into a sociology course or an ethnic-studies course, which we know the overwhelming majority of white students don’t.

A lot of students, professors, and administrators didn’t support Mr. Trump, but a lot of them did. How might college leaders balance ensuring that they are supporting minority groups who feel like the nation’s vote for Mr. Trump was a vote against diversity and inclusion, while not alienating Trump supporters?

Colleges and universities should be the marketplace for idea contestation and for debate and disagreement. What we’ve done for decades is we’ve created these spaces where people only talk to themselves — where they only talk to people who are like them. That is not where learning occurs. I would love to see College Democrats and College Republicans and independents come together more often to fiercely debate their ideas — and for it to not just be student-led, but for faculty members and administrators to be right there.

We as professors cannot be closeted about our political points of view. If you don’t deal with it out loud, it festers underground, and eventually there’s going to be an eruption. So let’s not wait until there’s an eruption. Let’s debate our ideas. There are too few colleges and universities across the country where that happens.

Sarah Brown writes about a range of higher-education topics, including sexual assault, race on campus, and Greek life. Follow her on Twitter @Brown_e_Points, or email her at sarah.brown@chronicle.com.